

A Sustainable Sufficiency Economy Model Based on Community Identity in Security-Challenged Areas: A Case Study of Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

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Abstract

This study aims to examine current contextual and spatial changes in Thailand's southern border provinces, assess residents' quality of life amid persistent security challenges, analyze security-related environmental factors that influence everyday life, and develop a sustainable sufficiency-economy model grounded in community identity within security-challenged contexts. This study employed a mixed-methods design that integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 representatives from government agencies and a focus group with 30 community leaders. Semi-structured interview guides and focus group protocols were employed, and qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. For the quantitative component, surveys were administered to 384 residents in the southern border provinces, and the data were analyzed using frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Findings revealed three significant contextual challenges: ongoing unrest and security issues; the spread of drug abuse; and the impact of large-scale infrastructure projects and Malaysia's rapid development. Regarding quality of life, concerns emerged in four areas: rising chronic conditions such as office syndrome, increased cases of depression and anxiety, persistent economic hardship and unemployment, and heightened feelings of insecurity in daily life. Survey results confirmed that the environmental dimension of quality of life scored lowest, particularly with respect to financial sufficiency for basic needs. Despite these challenges, the findings indicate that substantial social and cultural capital remains in the region, reflected in high evaluations of several security-environment dimensions, except for the economic dimension. Based on these findings, the proposed model for a sustainable sufficiency economy consists of six mechanisms: network building, participatory research, knowledge-based learning, communication for change, behavioral incentives, and community-based development through integrated collaboration. The study highlights how community identity and the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy can be mobilized to enhance quality of life, strengthen security, and promote sustainable development in security-challenged border areas.

Keywords

Community identity; security-challenged areas; Southern border provinces of Thailand; Sustainable Sufficiency Economy

Introduction

The Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy is an economic and social philosophy bestowed by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (King Rama IX). It emphasizes a development pathway grounded in self-reliance, moderation, and reasonableness, alongside the cultivation of resilience and moral integrity. The philosophy encourages people to maintain a balanced way of life, live within their means, and remain vigilant against complacency while progressing in a step-by-step manner (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council [NESDC], 2007). Within this philosophical framework, human well-being is understood as a holistic condition that integrates material sufficiency, psychological well-being, social harmony, and a sense of security in everyday life, rather than being defined solely by economic growth or income levels (NESDC, 2017; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994).

Due to its clarity, practicality, and applicability in guiding national development, the philosophy was formally adopted by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC). Since the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan, it has been integrated into subsequent national development frameworks. Its purpose has been to strengthen Thailand's economic and social foundations, preserve the balance of resources, and enable adaptability to globalization. This emphasis on balance and adaptability highlights the intrinsic interrelationship between quality of life and security, as sustainable well-being cannot be achieved in contexts characterized by instability, fear, or persistent insecurity (UNDP, 1994; World Health Organization [WHO], 1997).

Ultimately, the philosophy aims to foster a secure, balanced, and sustainable quality of life for the Thai people. The philosophy of sufficiency economy is recognized as a core principle underpinning Thailand's 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan, guiding the nation toward long-term success in alignment with the 20-Year National Strategy. This is anchored in three fundamental principles (NESDC, 2017): adherence to the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy; placing people at the center of development; and pursuit of a long-term vision within the 20-Year National Strategy. These principles explicitly position quality of life and human security as mutually reinforcing outcomes of people-centered development, consistent with human security frameworks that emphasize freedom from fear and freedom from want as the foundations of sustainable development (Alkire, 2003; UNDP, 1994).

By adopting the philosophy at the individual, community, and societal levels, Thailand has sought to strengthen national resilience and achieve sustainable development. This involves promoting equitable income distribution, ensuring stable economic foundations, and cultivating a deeper public understanding of sufficiency as a way of life—characterized by moderation, rationality, and resilience. From the perspective of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, security extends beyond physical safety to include economic security, social cohesion, and environmental stability, all of which directly shape both perceived and actual quality of life (NESDC, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011). Such a framework enables individuals and communities to live sustainably under the pressures of globalization. Against this backdrop, the present study employs a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this study, quality of life and security are conceptualized as interdependent dimensions informed by the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, and are examined jointly to

understand how their interaction contributes to community resilience and sustainable development in security-challenged contexts (Norris et al., 2008).

The southern border provinces have long affected by ongoing security challenges and socio-political unrest. This region, comprising provinces such as Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla, is characterized by relatively lower household incomes, limited employment opportunities, and structural economic disparities compared to other regions of Thailand. These conditions, combined with multidimensional changes in the regional context, have had a significant psychological impact on residents. As a result, cross-border economic migration to Malaysia has become a common livelihood strategy for many households, reflecting both economic vulnerability and the search for income security (Coordination Center Region 5, 2022). At the same time, the region is endowed with abundant natural resources and rich cultural diversity, reflecting its identity as a multicultural society.

The predominance of Malay Muslim communities alongside Buddhist and other minority groups has fostered a strong sense of community identity, social networks, and cultural institutions that serve as essential sources of social capital and resilience amid insecurity (Putnam, 2000). These cultural assets constitute an invaluable foundation for resilience and development. Despite the growing body of literature on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, quality of life, and security, existing studies have examined these dimensions primarily in isolation or focused mainly on economic or policy-level outcomes. There remains a notable gap in empirical research that integrates quality of life and security within a single conceptual framework grounded in community identity, particularly in security-challenged areas such as Thailand's southern border provinces. Moreover, prior studies have not sufficiently explored how community-based applications of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy can simultaneously address economic vulnerability, social cohesion, and perceptions of security.

