การพัฒนาเชิงพื้นที่: การตอบโต้ของท้องถิ่นและนัยเชิงนโยบายจากโครงการสะพานเศรษฐกิจภายใต้การขับเคลื่อนแบบรวมศูนย์ กรณีจังหวัดระนอง[1]

Place-Based Development: Local Contestation and Policy Implications of the Centrally Driven Landbridge in Ranong Province

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ศึกษาโครงการสะพานเศรษฐกิจภายใต้ระเบียงเศรษฐกิจภาคใต้ โดยเน้นกรณีจังหวัดระนอง ในฐานะตัวอย่างของนโยบายพัฒนาโครงสร้างพื้นฐานด้านคมนาคมขนาดใหญ่เพื่อรองรับการพัฒนาอุตสาหกรรม 2) วิพากษ์กระบวนการกำหนดนโยบายและการประเมินผลกระทบสิ่งแวดล้อมและสุขภาพ (EHIA) ซึ่งขาดการเชื่อมโยงกับบริบทเฉพาะของพื้นที่และการมีส่วนร่วมอย่างมีความหมายของประชาชน และ 3) เสนอแนวทางเชิงนโยบายสำหรับการพัฒนาที่สอดคล้องกับศักยภาพของพื้นที่และหลักความเป็นธรรมเชิงพื้นที่ การศึกษานี้ประยุกต์ใช้กรอบแนวคิดการพัฒนาเชิงพื้นที่และความเป็นธรรมเชิงพื้นที่ ควบคู่กับระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพที่เน้นการมีส่วนร่วมของประชาชน ผลการศึกษาพบว่า การดำเนินโครงการสะพานเศรษฐกิจภายใต้โครงสร้างนโยบายแบบรวมศูนย์จากส่วนกลาง และการจำกัดพื้นที่การมีส่วนร่วมของสาธารณะในกระบวนการตัดสินใจ

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ไม่เพียงทำให้ความเปราะบางทางนิเวศและสังคมทวีความรุนแรงขึ้น หากยังนำไปสู่การผลิตซ้ำความเหลื่อมล้ำเชิงโครงสร้าง และลดทอนศักยภาพของท้องถิ่นในการกำหนดอนาคตของตนเอง นอกจากนี้ การขับเคลื่อนนโยบายในลักษณะดังกล่าวยังนำไปสู่การตอบโต้ของภาคประชาชนในพื้นที่ ซึ่งสะท้อนถึงปัญหาเชิงโครงสร้างที่ฝังรากอยู่ในกระบวนการพัฒนาไทยมาอย่างต่อเนื่อง บทความนี้เสนอว่า การบรรลุเป้าหมายของการพัฒนาเชิงพื้นที่ที่เป็นธรรมไม่อาจอาศัยเพียงการปรับปรุงกฎหมายและระเบียบปฏิบัติเท่านั้น หากต้องดำเนินควบคู่กับการปรับเปลี่ยนโครงสร้างความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจในกระบวนการกำหนดนโยบายไปสู่การให้ความสำคัญกับศักยภาพของพื้นที่ ความรู้ท้องถิ่น และสิทธิของชุมชนในการมีส่วนร่วมอย่างมีความหมาย ในฐานะองค์ประกอบสำคัญของการวางแผนพัฒนาและการจัดการพื้นที่

คำสำคัญ: สะพานเศรษฐกิจ จังหวัดระนอง การพัฒนาเชิงพื้นที่ ความเป็นธรรมเชิงพื้นที่ การเมืองเรื่องสิ่งแวดล้อม

Abstract

This article aims to (1) examine the Landbridge project under the Southern Economic Corridor, focusing on Ranong Province as a case of large-scale transportation infrastructure policy designed to support industrial development; (2) critique the policy-making process and the Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA), both of which fail to engage with the specific socio-spatial context of the area and provide meaningful public participation; and (3) propose policy directions for development that align with local potential and the principles of spatial justice. The study applies the conceptual frameworks of place-based development and spatial justice, combined with qualitative research methods that emphasize public participation. The findings show that the implementation of the Landbridge under a centralized policy structure, together with restricted public participation in decision-making processes, not only intensifies ecological and social vulnerabilities but also reproduces structural inequalities and

undermines the capacity of local communities to determine their own futures. These policy dynamics have also generated various forms of local contestation, reflecting systemic problems embedded in Thailand's development processes. The article argues that equitable place-based development cannot be achieved solely through improvements in legal and regulatory frameworks. Instead, it requires broader structural changes in development governance and power relations in order to shift policy-making toward greater recognition of local potential, local knowledge, and the rights of communities to meaningful participation as essential components of development planning and spatial governance.

Keywords: Landbridge, Ranong Province, Place-Based Development, Spatial Justice, Environmental Politics

1. Introduction

The concept of place-based development emphasizes that development policies should be designed and implemented in close alignment with the specific characteristics of each locality. Rather than relying on universal policy prescriptions, this approach foregrounds the importance of ecological systems, natural resources, livelihood structures, ethnicity, culture, economic configurations, and local socio-political dynamics as integral components of development planning (Barca, McCann, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). By challenging one-size-fits-all approaches, place-based development advocates for strategies that are tailored to the unique potential and contextual conditions of individual places.

