

# How Actor-Networks Work in Community Adaptation under Special Economic Zone Development: A Case Study of Mukdahan, Thailand

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*Received: February 4, 2022*

*Revised: July 20, 2022*

*Accepted: August 11, 2022*

## Abstract

This article examines the patterns and interplay of an actor-network in one of Thailand's border special economic zones (SEZs) and identifies the factors affecting its capability in community livelihood restoration. An exploratory mixed method was applied. The systematic review technique, in-depth interviews with 35 key informants, and non-participant observation were conducted to trace power relations within the network. The survey of 375 residents and multiple regression techniques were adopted to identify the influential factors in communities' adaptation. Results revealed that the network of SEZ establishment was overlaid on a preexisting network of locals' livelihoods through land rights reform. Legislation passed after the 2014 coup was a key factor that dominated the relational flow within the network. Statistical analysis shows that local communities were not opposed to the idea of SEZs, but wanted more decentralization and constructive engagement of provincial authorities and community participation.

**Keywords:** actor-network, special economic zone, border, livelihood, community, adaptation

## Introduction

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were introduced as part of Thailand's economic policy strategy in the 1980s and have been in the mainstream

of the national development plans up until now. The idea was a strategic policy innovation aimed at promoting macroeconomic growth while also functioning as a microeconomic inducer (International Institute for Trade and Development, 2015). The SEZs development regime in Thailand can be divided into two generations. The first started in the 1980s in the form of export processing zones and closed industrial estates, located primarily in metropolitan areas (Asian Development Bank, 2016). A turning point in the SEZs development plan started in 2014, after a coup d'état,<sup>1</sup> which brought the SEZs plan and legislative context to a new socio-political landscape.

The National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO)<sup>2</sup> announced a new direction for the national development strategy which focused on a different pattern of SEZ establishment. The Thai government, like other countries in the Mekong River basin, expected to reap benefits from the geographic proximity of the cross-border infrastructure in the GMS Economic Corridor program and the emerging regional cooperation from ASEAN economic integration (Ishida, 2009). Therefore, the targeted SEZ sites were shifted from industrial estates in metropolitan areas to 10 border provinces within the range of possible cross-border connectivity development with neighboring countries. The administration of SEZs was transferred to the National Committee of Special Economic Zones (NCSEZs), which exercised its authority under the NCPO's special legislative frame, the post-coup administration (Krungkasem, 2014).

Under the new border SEZ development plan, the NCPO aimed to capitalize on the transnational dynamism of borders. The unique characteristics of border towns are the physical and cultural contiguity inherited in the daily life activities of the people on both sides of the borderline. Through decades of communication

<sup>1</sup> On 20 May 2014, martial law was declared nationwide by the Thai military junta to take overruling power from the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. After removing the government on May 24, the coup established the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) to take absolute control of the country. The NCPO was dissolved on July 16, 2019, a new cabinet was officially appointed, the NCPO announced special decrees, and arbitrary power is still active.

<sup>2</sup> See also online at [http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2561/E/239/T\\_0059.PDF](http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2561/E/239/T_0059.PDF)

and interaction, the communities in the area had forged strong socio-economic bonds through formal and informal trading, marriage, and shared norms. The flows of labor, commodities, and cultural exchange among border communities are intertwined in their livelihoods (Santasombat, 2019; Promphakping et al., 2020; Srisupan, 2020). This is an important factor in fostering a transboundary economy and a pool of shared resources, which are significant incentives for investors (Asian Development Bank, 2016; Massoni and Abe, 2022).

The SEZ establishment scheme was divided into two phases. The first phase started in 2015, covering 10 districts with a total of 10 special economic zones in Tak, Mukdahan, Sakaeo, Trat, and Songkla provinces. The second phase commenced in 2016 with a total of 12 districts in Narathiwat, Chiang Rai, Nong Khai, Kanchanaburi, and Nakhon Phanom provinces (NCPO, 2014). According to the 20-year National Strategy: 2018-2037, the SEZ plan was categorized as an urgent agenda which was implemented under fast-track legislation. It was expected to be a strategic way to reduce poverty and income disparity in peripheral regions (Office of National Economic and Social Development, 2017).