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine (1) the current contextual dynamics and transformations in the region, (2) the quality of life of residents as an outcome of these contextual conditions, (3) security-related environmental factors as key determinants shaping everyday life and well-being, and (4) the design of a sustainable sufficiency economy model grounded in community identity within a security-challenged context. These objectives are conceptually linked sequentially and integratively, whereby contextual and empirical analyses of quality of life and security collectively inform the development of a community-based model grounded in the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. The ultimate goal is to provide knowledge and practical guidance for government agencies, the private sector, civil society, and local communities, enabling them to apply the philosophy of the sufficiency economy in everyday life. By addressing the identified research gap, this study contributes new insights into how the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy can serve as a coherent theoretical and practical framework for enhancing quality of life, strengthening security, and fostering resilience in regions facing prolonged instability. By doing so, communities can cultivate resilience, align with the objectives of the 20-Year National Strategy, and ensure Thailand's stability, prosperity, and sustainability under evolving circumstances (Internal Security Operations Command Region 5, 2021).

Literature review

In this study, the author reviewed three key bodies of literature, which are considered the critical variables for the present research, as follows:

Concept of quality of life

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1993) defined *quality of life* as the level of societal well-being and the degree to which individuals' needs are satisfied. Accordingly, quality of life refers to the extent to which an individual experiences well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction, as well as to the environmental conditions that shape daily life. This aligns with the World Health Organization (WHO) (1998) definition of quality of life, which views it as an individual's perception of their position in life, within the cultural and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. Quality of life is thus a broad and multidimensional construct encompassing physical health, psychological well-being, autonomy, social relationships, personal beliefs, and relationships with the environment.

Recent literature further emphasizes that quality of life is closely intertwined with perceptions of security and stability, particularly in contexts affected by prolonged conflict or insecurity. Studies indicate that economic uncertainty, perceived threats to safety, and social instability significantly influence mental health, social trust, and overall life satisfaction (WHO, 2012). These findings support the argument that quality of life cannot be adequately understood without considering security-related conditions. Mahatnirunkul et al. (1997) adapted and developed the WHO Quality of Life (QOL) indicators into a concise Thai version, the WHOQOL-THAI-BREF, suitable for the Thai population. It comprises four domains: physical, psychological, social relationships, and environmental. This instrument, adapted from WHOQOL-100, contains 26 items scored on a five-point Likert scale.

In the present study, these four domains are adopted as indicators of quality of life, as they correspond directly with the people-centered orientation of the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, which emphasizes balanced well-being across physical, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions rather than economic outcomes alone (NESDC, 2017; UNDP, 1994).

Concept of security

According to the Coordination Center, Region 5, of Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command (2022), the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy can be interpreted as an applied moral philosophy that provides normative guidance for managing human behavior and resource use in accordance with local geographic and social conditions. It emphasizes self-reliance at the individual, household, community, societal, and national levels and promotes the sharing of surplus production to strengthen cooperative networks, social harmony, and food security.

From a human security perspective, security extends beyond military or territorial protection to include economic security, social stability, environmental sustainability, and cultural cohesion, all of which directly affect people's quality of life (Alkire, 2003; UNDP, 1994). Within this broader understanding, the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy aligns closely with human security frameworks by emphasizing freedom from want and fear, and resilience to change, as the foundations of sustainable development. The Coordination Center Region 5 (2022) conceptualized the national security environment through eleven dimensions: geography, population, natural resources, beliefs/religion/ethics/loyalty, national character, military,

science and technology, economy, international relations and diplomacy, education, and national ideology and leadership.

These eleven dimensions reflect the concept of comprehensive security, which recognizes that national and community security is shaped by an interrelated set of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and institutional factors rather than by military power alone (Buzan et al., 1998; UNDP, 1994). Empirical studies suggest that weaknesses in any of these dimensions, particularly the economic and social dimensions, can undermine both perceived and actual security, thereby negatively affecting quality of life (OECD, 2020).

Within the framework of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, these security dimensions are not treated as isolated variables but as mutually reinforcing conditions that support balanced development and resilience. For example, economic sufficiency enhances household stability, which in turn strengthens psychological well-being, social cohesion, and perceptions of safety, key components of quality of life.

Conceptual linkage between quality of life, security, and the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

Drawing on the reviewed literature, this study conceptualizes quality of life and security as interdependent dimensions grounded in the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy. Security provides the enabling conditions of economic stability, social cohesion, environmental safety, and institutional support necessary for individuals and communities to achieve and sustain a good quality of life. Conversely, improved quality of life contributes to enhanced security by reducing social tensions, economic vulnerability, and susceptibility to conflict (Norris et al., 2008; UNDP, 1994).

Accordingly, the conceptual framework of this study positions the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy as the overarching normative foundation, with quality of life and security as the two core analytical dimensions. Community identity and social capital function as mediating mechanisms linking these dimensions, shaping how sufficiency principles are translated into practice in security-challenged contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design, specifically a qualitative–quantitative–qualitative approach, following the framework proposed by Creswell and Clark (2017). This design was selected to ensure that complex contextual, social, and security-related phenomena in Thailand’s southern border provinces could be explored in depth, quantified systematically, and subsequently synthesized into a context-sensitive development model grounded in community identity and the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy.

The use of mixed methods is justified by the study’s objectives, which require an in-depth understanding of contextual and security dynamics, empirical measurement of quality of life and security perceptions, and the development of a participatory model. Qualitative methods are essential for capturing lived experiences, contextual meanings, and community perspectives, whereas quantitative methods provide systematic, generalizable evidence of quality-of-life and security patterns across the population. Integrating both approaches

enhances methodological rigor, triangulation, and explanatory power (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Phase 1: Qualitative inquiry on contextual changes in the Southern Border Provinces

The purpose of Phase 1 was to establish a contextual and institutional foundation for the study by identifying key socioeconomic, cultural, and security-related changes affecting the southern border provinces.