Within this framework, territorial potential is understood not merely in terms of physical geography or economic assets, but also as encompassing social capital, locally embedded knowledge, and the capacity for community self-governance (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development,

2016). Recognizing these dimensions enables the formulation of development policies that are more inclusive of grassroots voices, supportive of decentralization, and conducive to bottom-up decision-making processes—standing in contrast to conventional top-down approaches driven by centralized authorities.

The relevance of a place-based perspective is particularly evident in Thailand's contemporary development trajectory, especially in relation to the Landbridge Project under the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC). Conceived as a large-scale logistics and industrial corridor linking deep-sea ports on the Andaman coast and the Gulf of Thailand, the Landbridge has repositioned Ranong Province as a strategic gateway for regional and global connectivity. This framing, however, tends to prioritize macroeconomic competitiveness and industrial expansion, while overlooking the province's distinctive socio-ecological characteristics—most notably its extensive mangrove ecosystems, small-scale fisheries, culturally diverse coastal communities, and complex local political networks. These features constitute forms of territorial capital that do not easily conform to the state's blueprint for large-scale industrialization, yet are central to the sustainability of local livelihoods and ecosystems.

In this context, place-based development—combined with participatory research approaches that emphasize the co-production of knowledge with local actors—offers two critical analytical advantages. First, it provides a comprehensive lens for understanding territorial potential beyond narrowly defined economic or infrastructural metrics. Second, it enables a critical interrogation of power relations and governance arrangements that often produce spatial injustice, particularly in developing countries where development policies are frequently shaped by centralized state mechanisms and corporate interests that remain disconnected from local realities.

This article adopts such a perspective through an in-depth examination of the Ao Ang (Ranong)–Laem Rio (Chumphon) Landbridge Project, with a specific focus on its implications for Ranong Province. Ranong occupies a geographically strategic position in upper southern Thailand, bordering Myanmar and located along the Andaman Sea, with potential connectivity to the Gulf of Thailand. Its economic structure is predominantly based on fisheries, agriculture, ecotourism, and wellness services, and the Ranong Provincial Development Plan (2023–2027) explicitly identifies tourism and services as the primary productive sectors driving both spatial and economic development (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023). This strong reliance on natural resources renders the province particularly vulnerable to transformations associated with large-scale, state-led infrastructure projects such as the Landbridge.

The Ao Ang – Laem Rio Landbridge Project, under the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), is one of Thailand's large-scale infrastructure-led economic development plans. The Landbridge itself represents the most extensive economic infrastructure initiative ever undertaken in Thailand. Initially conceived under the Southern Seaboard Development (SSB) plan, it is now being advanced within the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) framework. Its core components include a deep-sea port at Laem Ao Ang in Ranong Province and another at Laem Rio in Chumphon Province, connected by an integrated multimodal transport corridor (Route MR8) comprising a motorway and railway line. A central strip along this corridor is reserved for the future installation of oil and gas pipelines, while both sides are designated for industrial estates and commercial zones aimed at ensuring the project's economic viability. The initiative is further institutionalized through the drafting of the Southern Economic Corridor Act, which establishes the Southern Economic Corridor Policy Committee—a national-level governing body endowed with comprehensive authority over development within the

designated area (Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning (OTP, 2023b). This governance arrangement reflects the Thai state's commitment to a centralized, top-down approach to spatial and economic development.

Against this backdrop, the significance of this article lies in its effort to move beyond an evaluation of development based solely on economic outcomes. Instead, it seeks to critically examine the institutional mechanisms, decision-making processes, and configurations of power that shape development trajectories in Ranong Province. By situating the Landbridge Project within a place-based development framework, the article contributes to broader debates on sustainable development—understood as the balanced integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions—while highlighting the risks of spatial injustice embedded in centralized development paradigms.

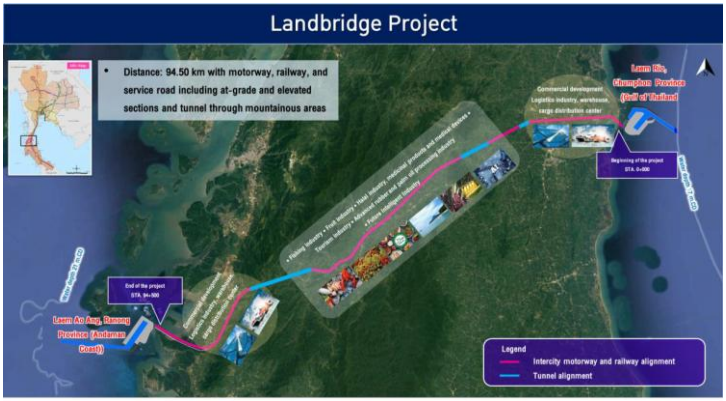


Figure 1 Composition of the Landbridge

Source: Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning. (2024b).