The SEZ development plan emphasized infrastructure establishment. Therefore, to expedite the construction process, the NCPO tailored many special decrees to create legal exemptions concerning conflict issues which might arise, such as land acquisition (NCPO, 2015), urban planning restrictions (NCPO, 2016), environmental impact assessment, and dispute management (Office of the Prime Minister, 2015). These new regulations were categorized as "SEZs Facilitating Measures." However, although the physical development process was successfully accelerated by the decrees, it was criticized as a highly state-centric administration that disregarded the community's right to develop (Chambers, 2018).

The current infrastructure developmental programs not only brought about physical changes to the landscape, but also caused many socio-economic permutations in the community's way of life that were ignored in the current process. Most governmental policy papers

highlighted only the promising benefits after the SEZs were to be fully operating, leaving vulnerable the real-life transitions of local communities at the margins of the national development scheme.

This research examined the pattern of an actor-network of local community livelihoods that had reassembled during the transitional periods of SEZ establishment. It also explored how the locals struggled to restore their daily life through this intertwined network of old and new actors, where the right to participate in the process and the household assets, namely land and significant social capital such as information and resource assessment, were strictly restrained under post-coup legislation, through the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) framework. Following the practices of actors within the communities along the path of SEZ infrastructural projects reveals how the current state-centric infrastructure development regime has fabricated a local way of life, politics, and bureaucracy within which it operates.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research adopted the ANT as an analytical framework to explore how a local community adjusted its livelihood to cope with the transition during SEZ establishment under the post-coup socio-political context from 2015 to 2021. This article describes how ANT was used to navigate networks under the SEZ policy implementation which was perceived by the NCPO as a “policy innovation” for enhancing national economic growth and improving living standards of the community where it was situated (Office of the National Economic and Social Development, 2017). As a new actor imposed on the community’s livelihood network, SEZ and its implementation are considered the nodes of change within the trial-and-error national development strategy which this study explores.

ANT has been one of the most influential approaches since the 1990s. It originated in the field of science and technology studies (STS) around the 1980s and later became widely used in sociology and anthropology. This is partly due to its challenging ontology which

expanded the field of social studies from human-to-human relations to socio-material interactions where non-human elements are treated as equal agential “actors” within the relational network. It is a practical theory that looks at specific cases and develops its approach out of the empirical evidence found from tracing the actors’ interactions (Latour, 2017).

Rather than being a rigid theory, ANT is more of a guideline that opens the analytical process to all possibilities within the interconnection. It allows researchers to observe the network from empirical phenomena created by the actors’ interaction. By tracking the relations, we will see which node may fail to redesign the pre-existing assemblage and perform as an active actor in the newly diffracted network. By noticing the failure association, the result can be used as a policy suggestion, offering a way to reshuffle the other actors involved, or it can be developed into a framework for network intervention for a resolution (Fenwick, 2019).

The fundamental ethics of ANT applied in this research are from the prominent works of Bruno Latour (1986) and John Law (2009). They proposed ANT as a flat ontology which overrides the classical binary-analysis approaches that divide issues into social and scientific, or human and non-human. Furthermore, it opposes the idea of a hierarchical order or any biased assumptions when it comes to social analysis (Latour, 2017). The analytical method through network tracing for ANT does not start with defining exactly what society comprises or what it should be. Instead, it looks at the empirical interaction and mutual influence developed by certain elements and the ways they enter contact with humans in real-life practices and, as a result, contribute to a particular kind of socio-materials network.

In ANT ethics, both humans and non-humans are equally referred to as “actants” since they are both acting with equal agential quality within the systems (Fenwick, 2019). Latour emphasizes that society does not hold a fixed composition. It is not a finished form and does not require any specific kind of material or human property. Instead, it uses a type of connection among things that are not themselves in a

pure state because something becomes a social actor by entering a particular kind of interconnection. It is not a property that any element can acquire by itself outside a kind of connection among other things. Consequently, social phenomena according to ANT refer to this process as “reassociation” and “reassembling” elements (Latour, 1986).