Secondary data review

Sources included research reports, operational plans, and performance reports relevant to the study over the past five years. These documents were selected to capture the region's policy directions, development trends, and security dynamics. Data were analyzed using content analysis and summarized into thematic findings (Bowen, 2009).

In-depth interviews

The sample size followed Creswell's (2014) guideline for qualitative inquiries (5–25 participants). Purposive sampling targeted key informants closely aligned with the research focus, including representatives of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center, Internal Security Operations Command Region 4 (Forward Command), provincial governors, district chiefs or deputy district chiefs, executives of local administrative organizations, and heads of relevant regional line agencies.

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore perceptions of contextual change, development challenges, security conditions, and the applicability of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. The guide was validated for content relevance by three experts; Interviews were conducted online and onsite; 12 informants participated.

Focus group discussion

Discussants comprised formal and informal community leaders recognized for their leadership capacity. This method was employed to capture collective perspectives and community-level interpretations of contextual change and resilience. The discussion protocol mirrored the semi-structured interview guide. Thirty participants joined. Data from interviews and the focus group were analyzed using content analysis.

Phase 2: Concurrent qualitative and quantitative studies on quality of life and the security environment

Phase 2 aimed to empirically examine quality of life and security as interdependent dimensions, as conceptualized in the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and articulated in the study's theoretical framework.

Qualitative component (in-depth interviews)

Sampling followed Creswell (2014) and employed purposive sampling with the same inclusion criteria as Phase 1. A semi-structured guide, validated by three experts, focused on lived experiences related to quality of life, perceptions of security, and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted online or onsite; 12 informants participated. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

Quantitative component (survey)

Population

Residents of Thailand's southern border provinces (Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat), totaling more than 2.5 million persons (Department of Provincial Administration, Bureau of Registration Administration, August 2023).

Sample size

According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), when the population exceeds 300,000, a sample size of 384 yields 95% confidence level. Accordingly, 384 respondents were selected using multistage sampling.

Sampling procedure

An equal quota of 128 respondents per province was assigned. Sampling employed cluster sampling by province (three clusters per province) to ensure spatial coverage, and simple random sampling of four subdistricts (tambon) per province (a total of 12 tambon). Within each selected tambon, an equal number of individual respondents was assigned, as summarized in Table 1. Systematic household sampling was conducted within each tambon, spacing visits at least every 10 households.

Table 1: Summary of Subdistricts and Sample Sizes by Province

Subdistrict (Tambon)		Sample Size
Pattani Province		
1	Na Pradu, Khok Pho District	32
2	Nong Raet, Yaring District	32
3	Tanyong Lulo, Mueang District	32
4	Tuyong, Nong Chik District	32
Yala Province		
5	Sateng Nok, Mueang District	32
6	Kabang, Kabang District	32
7	Yaha, Yaha District	32
8	Bannang Sata, Bannang Sata District	32
Narathiwat Province		
9	Si Sakhon, Si Sakhon District	32
10	Yi-ngo, Yi-ngo District	32
11	Kaluwa, Mueang District	32
12	Sako, Su-ngai Padi District	32
Total		384

Instrument and validation

A structured questionnaire with five-point Likert-type items assessed perceptions of quality of life and the security environment. Content validity was evaluated by three experts. (specializing in quality-of-life development, area/community development and management, and security/Deep South affairs). using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) method ($IOC > 0.75$). A pilot test with 30 residents in Songkhla Province yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83, indicating acceptable reliability (Netemeyer et al., 2003).

Measurement of Quality of Life (WHOQOL)

Quality of life was measured using a WHOQOL-based instrument adapted for the local context (WHO, 1997)—items covered multiple domains, including physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being. Item scores ranged from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) on a five-point scale. Domain-level scores were calculated by averaging item scores within each domain, and the overall quality-of-life score was computed as the mean of the domain scores. Higher scores indicated better perceived quality of life. Possible scores ranged from 1.00 to 5.00 for both domain-level and overall indices.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics—frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation—were used to summarize respondent characteristics and key variables.

Phase 3: Qualitative development of the proposed model

The purpose of Phase 3 was to synthesize empirical findings from Phases 1 and 2 into a sustainable sufficiency economy model grounded in community identity and responsive to security-challenged contexts.

A focus group workshop was convened to deliberate on and refine a draft model developed by the research team. The draft model was not pre-fixed but served as a flexible framework informed by empirical findings on contextual change, quality of life, and security conditions. Participants included experts in implementing the sufficiency economy and representatives from government agencies, the private sector, and community leadership. Thirty participants joined. Participants were invited to assess critically and co-create model components, mechanisms, and implementation pathways. All qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. The final model reflects a synthesis of empirical evidence, stakeholder input, and the theoretical principles of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy.

Results

Current context of spatial changes in the Southern Border Provinces

The synthesis of secondary data, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions revealed consistent findings regarding the current context of spatial changes in Thailand's southern border provinces. The key issues can be summarized as follows:

Ongoing unrest and instability

Since 2004, violent conflict in the southern border provinces has persisted for nearly two decades, causing severe impacts on local livelihoods and the regional economy. The prolonged unrest has resulted in economic contraction, business closures, declining investor confidence, and high unemployment. Importantly, widespread poverty remains a pressing issue. Many residents are unable to engage in routine occupations, resulting in low per capita incomes. Agricultural prices—especially rubber—have steadily declined, further reducing farmers' earnings and negatively affecting household consumption.