Note: As this document was prepared OTP, it does not yet include references to the liquid cargo pipeline system.

2. Objectives

2.1 To analyze the Landbridge project in Ranong Province as a case of top-down development under the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), highlighting its disconnection from local contexts.

2.2 To examine how centralized planning and limited participatory mechanisms—particularly public hearings conducted through the Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) process—undermine local knowledge, community rights, and spatial justice.

2.3 To apply the theoretical frameworks of place-based development and spatial justice to propose more inclusive and decentralized development policy in Thailand

3. Research Methods

This study was conducted between 2019 and 2025 and was guided by two interrelated methodological approaches, as follows:

3.1 Documentary research served as a foundational method in this study. As the Landbridge represents a large-scale infrastructure initiative shaped by more than three decades of policy evolution across Thailand's Southern region, and its current formulation in Ranong remains at the stage of public consultation, documentary analysis is essential for tracing its conceptual origins, historical trajectories, shifting policy rationales, and Ranong's development trajectory. The study draws on an extensive review of theoretical literature, academic publications, policy documents, and digital archives. Using an integrated analytical framework that combines place-based development with a strong emphasis on spatial justice, the research critically examines whether state-led projects—such as the Landbridge—respond to local needs or reproduce centralized, growth-oriented agendas.

3.2 Field Research was designed to reflect the study's commitment to participatory and critical inquiry. The research site was

observed continuously between 2019 and 2025, beginning with the Thai government's approval in principle of the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) in 2019 and intensifying after the formal initiation of the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge project in 2021.

During the initial phase, field engagement consisted primarily of informal conversations with local residents and participation in public activities related to the SEC, as permitted by COVID-19 restrictions. Although these interactions did not yet constitute systematic data collection, they were crucial for contextual familiarization, trust-building, and understanding local perceptions. A key early finding was the extremely low level of community awareness regarding the Landbridge project, despite its large scale and direct implications for local livelihoods. For example, during a field visit to the Ao Ang cape area in July 2021, a small-scale fisher operating in the designated deep-sea port area was unaware that his fishing grounds had been selected as one of the target areas for port construction.

Recognizing this lack of access to information among directly affected communities marked a critical shift in the researcher's positionality. The research approach evolved from conventional data collection toward an activist and action-oriented research stance (Rose, 1997; Martínez, 2024), grounded in the ethical consideration that conducting in-depth interviews without first addressing information asymmetries would be methodologically problematic. Consequently, the researcher engaged in collaborative knowledge-sharing activities with local communities, in consultation with civil society actors in Ranong Province.

This process began with small discussion circles among communities with whom prior working relationships existed and gradually expanded into broader public forums. These discussions were not designed solely to elicit data, but to facilitate joint analysis by connecting policy-level information with local knowledge and lived experiences. As community understanding

deepened, external resource persons—such as experts on the Eastern Economic Corridor and human rights lawyers—were invited to support collective learning about development impacts and participatory rights.

Between 2022 and 2024, field dynamics intensified as state agencies accelerated project implementation and communities increased their engagement and mobilization. Public concern grew notably following the first off-site Cabinet meeting held in Ranong Province in January 2024, during which the Landbridge was declared a national agenda. These developments expanded opportunities for in-depth interviews, as local actors could now articulate their concerns in relation to increasingly concrete policy processes.

The final phase of fieldwork was conducted between November 2024 and May 2025. While the official Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) defined the study area as a 3–5 kilometer radius from the Ao Ang deep-sea port, this research adopted a broader, relationship-to-the-project framework. Stakeholders were identified based on both spatial proximity and substantive connections to the project, including:

(1) residents within the EHIA-defined area;

(2) communities outside the 3–5 kilometer radius but located along projected land- and sea-based potential construction material transport routes; and

(3) individuals whose livelihoods or professional roles were linked to natural resource management, tourism, services, civil society, or provincial governance.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods:

(1) in-depth interviews with 31 key informants, including 5 small-scale fishers and 4 commercial fishers, 9 tourism and service-sector operators, 3 community leaders, 7 civil society actors, and 3 provincial officials;

(2) five focus group discussions with 2–4 participants each;

(3) five informal conversations (individual and group-based, 3 – 6 participants);

(4) eight informal dialogues combined with community observation; and

(5) one semi-formal meeting involving 30 participants.

4. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The concept of place-based development emerged as a critique of centralized and space-neutral development approaches, which aim to stimulate economic growth in high-potential areas under the assumption that the benefits would eventually trickle down to other regions (World Bank, 2009). While such approaches have often been favored in national development policies for their efficiency, they have also led to spatial inequality and the exclusion of local communities, particularly those residing in target development zones—from decision-making processes.

Rodríguez-Pose (2013) offers a critical assessment of centralized development strategies that focus narrowly on economic efficiency, arguing that policy failures in many countries stem not from a lack of resources or infrastructure, but from the institutional neglect of place. Without a deep understanding of a locality's historical, social, cultural, and political contexts, development efforts are unlikely to succeed. He thus advocates for context-sensitive policies grounded in localized data and designed collaboratively with local stakeholders.