Many social science approaches take all new innovations as accepted products. That perspective makes it more difficult to notice and understand the transformation process that is taking place between innovation and practices. By contrast, ANT positions itself on the side of the innovator that is trying to develop a new way of connecting actors within the network. It also focuses on how new actors have changed, as the process of developing a new connection that catches on socially and becomes part of the accepted practice in the network (Latour, 1986).

From this perspective, ANT treats society as a complex web of relations where various institutions, elements, and people interact continuously. Elements become part of society when they are taken into the process of association with other actors and form a particular connection that contributes to a certain social practice (Latour, 1986). In this way, social entities, norms, policies, etc. are not a one-size-fits-all formula. Instead, they are the specific results of the prior work of constructing connections and assembling relations created through the interactions of each actor.

## Methods

This research adopted an exploratory mixed method in which the data collection and analysis were divided into three phases.

First, the qualitative phase was designed to determine the actors in the SEZ establishment process. The expected outputs from this phase were twofold. The first was the pattern of interaction and power relations between actors within the development process, focusing on the triangular assembling of the infrastructure construction, regulation, and local livelihood practices. The second phase consisted of the influential actors identified in the network that would be treated as the input for the questionnaire designed and developed in the next research procedure.

The systematic review technique was used as the first step of data collection to provide an overview of SEZ development and to trace the actors involved. The reviewed documents were categorized into two groups according to the sources of information: 1) governmental sources, such as policy papers, budget plans, laws, and reports of the projects, and 2) non-governmental sources, such as academic research. At this point, a preliminary set of actors was identified according to their mandatory roles appearing in the papers and transcripts by using the ANT.

The ANT's network tracking methods are diverse, depending on the field of studies. This article applied ethnographic methods which emphasize fieldwork techniques, namely, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and non-participant observation. The study explored the material-discursive practices around SEZ infrastructural projects within the community's livelihood network that are at play. The focus is particularly on the daily life activities of villagers who have been directly affected by policy implementations, such as land expropriation and construction procedures. One of the objectives of this step was to sensitize the way in which the pre-existing local livelihood network associated itself with the new actors from the SEZ policy implementation.

The fieldwork data were gathered by in-depth interviews and non-participatory observation. The objectives were to cross-check the identified actors from the reviewed documents in the first step of the research with real-life operations in the targeted communities and to trace the interactive network between them. The unit of analysis here was that of actor-networks, which communities in the sites perceived as their tools to sustain their livelihoods. Thirty-five key informants for the interview were chosen by purposive sampling under the following conditions: 1) villagers who had lived or work in the communities which were selected as the SEZ construction sites for more than five years since the SEZ projects had started, 2) landowners listed in the SEZ land rights reform process, 3) government officials in charge, and 4) influential parties from the private sector.

The second phase of the study applied the quantitative method using a questionnaire survey. The data from the qualitative phase were

deducted as variables and then applied in the survey to measure the level of their significance to other actors within the livelihood network. The objective of this phase was to identify the actors and the particular power relations which the community valued as significant factors in their adaptation during the transition. The survey was conducted with 375 volunteers who have lived in the communities where three major Mukdahan SEZ infrastructure development projects are in progress. The sample size was calculated according to the Krejcie and Morgan table (Chuan and Penyelidikan, 2006). The data gained from the survey were analyzed by using multiple regression statistical analysis.

The last phase of the research was done by the focus group technique. Three rounds of small monthly meetings between targeted sectors were organized. The participants were the key informants from the first phase. During the meeting, the research team provided a communicative platform where all parties were presented with the research findings and asked to give feedback on the topic of what network interventions were needed for local communities supporting during the transition, from border towns to an SEZ.