Analytically, these contextual shifts indicate that “security” in the study area is not merely a condition of physical safety but a structural determinant of economic stability, employment opportunities, and psychosocial well-being—dimensions closely aligned with the holistic notion of well-being emphasized in the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (NESDC, 2017; UNDP, 1994). For example, informants emphasized how insecurity disrupts daily economic routines and intensifies uncertainty: *“When incidents occur, shops close early and people avoid going out, income drops immediately.”*

Drug abuse and distribution

The prevalence of narcotics remains a critical problem, with increasing accessibility and widespread distribution throughout the area. The most common drugs include kratom leaves and methamphetamines, followed by cough syrup, heroin, crystal methamphetamine (ice), cannabis, psychotropic substances, and ecstasy. Social groups can distinguish patterns of drug use:

Students and out-of-school youth commonly consume kratom, methamphetamines, cannabis, and cough syrup, with methamphetamines often purchased collectively and shared.

Laborers, day workers, and the unemployed predominantly use methamphetamines, cannabis, heroin, and kratom.

Tourists and entertainment workers are more associated with methamphetamines, ecstasy, and crystal methamphetamine.

From an interpretive perspective, drug proliferation can be viewed as both a symptom and a driver of vulnerability: it reflects coping under stress and economic hardship while simultaneously eroding social cohesion and perceived safety, thereby affecting both security and quality of life. This linkage is consistent with the view that human security involves “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want,” which are inseparable in fragile contexts (Alkire, 2003; UNDP, 1994). Community leaders described drug issues as undermining trust within neighborhoods: *“People are afraid to let children go out, they worry about drugs and gangs.”*

(3) Large-scale infrastructure projects and Malaysia’s rapid development.

The southern border provinces, as cross-border areas, are strongly influenced by Malaysia’s dynamic development trajectory. Major infrastructure initiatives across the border—such as the high-speed rail project—have had significant psychological impacts on residents, particularly regarding perceived disparities in convenience, infrastructure quality, and employment opportunities. This comparative awareness heightens local concerns about lagging development and competitiveness in Thailand’s southern border region.

These perceptions of cross-border disparity function as a “comparative reference frame” that shapes local expectations and satisfaction, thereby influencing psychological well-being and perceptions of fairness. In SEP terms, such comparisons may challenge the balance principle by heightening feelings of relative deprivation, thereby affecting community-level resilience (Norris et al., 2008; OECD, 2011). An informant noted: *“Across the border, everything looks faster. Our youth want to leave because they see better opportunities there.”*

Quality of life of residents under the context of spatial change

Findings from in-depth interviews with key informants

The synthesis of data from in-depth interviews with key informants revealed broadly consistent views regarding the quality of life of residents in the southern border provinces amid spatial change. The findings can be summarized as follows:

Physical health dimension. Residents face issues with seven categories of chronic illnesses, which affect daily life to some extent, though not to the extent of preventing work altogether. An important observation was the growing incidence of general health problems—particularly office syndrome-related conditions—among adolescents, a trend not previously common. Interview data suggest that health concerns are increasingly shaped by livelihood patterns and stress exposure, consistent with WHOQOL's view that health and functioning are embedded in social and environmental contexts (WHO, 1997). An informant noted: *“Young people now have office syndrome because they sit with phones or computers all day.”*

Psychological dimension. Overall, residents reported good mental health, maintained the ability to live and work, and generally experienced life satisfaction, despite some adjustments required during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, an emerging concern is the increasing prevalence of depression, anxiety, and suicide, problems that were relatively rare in the past but are now more frequently observed. Although respondents reported generally “good” mental health, qualitative accounts indicate emerging mental health risks (depression, anxiety, suicide), which may reflect prolonged exposure to uncertainty, fear, and economic stress. This supports the argument that security conditions are closely tied to psychological well-being (UNDP, 1994; WHO, 1997). An informant noted: *“People try to be strong, but the stress accumulates, and some feel hopeless.”*

Social dimension. Communities continue to display strong kinship bonds, mutual assistance, and solidarity. Nevertheless, deteriorating economic conditions and relatively high unemployment rates, combined with misinformation and fraudulent content circulating through various media, have fueled growing distrust and suspicion among neighbors and communities. This has negatively affected social relationships and increased caution in daily interactions. Strong kinship and mutual aid constitute protective social capital, whereas economic stress and misinformation appear to erode trust. This is crucial because social cohesion is a resilience resource that SEP-based development seeks to mobilize (Norris et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000). An informant noted: *“We still help each other, but we are more careful now; scams and rumors make people suspicious.”*

Environmental dimension. Residents increasingly report feelings of insecurity and lack of safety, shaped by multidimensional changes in the economy, society, culture, and values. Negative economic trends, particularly inadequate incomes to meet basic needs, exacerbate these concerns. Moreover, access to healthcare services in the region is limited—while

residents can generally obtain basic care, the health system lacks the capacity to manage more complex medical conditions. Qualitative evidence points to a notable convergence between environmental insecurity (feeling unsafe) and economic insecurity (income inadequacy). An informant noted: *“Even if nothing happens today, we don’t feel secure prices rise, but income is not enough.”* This is consistent with the survey finding that “income adequacy” is among the lowest environmental QoL items.

Findings from the Public Opinion Survey

The survey of public perceptions regarding quality of life in the southern border provinces under spatial change found that, overall, quality of life was high ($M = 3.45$).

By domain, Psychological well-being scored the highest ($M = 3.64$). Physical health followed ($M = 3.51$). Social relationships were also rated high ($M = 3.44$). Environmental conditions, however, were only moderate ($M = 3.21$).

Itemized findings by domain:

Physical health: The highest-scoring indicator was the ability to move independently ($M = 4.29$). Other strong indicators included satisfaction with work capacity ($M = 3.75$), satisfaction in accomplishing daily tasks ($M = 3.59$), having enough energy for daily life ($M = 3.52$), and managing illness sufficiently to work/live daily ($M = 3.48$). Moderate items included absence of bodily pain ($M = 3.05$) and satisfaction with sleep ($M = 2.90$).