Barca, McCann, & Rodríguez-Pose, (2012) further developed the place-based policy framework, which emphasizes the importance of local context and inclusive stakeholder participation. They argue that achieving sustainable development outcomes requires addressing deeply embedded institutional constraints while fostering mechanisms of policy learning between state agencies, local communities, and the private sector.

The concepts of spatial justice and participatory governance have since enriched the place-based development paradigm by bringing political and power dimensions to the forefront. Soja (2010), for instance, contends that spatial justice is not merely about the equitable distribution of resources, but also concerns the right to participate in decision-making and to shape the future of one's own space and community.

In practice, studies by Barca (2011) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016) have presented case examples from countries such as Italy, Poland, and the Nordic region, where place-based policies have been implemented to support regions facing economic development challenges. These efforts leveraged local knowledge, social capital, and participatory resource allocation. In Finland, for example, place-based strategies have been utilized to support development in remote and climatically challenging areas — by drawing on cultural heritage and renewable energy potential through context-sensitive policy design.

In the Thai context, there has been a consistent effort to integrate place-based development approaches that prioritize public participation into national policy, most notably since the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997 – 2001). However, numerous studies—such as those by Patan Suvanamongkol (2011), Decentralization: Concepts and Experiences from Asia, and Rangsun Thanapornpan (2002), The Economics of Constitution: An Analysis of the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand—highlight the limitations of decentralization under Thailand’s centralized state apparatus. These limitations are particularly evident when democratic mechanisms are weakened or overridden by authoritarian interventions.

Sanamchai (2021) similarly argues that although the decentralization movement gained momentum in the late 1990s, it was short-lived. By the 2000s, especially after the 2014 coup, Thailand witnessed a recentralization

of state power through legal and policy mechanisms that curtailed public participation. These included the use of Section 44 executive orders by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), and the entrenchment of centralized control in the 2017 Constitution and the 20-Year National Strategy.

A case study by the International Commission of Jurists (2020) on Thailand's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) illustrates the structural injustices inherent in top-down spatial development. Although these projects were officially justified as tools for poverty alleviation and regional development, their implementation—especially through orders issued by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—resulted in widespread violations of community rights. These included forced land expropriation, imposition of infrastructure without local consent, and exclusionary planning processes that denied affected communities the ability to shape their own developmental trajectories.

In summary, the concept of place-based development offers a new analytical lens that challenges centralized power structures and advocates for participatory approaches grounded in the unique economic, social, and political contexts of each locality. However, a key challenge remains in translating this conceptual framework into concrete policy actions, particularly within political systems that continue to resist genuine decentralization.

5. Ranong's Resource-Based Economy and Spatial Vulnerabilities under Centralized Development

Ranong Province exhibits two interrelated spatial assets that have historically underpinned both its economic foundations and urban development: (1) its rich natural resources, which simultaneously sustain ecological balance and drive the local economy, and (2) its strategic geographic location, which facilitates the flow of people and commerce.

These features have not only defined the area's economic structure through different eras but also contributed to vibrant socio-cultural dynamics and migration-induced diversity

Historically, Ranong grew from the abundance of tin and its status as a key Andaman port. It later transitioned through the 'logging era' and the 'commercial fishing era,' which began to decline after the termination of logging concessions in 1989. The fishing industry waned further as labour rights and environmental sustainability regulations were tightened in the mid-2000s. As of 2025, while agriculture and small-scale fisheries remain vital to community life, Ranong's economic structure has shifted to a service-based economy centered on tourism (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023).

Ranong's natural resources now generate the highest economic value in the province—from mountains and forests to mangroves, sea, and mineral hot springs. The hot springs are also of high quality and sulfur-free (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). The coastal position also supports maritime tourism to Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago and sustained cross-border trade (International Institute for Trade and Development, 2022). This marks a transition from extractive resource use to value-added, sustainability-oriented development.

A 2019 the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) study for Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) planning noted Ranong's high potential to connect the Andaman coast and become a global destination for nature-based and wellness tourism. In 2021, it was selected as a health-related services model city by the Trade Policy and Strategy Office and Chulalongkorn University's Academic Services Center. The 2023–2027 Provincial Development Plan frames Ranong as a strategic locality for wellness-oriented tourism and high-value agricultural development, aimed at enhancing local quality of life through the integration of natural conservation (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023). This vision aligns with the rising popularity of

community-based, nature-immersive, and health-conscious tourism among both Thais and foreigners.

Ranong's tourism is not solely based on natural and geographic endowments but also integrates local cultural and social values through creative tourism (Richards, 2011). It has long been a hub for migrant flows—Chinese, Burmese nationality, Thais (Southern, Central, and Northeastern), Indians, and Malays—which have shaped its multicultural city. This diversity is reflected in its architecture, old town districts, language, cuisine, and everyday life, contributing to a variety of tourism forms: cultural, culinary, lifestyle, and community-based (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023; NESDC, 2019).