Psychological well-being: High ratings were given to having a sense of life’s meaning ($M = 4.12$), spiritual anchoring ($M = 4.09$), self-acceptance ($M = 3.72$), life satisfaction ($M = 3.59$), and self-confidence ($M = 3.48$). Moderate items included concentration in tasks ($M = 3.29$) and the ability to manage sadness or anxiety ($M = 3.21$).

Social relationships: High ratings were given to getting along with others ($M = 3.61$), having friends to confide in ($M = 3.60$), cooperating in group activities ($M = 3.53$), and satisfaction with assistance from friends ($M = 3.44$). A moderate level of safety in life and property was reported ($M = 3.02$).

Environmental conditions: Satisfaction with housing ($M = 3.83$) and transportation convenience ($M = 3.68$) received high ratings. Moderate ratings included healthy surroundings ($M = 3.32$), satisfaction with access to health services ($M = 3.26$), availability of recreation areas ($M = 3.06$), daily security ($M = 2.77$), and adequacy of income for basic needs ($M = 2.61$).

The domain pattern with the highest psychological and physical scores but lower environmental scores suggests that individuals may maintain internal coping resources (e.g., meaning, spirituality) even when external conditions (income adequacy, safety, health service access) remain constrained. Importantly, two environmental items, daily security ($M = 2.77$) and adequacy of income for basic needs ($M = 2.61$), signal that perceived safety and livelihood sufficiency remain critical pressure points, reinforcing the conceptual linkage between security and quality of life proposed in the study framework (UNDP, 1994; WHO, 1997).

Security environment factors under the context of spatial change

Findings from in-depth interviews

The synthesis of data from in-depth interviews revealed broadly consistent perspectives on security-environment factors in the southern border provinces. The key dimensions are as follows:

Geography. The provinces' geographic location along the Malaysian border, combined with strong bilateral relations, creates opportunities for residents to cross the border easily for work or tourism. However, ongoing unrest in the area significantly undermines local livelihoods and day-to-day survival.

Population. Communities generally live harmoniously, with limited factionalism. Occasional group formations are typically positive, such as occupational clusters. Strong solidarity and cooperation are evident in community and government-led activities, with broad acceptance of societal rules and regulations.

Natural resources. Overall, natural resources remain abundant and aligned with each province's geography. Nonetheless, concerns are rising about future degradation, particularly of marine resources, water sources, and waste management, requiring proactive community awareness.

National character. Residents generally demonstrate nonviolent, cooperative behavior and social cohesion. Although political polarization occasionally emerges during elections, such divisions dissipate afterward and rarely escalate into conflict.

Science and technology. Government agencies have advanced development efforts, yet some communities – especially remote border areas and older populations – remain unable to fully access or utilize information technology, limiting modernization and knowledge acquisition.

International relations and diplomacy. As cross-border areas, the provinces facilitate regular bilateral collaboration between Thai and Malaysian government agencies, particularly at the local level, thereby strengthening positive diplomatic ties.

Education. Both families and government agencies prioritize education, with increasing access across the region. However, challenges remain in the quality of education across institutions, teachers, and learners. An emerging trend is the rise in students sent to study outside the region and in Islamic schools, alongside concerns regarding Thai literacy rates.

Religion, ethics, and loyalty. Despite religious diversity, interfaith conflict is rare. While most residents practice Islam, intercommunity relations with Buddhist populations remain generally harmonious. Residents also maintain loyalty to the nation, religion, and monarchy, reflecting gratitude for the monarchy's contributions to the region.

Military presence. The military remains essential for security operations amid persistent unrest. However, stakeholders note the need to adjust operational conduct to maintain appropriateness and avoid creating distrust among external observers.

Economy. Agriculture, trade, and wage labor dominate livelihoods. However, COVID-19 and broader economic downturns have exacerbated unemployment and weakened local commerce.

National ideology and leadership. Both leaders and residents uphold appropriate ideologies and values, demonstrating patriotism, adaptability, and community support. Local leaders have shown resilience in adapting to crises such as COVID-19 and ongoing unrest associated with historical ideological movements.

Across dimensions, qualitative findings emphasize a “dual reality”: the region possesses substantial social and cultural strengths (e.g., solidarity, interfaith coexistence, loyalty, local leadership) yet remains constrained by insecurity and economic fragility. This pattern aligns with the resilience literature, which distinguishes between community capacities (protective factors) and structural stressors (risk factors) (Norris et al., 2008). Illustrative quotes highlighting the duality include: *“People here cooperate well, but when incidents happen, everything stops,”* and *“We live together peacefully across religions, but the economy is really difficult.”*

Findings from the public opinion survey

Survey results on security environment factors in the southern border provinces revealed that overall perceptions of security environment quality were very high ($M = 4.35$). Highest-rated domains: Nine dimensions scored at the “very high” level, including natural resources ($M = 4.91$), national character ($M = 4.91$), population ($M = 4.71$), science and technology ($M = 4.68$), religion/ethics/loyalty ($M = 4.68$), international relations and diplomacy ($M = 4.67$), geography ($M = 4.46$), education ($M = 4.43$), and national ideology and leadership ($M = 4.30$). Moderately rated domain: The military dimension was rated high ($M = 3.92$). Lowest-rated domain: The economy dimension was rated low ($M = 2.16$), highlighting significant economic vulnerability. Itemized findings:

Geography: Stable climate ($M = 4.67$) and favorable terrain for livelihoods ($M = 4.26$). Population: Strong compliance with social rules ($M = 4.81$) and community unity ($M = 4.62$). Natural resources: Adequacy ($M = 4.94$) and continued fertility ($M = 4.89$). National character: Cohesive thought and behavior ($M = 4.94$) and nonviolent expression ($M = 4.89$). Science and technology: Broad access to IT ($M = 4.84$) and utilization for knowledge/modernization ($M = 4.52$). International relations/diplomacy: Positive cross-border state activities ($M = 4.75$) and diplomatic benefits ($M = 4.59$). Education: Broad accessibility ($M = 4.84$) and application of learning for skill enhancement ($M = 4.03$). Religion/ethics/loyalty: Shared loyalty to nation, religion, and monarchy ($M = 4.81$), with religious diversity not leading to conflict ($M = 4.55$). Military: Reassuring role of military operations ($M = 4.14$) and adequate troop levels ($M = 3.70$). Economy: Limited evidence of economic downturn ($M = 2.30$) and perceptions of sufficiency in income/expenditure balance ($M = 2.03$). National ideology and leadership: Citizen adaptability ($M = 4.43$) and appropriate leadership qualities ($M = 4.17$).

At first glance, the very high overall security-environment mean appears counterintuitive given the ongoing unrest. However, this may be explained by several plausible interpretations: 1) Conceptual scope effect (what is being measured). The 11-factor “security environment” instrument includes broad social and institutional dimensions (e.g., national character, religion/ethics/loyalty, international relations), many of which respondents may evaluate positively even when physical security incidents persist. Thus, the high mean may reflect evaluations of “societal order and cohesion” rather than “incident-based physical

safety,” which is captured more directly in QoL items such as daily security ($M = 2.77$) (WHO, 1997). 2) Normalization and adaptation. Long-term exposure to instability can lead to adaptive expectations; residents may rate overall conditions more favorably than their historical experience, even while acknowledging fear and risk in daily life (Norris et al., 2008). 3) Differentiation between “security in society” and “security in livelihood”. The data show a coherent internal pattern: most social-cultural domains score high/very high, while the economy scores low. This implies that residents may perceive strong social cohesion and cultural stability while simultaneously recognizing livelihood insecurity as the most salient threat. Such a pattern corresponds to human security frameworks that treat economic insecurity as a core dimension of insecurity (Alkire, 2003; UNDP, 1994).

These interpretations also help reconcile the apparent discrepancy between survey results and in-depth interviews: interviews foreground incident-based insecurity and lived fear, whereas the survey's 11-factor security environment index may capture broader perceived strengths (social cohesion, resources, diplomacy) that remain intact despite conflict.

Model development: Linking empirical findings to the sustainable Sufficiency Economy Model

Drawing on the focus group deliberations and the synthesis of evidence gathered across all stages—namely (a) current spatial changes in the southern border provinces, (b) residents' quality of life under such changes, and (c) the prevailing security environment—the study highlights the urgent need to develop people and places to enhance stability and sustainability, using the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy as the overarching developmental framework. Key empirical signals include: persistent unrest and its severe repercussions on livelihoods and local economies (unemployment, poverty, low per-capita income, and depressed household consumption); the environmental dimension of quality of life scoring lowest on the item “adequacy of income for necessities”; and the economic dimension of the security environment receiving the lowest mean among eleven factors—while the remaining ten factors ranged from high to very high. These findings indicate substantial social capital remains in the region, which can be harnessed to drive sufficiency-based development. The resulting model comprises six mutually reinforcing mechanisms:

Building area-based networks for driving the Sufficiency Economy

The southern border provinces constitute a special cross-border context that requires multi-agency collaboration to achieve sustainable outcomes. In this regard, the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and security agencies such as the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) should serve as core conveners, coordinating with regional line agencies (e.g., District Agriculture Offices and District Community Development Offices) and local governments, including Subdistrict Administrative Organizations, municipalities, and Provincial Administrative Organizations. The network architecture should integrate civil society and community networks (grassroots organizations and community groups), private-sector networks (local businesses and entrepreneurs), and public communication and understanding networks (community radio, local media, and online channels). Acting as backbone organizations, the conveners are responsible for connecting network nodes, formalizing cooperation agreements, structuring participatory processes, and translating the philosophy of the sufficiency economy into practice at the individual, household, village, or community levels. The process should begin with SBPAC and ISOC hosting multi-stakeholder

roundtables to map existing actors, establish a joint steering group, and agree on shared goals, activity pipelines, and coordination protocols tailored to the realities of security-challenged border areas.

Area-based research and knowledge development for the Sufficiency Economy

Correct and contextually relevant knowledge is essential for the sustainable, practice-oriented application of the sufficiency economy philosophy. Accordingly, this mechanism emphasizes the promotion of participatory action research (PAR) led by the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), in collaboration with universities, scholars, students, civil society organizations, communities, citizens, and private-sector partners, to co-produce actionable knowledge, practical guidelines, and demonstrable models.

Key deliverables and indicative targets include clearly defined target groups, partner networks, and cooperation mechanisms both within and beyond the area; a consolidated social capital dataset for the region; a socio-cultural landscape map visualizing local assets; a social-capital supply chain illustrating how sufficiency practices flow through local actors; training for at least 50 entrepreneurs in sufficiency-aligned business and enterprise skills that foster sharing and well-being; the establishment of at least one sufficiency- or “sharing”-based enterprise group integrated from community social capital; the establishment of at least one sufficiency- or “sharing”-based community as a demonstrator; the development of at least one innovation grounded in the sufficiency philosophy (product, process, or governance); equipping at least 50 residents with the knowledge and skills to apply sufficiency principles in daily life and community development; and the organization of at least one Creative Festival celebrating sufficiency, sharing, and creative local practices. The expected outcome is a robust evidence base and a portfolio of tested prototypes that can be scaled and adapted across communities.