Given the population's deep reliance on local assets, together with the national and global ecological significance of Ranong's ecosystems, the province is exceptionally vulnerable to structural transformations proposed under the Landbridge project. Ecologically, Ranong is one of Thailand's most unique provinces. Its mangrove forests are among the most biodiverse in the Asia-Pacific region. In 1997, the area was designated the world's first Mangrove Biosphere Reserve; in 2002, it was recognized as a Ramsar site; and in 2021, it was included in the Andaman Sea Conservation Area nominated for UNESCO World Natural Heritage status (Plathong, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the Landbridge—designed as a multimodal transport corridor integrating deep-sea ports, highways, railways, and energy pipelines, alongside commercial zones and industrial estates (figure 1) (OTP, 2023b; 2024)—poses significant risks. The project threatens to disrupt the province's socio-ecological equilibrium, particularly in the absence of meaningful public participation. Furthermore, the draft SEC Act proposes granting sweeping authority to the national-level SEC Policy Committee to oversee land-use planning and development, with a stated emphasis on promoting investment, particularly foreign direct investment. Such centralized

decision-making raises critical concerns regarding local governance, community rights, and the long-term sustainability of development in Ranong.

6. Contextualizing the Landbridge in Ranong Province: Centralized Planning and Local Disconnects

Although the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge under SEC has been presented within the discourse of regional development and decentralization, its actual policy process reveals a highly centralized model dominated by national-level institutions. Key policy directions and development formats have been predetermined by central agencies such as the National Economic and Social Development Board, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of Transport, leaving local administrative bodies with minimal decision-making authority and largely relegating them to roles of policy reception and implementation.

The Landbridge project is a continuation of the Southern Seaboard Development (SSB) initiative, first proposed in 1993 (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2011), which aimed to establish a transoceanic multimodal transport corridor integrating highways, railways, and oil and gas pipelines to connect deep-sea ports on the Andaman coast and the Gulf of Thailand for the transport of crude oil and industrial goods, alongside the development of energy and petrochemical industrial zones (Office of National Economic and Social Development Board, 1992).

For more than three decades, the project site has undergone repeated shifts, beginning with the initial Krabi–Khanom Landbridge proposal in 1993—which faced opposition from stakeholders in agriculture, fisheries, and eco-tourism—the project has been repeatedly relocated, shifting first to Tub Lamu–Sichon (1997), then to Thai Muang–Sichon (2003–2004), which was later identified as a tsunami-risk zone (Ministry of Energy, 2005). Similar initiatives were later advanced along the Pak Bara–Songkhla route (2005–

2018), but likewise encountered persistent resistance from local communities, leading to repeated relocations of proposed project sites (Thailand Future Writing Network & Southern People's Assembly, 2021).

This long-standing pattern exemplifies an enduring structural problem associated with centralized planning and a persistent failure to secure local legitimacy across Southern provinces, underscoring deeper tensions between national development ambitions and the spatial realities of local development that depend heavily on natural capital, agriculture, fisheries, and sustainable tourism.

Most recently (2018–present), along the Ao Ang (Ranong)–Laem Rio (Chumphon) route, a similar developmental trajectory has unfolded in Ranong under the SEC. When examining the provincial potential, it becomes evident that Ranong has sought to leverage its geographical advantages and natural resources. Ranong's economy is heavily dependent on fisheries and agriculture, as well as tourism and wellness services. The provincial development vision highlights: "*Ranong as a wellness tourism city and high-value agricultural zone for enhanced quality of life*" (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023). Such efforts align with development approaches that prioritize sustainability and spatial justice, grounded in local natural and cultural capital (Soja, 2010; Schlosberg, 2007).

In this context—where the Ranong economy remains resource-based and the coastal ecosystem is highly vulnerable to large-scale infrastructural transformation—the relocation of the Landbridge project's target area to Ranong was not merely a geographical adjustment to bypass local opposition. It also reflects a policy trajectory shaped by centralized territorial logic, a persistent feature of institutional centralism in Thailand's development paradigm. Moreover, the government's effort to pass the draft SEC Act, modeled on the 2018 Eastern Economic Corridor Act, proposes the creation of a national policy committee with sweeping legal authority to govern SEC

zones and grant long-term investment concessions to investors (Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning, 2023b). This move reflects a broader trend of recentralization through legal exceptionalism; wherein special legislation is used to override local governance structures and general laws.

This structural imbalance becomes even more pronounced when analyzed through the legal framework of Section 65 of the 2017 Constitution, which requires all government agencies to craft their plans and budgets in alignment with the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2017–2037). SEC-based development, including the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge, is incorporated under Strategic Issue 9 on Thailand's Special Economic Zones (National Statistical Office, 2023). While the strategic plan ostensibly aims to ensure policy continuity, in practice it constrains the flexibility of provinces to shape their own long-term futures and diminishes both public participation and the potential for meaningful local self-determination. Such mechanisms not only restrict the scope of de facto decentralization but also embody the politics of territorialization and spatial injustice (Soja, 2010).