Creating and promoting learning for area-based Sufficiency Economy

Deep and continuous learning is essential for fostering awareness, mindset shifts, and the practical adoption of the sufficiency economy philosophy. This mechanism emphasizes the creation of a comprehensive learning ecosystem that includes intensive capacity-building for residents, entrepreneurs, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders, delivered through workshops and hands-on seminars that prioritize learning-by-doing. It also involves integrating short courses, continuing modules, and elective subjects into schools and TVET or general education tracks at all levels within the area, embedding sufficiency-related content into formal curricula, co-curricular activities, and community-based projects.

In addition, an Area Training and Learning Center should be established as a central hub to support the application of sufficiency principles at the individual, household, and community levels, through activities such as citizen briefings and training sessions, community leader seminars, youth and grassroots camps, and thematic learning networks. Programming examples include career-linked learning initiatives such as household-level production and cooperative value addition, group-based livelihood projects that emphasize mutual support and sharing-based production, and recognition mechanisms such as poster sessions, juried showcases, and “Sufficiency Person,” “Household,” or “Community” awards with transparent criteria to reinforce positive behavior change. The expected outcome is a sustained

pipeline of sufficiency-literate actors capable of translating the philosophy into everyday practice.

Strategic communication and advocacy for area-based sufficiency

Communication for social change is a critical mechanism for building shared understanding and collective momentum, particularly in security-challenged contexts. This strategy emphasizes the development of citizen-friendly communication materials, such as Sufficiency for the People, The Sharing Society, and Steps to a Sufficiency Community, that present concrete, context-relevant examples of applying the sufficiency economy philosophy in everyday life. It also involves leveraging local media channels, including community radio and social media platforms, to conduct sustained communication campaigns through formats such as short spots and micro-documentaries.

Furthermore, mobile outreach activities such as announcement trucks and door-to-door engagement should be implemented by trained communicators using pocket guides, alongside the production of posters and large-format vinyl banners for dissemination in public spaces. Complementing these efforts, micro-events targeting diverse audiences, including residents, entrepreneurs, educators, youth, civil society groups, and local businesses, should be organized, such as photo and essay contests, short film or clip competitions, public-speaking contests, and themed fairs or festivals that highlight context-appropriate applications of the sufficiency economy philosophy. The expected outcomes are heightened public awareness, accurate understanding, and the formation of social norms that support and sustain the adoption of sufficiency practices across contexts.

Applying behavioral incentives and “Nudge” approaches

To catalyze the voluntary adoption of sufficiency economy practices, this mechanism emphasizes designing behavioral interventions that respect individual autonomy while gently steering behavior toward desirable outcomes. It is grounded in behavioral economics and nudge approaches based on the principle of libertarian paternalism (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), which preserves freedom of choice while shaping choice environments and providing salient, comprehensible information.

Key instruments include recognition and reward systems with clear and transparent criteria standards, indicators, and evaluation procedures for identifying Model Sufficiency-and-Sharing Persons, Households, Communities, Community Enterprises, Entrepreneurs, and Business Organizations; the use of normative cues such as house-level stickers or signage designating “Model Sufficiency-and-Sharing Households”; the dissemination of nudge letters or messages to households highlighting benefits, practical guidance, and positive local examples; regular public briefings for residents, entrepreneurs, educators, youth, civil society, and business actors; and the implementation of attitude and perception surveys to monitor shifts in willingness and perceived feasibility of adopting sufficiency practices. The expected outcome is increased willingness, participation, and sustained behavior change at the individual and communal levels, achieved without coercion.

Reframing local-development paradigms around community assets

To translate the Sufficiency Economy philosophy into practice in a security-challenged borderland, local development must be asset-based, balanced, and self-reliant. This paradigm

emphasizes the mobilization of community assets through multiple, interrelated mechanisms: reducing household expenses through home or kitchen gardening including vertical or hanging gardens in space-limited settings and household accounting; increasing income by promoting secondary livelihoods alongside primary occupations and strengthening producer groups and cooperatives; fostering saving and thrift through the establishment of village or community savings groups offering diverse saving instruments; ensuring learning and knowledge continuity by recording and transmitting local wisdom and building inter-community development networks; promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable resource use by prioritizing local inputs, efficiency, and continuity, encouraging renewable energy suited to local conditions, and adding value to natural and environmental resources; cultivating mutual aid and sharing by fostering a culture of care, such as using public spaces as sharing corners or community markets managed by administrative units; and encouraging innovation for community-asset development by incentivizing agencies to prototype sufficiency-aligned innovations, setting clear performance indicators, and organizing innovation awards to recognize outstanding local entities. The expected outcome is a localized development paradigm that integrates livelihoods, learning, savings, environmental care, and mutual aid, thereby transforming community assets into a foundation for resilient, sufficiency-driven development.

To strengthen the evidence-to-model linkage, the study interprets the model's six mechanisms as direct responses to empirically identified vulnerabilities and protective capacities: Economic vulnerability (low economy score; low income adequacy) mechanisms emphasizing livelihood strengthening, savings, learning, and asset-based development (NESDC, 2017; OECD, 2011). Social capital strengths (high scores in population, national character, religion/ethics/loyalty) mechanisms emphasizing networks, participatory knowledge, and community learning (Norris et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000). Persistent insecurity and psychosocial stress (qualitative accounts; low daily security item) mechanisms emphasizing strategic communication, trust-building, and non-coercive behavioral support (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Illustrative workshop quote: *"We already have strong community leaders; what we need is coordination and learning so people can stand on their own feet."* Taken together, the findings suggest that a sufficiency-based model is not merely an economic intervention, but a resilience-oriented framework that mobilizes community identity and social capital to buffer insecurity.

Discussion and conclusion

The model proposed in this study is situated in the southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—the empirical setting of the research. These border areas are characterized by a distinctive spatial context and persistent security challenges—environmental factors that are difficult to control yet profoundly shape local livelihoods. Such conditions have constrained economic development and the quality of life. Even so, the region as a whole retains substantial social capital, a distinctive geographic and societal asset in Thailand. This aligns with Putnam's (2000) view that social capital is a critical mechanism enabling association and cooperation in society. Consistent with our findings on the security environment, the area's resource capital and human capital provide foundational strengths for applying the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy—emphasizing self-reliance grounded in reason, moderation in living, and resilience to change—to build stability and sustainability based on community identity. The overarching goal is for residents to live well, with a high quality of life, amid both enabling and constraining environments.

Model derivation and empirical grounding. To enhance transparency, it is essential to clarify that the proposed model was derived through a structured synthesis of empirical evidence across Phases 1–3 of the mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Specifically, Phase 1 (document review, interviews, and focus group discussion) generated thematic evidence on contextual change and key constraints (e.g., prolonged unrest, livelihood disruption, drug issues, and cross-border development pressures). Phase 2 provided convergent qualitative and quantitative evidence on (i) residents' quality of life (including low scores on income adequacy and daily security) and (ii) security-environment factors, where most dimensions were rated high/very high while the economy dimension was rated lowest—indicating pronounced economic vulnerability alongside substantial social and cultural strengths. Phase 3 then translated these empirical signals into an actionable model through a participatory validation-and-co-design workshop.

In Phase 3, workshop participants were not merely asked to “endorse” a fixed model. Instead, the research team prepared an initial evidence-based draft (a preliminary logic model) as a facilitation tool, explicitly grounded in Phase 1–2 findings, and invited participants to critique, revise, and co-create its mechanisms, actors, and implementation pathways. The workshop followed an iterative process: (1) presentation of synthesized findings and the draft logic model; (2) small-group deliberations to propose revisions and additional mechanisms; (3) plenary sessions to negotiate consensus and prioritize mechanisms; and (4) final validation of a refined model. Participant input was captured through audio recordings, facilitator notes, and artifact outputs (e.g., flip charts), and then analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring themes, contested points, and agreed-upon mechanisms. This process reflects established participatory and co-production approaches that enhance rigor, local relevance, and ownership in model development (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cornwall, 2008).

Importantly, the model's six mechanisms map directly onto empirically observed vulnerabilities and protective capacities. For example, consistently low economic security indicators and income adequacy concerns support mechanisms that emphasize area-based learning, livelihood diversification, savings, and asset-based development. Conversely, high ratings in social and cultural dimensions (e.g., population cohesion, national character, religion/ethics/loyalty) and qualitative evidence of community solidarity support mechanisms centered on networks, participatory knowledge production, and communication strategies that strengthen trust and collective efficacy (Norris et al., 2008; Putnam, 2000).

Critically, achieving sustained adoption requires rooting the sufficiency economy in community identity—respecting and integrating local culture, religion, and traditional ways of life. Beyond the six strategic mechanisms detailed earlier in the paper, the following cross-cutting components summarize what is essential for durable implementation not only in security-challenged borderlands but also in more general contexts:

Prioritize the application of local wisdom

In the southern border provinces, communities possess deep expertise in organic agriculture, fisheries, and local crafts. Leveraging this local knowledge as social capital, in tandem with sufficiency-based territorial development, enhances sustainability, increases the value of community goods and services, and safeguards distinctive regional identity. This emphasis aligns with asset-based and resilience-oriented perspectives that view local knowledge and social ties as key adaptive resources in contexts of uncertainty (Norris et al., 2008).

Invest in community capacity

Strengthen communities through training and education in local resource management and governance. Public agencies should support community-led projects consistent with local identity—for example, area-appropriate New Theory Agriculture initiatives and the development of distinctive craft and creative products—so that residents can translate sufficiency principles into viable livelihoods.

Institutionalize genuine community participation

The planning, decision-making, and implementation of sufficiency-driven development must embed community participation to sustain results. This approach resonates with Oakley's (1991) participation paradigm and Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation, emphasizing deep, empowering engagement that builds ownership, cooperation, and social acceptance of projects. In security-challenged settings, participatory processes also function as trust-building mechanisms that can strengthen perceived legitimacy and social cohesion, both of which are closely related to security and quality of life.

Ensure systematic, ongoing public and local-government support

Whether in security-affected border areas or elsewhere, implementing the sufficiency economy requires consistent support from the state and local levels, including appropriate resource allocation, infrastructure development, and structured learning programs. Such support reduces constraints and expands opportunities for communities to adopt sufficiency principles in daily life and to improve overall quality of life.

At the same time, policy and practice must remain sensitive to place-based identity. In the context of the southern border, this includes religious and cultural diversity—e.g., promoting organic agriculture aligned with Muslim ways of life; fostering cultural and community-based tourism; and developing signature local products. These elements are not merely economic strategies; they are integral to strengthening identity, cohesion, and community resilience. Such place-based alignment also responds to the study's empirical evidence that cultural and social strengths remain high even amid economic and security pressures, making identity a practical lever for resilience-oriented development.

In sum, the model shows that when the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy is implemented through networks, research-informed learning, strategic communication, behavioral incentives, and community-asset development, and is explicitly aligned with local identity development in security-challenged areas, it can move beyond short-term mitigation. It can simultaneously (i) bolster economic sustainability, (ii) elevate quality of life and well-being, and (iii) reinforce local identity and social strength, even amid the specific security constraints and the rapid, multidirectional changes that characterize the southern border provinces.

Ethical considerations

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