7. The Marginalization of Local Knowledge and Spatial Justice in the EHIA Process

The Ao Ang coastline—designated as a development site for the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge under a state-led planning framework—is not merely a zone of conservation areas (figure 2); rather, it constitutes a place-based livelihood in which ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions are deeply interwoven. These areas support spatially embedded networks of resource-sharing among diverse local communities.

However, the project plan and associated policy processes have failed to systematically incorporate socio-cultural capital and local knowledge into decision-making. This limitation became evident throughout the project feasibility study and the Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA)

process for the Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port and Landbridge project. The EHIA process formally commenced after the Ministry of Transport, through the Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning, commissioned a consortium of consulting firms in March 2021 to undertake the study, the final report is expected to be submitted to the Expert Committee on Environmental Impact Assessment for review by mid-2026. These issues were particularly visible during the first (2023) to the third (2025) rounds (K.1–K.3) of the EHIA public hearings, where local respondents—as observed in this research and corroborated through interviews—criticized the narrowly defined impact zone, which was limited to a 3–5 kilometer radius from the project site.

This designated area includes six communities across three subdistricts and two districts in Ranong Province (OTP, 2023a; 2023b), participants consistently emphasized that the impacts would extend far beyond this boundary, particularly regarding marine resources, community livelihoods, and the local economic system. The limited impact zone was widely interpreted as an omission of community values from the consultant's study, and despite repeated calls to expand the assessment scope, these demands were not addressed until the final day of the official field impact study and local consultation process

The designated project site, locally known as "*Don Ta Phaew*" or "*the fishermen's treasure trove*," is a key fishing ground and marine resource supporting nearly all coastal communities in Ranong. Surrounding islands—such as Ko Kam (Ao Khao Khwai), Ko Khankhao, and Ko Yipun—also function as important ecotourism destinations, generating income for both small-scale fishers and private tourism operators.

Ko Son or also called "*Ko Pae*" [goat] or "*Ko Toh Yiseem*"—located between Hat Sai Dam village and Ao Ang cape—is a sacred site for local Muslims. It houses the Toh Yiseem Mosque and is the burial ground of the

revered Islamic scholar Toh Yiseem. To the west, the seas around Ko Kham and Ko Phayam are home to the Indigenous Moken, whose lives are deeply intertwined with the marine environment. However, in the first EHIA hearing presentation (OTP, 2023a), the sacred mosque on Ko Son was merely labeled as an "*unnamed mosque*" and none of the official documents recognized the Moken as an Indigenous people of Ranong.



Figure 2 Map of the Don Ta Phaew and its surrounding areas
Source: Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning. (2023b).
(modified by the researcher)

Further, the second round of public hearing documents, dated July 2024, listed only "*polychaetes and sand fish*" as benthic fauna in the area. During the second hearing, although community members pointed out that this description failed to encompass the full ecological, economic, and cultural significance of the area, they also proactively provided supplementary information regarding their relationship to the area, including details on marine resources, fishing, tourism, and livelihood practices (figure 5 and 6). However, this information was organized under the section '*Concerns, Comments, and Recommendations*,' without being formally acknowledged as knowledge pertinent to policy decisions.

Similarly, the (draft) EHIA report (Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning, 2024a), which discusses the first phase of port development involving dredging and land reclamation over 11,287.5 rai, states only that '*the benthic organisms in the dredging zone include polychaetes of the Capitellidae, Nephtyidae, and Spionidae families*,' and frames the environmental impact as '*loss of benthic biomass, which may affect the food chain of marine species during the dredging process.*'

From the perspective of place-based development and spatial justice (Soja, 2010; Schlosberg, 2007), this mode of presenting environmental data reflects a deeper discursive confrontation between local communities—who understand land and sea as "*life*" and "*place-based livelihoods*" constituted through integrated ecological, economic, social, and cultural relations—and the state, which conceptualizes these spaces primarily as economic resources. Moreover, when the EHIA process is examined through the notion of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004), the failure to integrate local knowledge into policymaking reveals that scientific evidence within the EHIA is not produced in a neutral technical space, but is instead shaped by institutional power relations and prevailing policy interests.

8. Entrenched Developmental Structural Problems in Centralized Policy Processes and the Failure to Confer Local Legitimacy

This persistent failure to integrate local knowledge and territorial potential into policymaking reflects not only the institutional limitations of centralized development, but also contributes to the erosion of public trust. As a result, resistance has grown toward both the impact assessment process and the broader state-led development agenda.

What had initially proceeded as a largely uncontested policy initiative for more than two years began to encounter persistent social pushback. The first public protest in the history of the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge—led by

civil society groups from Ranong and Chumphon under the banner of the *Network of People Affected by the Chumphon–Ranong Landbridge* during the first EHIA hearing (K.1) on August 16, 2023—emerged directly from a grassroots movement initiated by ordinary Ranong residents who sought to assert their role in the local policy process in a concrete and visible way.

The submission of the letter resulted from a collective resolution formulated during a community forum convened by Ranong civil society not long before the K.1 hearing, in collaboration with the researcher and with external support from a human rights lawyer. This forum marked the first cross-community dialogue between Ranong and Chumphon, during which participants discussed how, within the existing legal framework, citizens could convey their concerns to the government regarding the project's impacts and the perceived unfairness of the process. The letter called upon the state to undertake a new study and to reopen the process to diverse perspectives, in accordance with the principles of transparency and meaningful participation.

Following this initial act of resistance, the movement diversified, giving rise to several groups employing varied strategies. While some engaged in public advocacy alongside NGOs, the core Ranong network continued grassroots work—disseminating information, building alliances, and facilitating resource-sharing among more openly mobilized groups. These efforts extended to the 3rd EHIA public hearing for the Ao Ang deep-sea port and Landbridge project (May 19–21, 2025).

On May 19, participants from Ranong voiced critical concerns regarding the project's rationale, the boundaries of the assessment, the credibility of the data, and the participatory procedures. The following day, civil society groups from Ranong and Chumphon organized a parallel forum to present alternative perspectives grounded in local experience and values. By May 21, public protests in Chumphon—supported by participants from

Ranong—had intensified to the extent that government agencies were almost unable to proceed with the scheduled activities.

Moreover, an examination of the EHIA process reveals that legal mechanisms originally intended to safeguard citizens' rights have instead been deployed as instruments of state control over both the direction and implementation of development. The limitations observed do not arise solely from technical deficiencies. As discussed earlier with regard to the systematic neglect of integrating local knowledge into policymaking, these limitations reflect entrenched structural injustices embedded within Thailand's legal and political systems.

One of the key mechanisms used to accelerate the investment process is the exemption under Section 49, paragraph four, of the Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act, B.E. 2561 (2018), which originated from Announcement of the National Council for Peace and Order No. 9/2559. This provision allows transportation projects to initiate the investor selection process in advance, even before the EHIA report receives formal approval. Although the law prohibits contract signing, in practice it enables negotiations, coordination, and the establishment of investor confidence in advance.

This type of acceleration reflects what Schlosberg (2007) terms as 'procedural injustice', where the state privileges economic imperatives over citizens' rights as stakeholders. It exemplifies the 'politics of acceleration', in which the state invokes policy authority under the guise of urgency to fast-track project implementation, even when the impact assessment process has not yet been completed.

Compounding this issue is the absence of clear legal definitions regarding affected areas in Thai law. Consequently, the Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port project was able to limit its assessment boundary to a 3–5 kilometer radius from the project site, based largely on notions of direct physical impact. The

boundary determination set out in the Terms of Reference (TOR)—lacking a robust review process—reflects the politics of knowledge (Forsyth, 2003; Jasanoff, 2004), where the state and consulting firms use technical expertise to shape what 'should be studied' and what 'can be excluded'.

Another critical gap is the absence of legal requirements for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for large-scale master plans. This allows projects to conduct fragmented assessments, preventing the public from understanding the systemic connections among project components. The Landbridge's infrastructure package—deep-sea port, motorway, and railway—requires land expropriation, forest clearance, dredging, land reclamation, and the securing of raw water and electricity supplies. Each activity demands substantial natural resources and generates land and marine pollution. Considered individually, each component may appear to produce manageable impacts; yet when viewed cumulatively, the combined impacts are severe and far-reaching

The third structural limitation lies in the neglect of cross-scalar impacts within the EHIA process. Although project proponents were fully aware that substantial volumes of construction materials would be sourced from areas far beyond the immediate project site - and transported across multiple districts over an extended period of nearly a decade - the assessment boundary remained confined to a 3–5 kilometer radius. As a result, communities located along material transport routes, who would be subjected to persistent impacts such as dust pollution, noise, traffic-related risks, and a decline in overall quality of life, were entirely excluded from the assessment. This narrow delineation reflects a politics of spatial framing, in which technical boundaries are strategically employed to restrict the scope of impact assessment and delimit public participation. In practice, however, the project's effects extend across districts, occupational groups, and interconnected ecosystems over the long term. The failure to account for

cumulative and synergistic impacts is therefore not merely a technical oversight, but rather a manifestation of power relations that fragment knowledge, depoliticize harm, and regulate how space is defined and understood (Walker, 2012).

Within the context of the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge—and particularly when situated within the longer historical trajectory from the Southern Seaboard Development (SSB) to the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC)—this study demonstrates that such legal and procedural gaps are emblematic of technocratic politics. Through the segmentation of large-scale development into discrete and narrowly defined components, cumulative impacts are obscured, contentious issues are downscaled, and the scope of public engagement is systematically constrained. These practices enable projects to advance under institutional conditions that are most favorable to the state, while minimizing political accountability.

In the case of Ranong, given its resource-based economy and the multidimensional ecological, cultural, and livelihood significance of Ao Ang for local communities, the adoption of narrow assessment methodologies and limited spatial boundaries—framing the area as having low ecological value and affecting only a small population—renders the province particularly vulnerable to structural harm.

The province vulnerabilities are further reinforced by the draft SEC Act, which centralizes decision-making authority within the SEC Policy Committee. Dominated by national-level agencies and oriented primarily toward investment facilitation, this governance arrangement effectively marginalizes local actors from both spatial determination and area-based management. It represents a form of centralization enacted through legal and institutional exceptionalism; whereby structural power is reallocated to dominant capital interests through concession-based mechanisms. Such arrangements exemplify authoritarian development practices and

fundamentally undermine principles of spatial justice, while risking the reproduction of systemic failures previously observed in border special economic zones and the Eastern Economic Corridor (International Commission of Jurists, 2020).

9. Conclusion

The case of the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge in Ranong Province illustrates how the area—despite its ecological richness, diverse local economy, and vibrant multiculturalism—has been redefined as a strategic asset through top-down spatial designation. This transformation reflects a developmental logic in which territorial value is shaped by national policy imperatives rather than intrinsic socio-ecological characteristics or locally articulated priorities. Legal and policy instruments embedded in the Southern Economic Corridor framework further consolidate centralized authority, constraining provincial and community influence over development trajectories.

Procedurally, the Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) process reinforces these dynamics. Operating as a form of technocratic politics, it uses ostensibly neutral scientific tools to delimit participation, control knowledge production, and prioritize administrative efficiency over substantive public engagement. Mechanisms permitting investor involvement prior to EHIA approval, combined with the absence of Strategic Environmental Assessment or cumulative impact analysis, accelerate project implementation while weakening safeguards intended to protect community rights. Procedural legitimacy thus substitutes for meaningful deliberation.

Viewed in this light, the Ranong Landbridge extends beyond a case-specific critique to illuminate broader characteristics of centralized environmental politics and a growth-oriented development paradigm that continues to dominate Thai policymaking at the expense of spatial justice.

From the perspective of place-based development and spatial justice, Ranong has been treated primarily as an economic instrument rather than as a lived space requiring participatory, co-knowledge-driven policymaking. The marginalization of local knowledge, the exclusion of community capital from decision-making, and the neglect of cross-scalar impacts reveal how spatial framing is used to exercise power. These practices generate material risks for communities dependent on marine, ecological, and cultural resources, while undermining the potential for development pathways grounded in local realities.

Reframing development through place-based approaches and spatial justice therefore requires more than analytical critique; it demands a genuine political commitment to people-centered and sustainable development. Such a shift calls for reconsidering how development policies are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated in relation to local socio-ecological contexts, while ensuring that cross-scalar and cumulative impacts are meaningfully recognized and addressed.

Taken together, the findings of this study affirm that place-based development should be understood not as a technical exercise in spatial optimization but as a fundamentally political and relational process. When combined with participatory research approaches, it serves not only as an analytical framework but also as a pathway for advocacy and community empowerment—through co-knowledge production, strengthened public participation, and the reassertion of community agency in shaping local futures. Without such a transformation, development frameworks risk remaining detached from the socio-ecological and cultural foundations that sustain local life.

10. Recommendation

Drawing on the findings of this study, three key policy implications emerge for strengthening place-based development and spatial justice in Thailand's large-scale development planning.

First, national development planning should incorporate place-based territorial assessment at the earliest stages of policy formulation. Strategic spatial designation of development zones—such as the Landbridge under the Southern Economic Corridor—should be preceded by systematic territorial analysis that considers the socio-economic, cultural, and ecological characteristics of local areas. This requires the formal incorporation of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) into national law to evaluate territorial potentials and constraints before development projects are designed and planned, thereby ensuring that decision-making align with local contexts without overriding existing community-based economic systems and ecological balances.

Second, Thailand's environmental governance framework requires strengthening through the integration of cross-scalar and cumulative impact assessments. Reliance on project-level Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) limits the ability to evaluate the broader and long-term impacts of large infrastructure initiatives. Cross-scalar and cumulative impact assessments should therefore be incorporated into the legal framework governing large-scale development planning, enabling earlier and more comprehensive scrutiny of policy directions, planning strategies, and potential impacts, thereby reducing the risk of environmentally and socially unsustainable outcomes.

Third, development governance must expand meaningful public participation and integrate local knowledge into decision-making processes. Participation mechanisms within the existing EHIA process often function as procedural formalities rather than genuine deliberative platforms.

Although current laws recognize public participation rights, enforcement mechanisms and sanctions remain weak or ambiguous. Legal accountability should therefore be strengthened through clearer enforcement mechanisms and effective sanctions for responsible state agencies, as well as for academic institutions and consulting firms involved in impact assessments that produce ritualized forms of participation or marginalize local knowledge. Such measures are essential to ensure that participatory processes function as genuine deliberative mechanisms, thereby enhancing the capacity of local actors to engage in development planning and negotiate development outcomes.

Collectively, these policy directions suggest that achieving spatially just development requires not only improvements in legal procedures but also broader reforms in governance arrangements that redistribute decision-making power and enable communities to participate meaningfully in shaping the future of their territories.

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