### **From the Border Town to the Strategic SEZ**

Mukdahan province was the first northeastern province to undergo implementation of the national SEZ strategic development plan since November 2014 (NCPO, 2015). According to the NCPO's announcement, the SEZ covered three districts situated along the Thai Lao border with a total area of 578.50 square kilometers. The province was chosen because of its geographical location. It is located at the heart of various regional development plans, most significantly, the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Co-operation (GMS) and the Economic Corridor under the support of the Asian Development Bank

Consequently, Mukdahan has long been evolving under the tides of both local and international dynamism. Multiple sets of development project plans were applied to assemble the border communities and local fertile resources into the national and regional development goals.

These goals have existed since the announcement of the new policy of transforming Indochina's battlefields into a prosperous trading arena by Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhawan in 1988 (Manorom, 2019). However, the province had never encountered the kind of rapid transformation under the special legal structure and governmental administration that happened after the NCPO's SEZ announcement. The special NCPO decree, especially Article 44, and the absence of a civil sector participatory platform implemented under the development facilitation measure left the community in a vulnerable condition with few options to relocate their livelihood under the SEZ development context (Open Development, 2021).

The NCPO planned to take advantage of transborder dynamism to attract foreign investment into the newly established industrial estate, Nikhom Kham Ahuan (นิคมท่าอาฮวน), which was the first prioritized project of the SEZ. To fulfill the estate establishment, the policy implementation was based heavily on infrastructure development, especially projects contributing to logistic connectivity with inland industrial zones and those required for industrialization. This aimed to enhance the competitiveness of the estate compared to the pre-existing SEZs in neighboring countries (Office of the National Economic and Social Development, 2017). The results from the governmental policy paper review and fieldwork show that most of the projects and budget plans were focused on four infrastructure projects located in one district, Amphur Muang, covering three sub-districts, Kham Ahuan, Sri Bun Ruang, and Bang Sai Yai, which accounted for more than 70 percent of the total Mukdahan SEZ area. Under the plan, local villages were given a new position from the border communities on the site of new industrial grounds and economic space.

An interesting problem was found when cross checking the governmental development framework with the data from the in-depth interviews and statistical analysis. There were different meanings of the word "land" between actors in the overlapping local livelihood network and the network of the governmental development projects. According to governmental documents such as feasibility study reports, the



agencies involved claimed that the implementation of infrastructure development projects attempted to reduce the social effects on the local community from the land rights reform by avoiding expropriation of private land. Therefore, the targeted land plots for the current development projects were chosen mainly from public land, such as community forests, degraded forest areas, and common pastureland in the district. The authorities perceived that the land was state owned or a rented agricultural area with no private title deeds. The locals did not hold legal rights over the area as their household property so there should not be great effects on the livelihood. As a result of this perception, the community assessment and public hearings could be exempted during the reforming process (Malailoy, 2019).

However, while the statistical analysis showed that although only 25.5 percent of the volunteers were directly affected by the land expropriation, over 75 percent stated that their livelihoods were affected. The data from the in-depth interviews stated that most key informants perceived public land as the communal last resource which they could rely on during any seasonal or life crisis. The targeted public forest was not only their source of natural water during the drought, but also the source of local food, herbs, and common pastureland. Many villagers in Kham Ahuan subdistrict have a second job as wild food collectors during the rainy season when the degraded forest comes to life. The space would be fertile with grass for the livestock, wild mushrooms, edible insects, fish, and rare herbs which are a valuable source of extra income. The residents had developed a sense of ownership toward the land through the dependency constructed in daily life operations, so they felt insecure and lost when the land reform process announced the area as a new industrial estate for the SEZ.

However, statistics also revealed that though 55.7 percent of the residents in Kham Ahuan were not pleased with the current development process in their community, they still held a positive attitude toward the prospect of the future overall SEZ of Mukdahan. As a result, there were no incidents of violence or conflict between the community and the governmental development agencies. There were

three factors which sustained the locals' positive perspective: 1) the prospect of future contributions from the infrastructure upgrade to their daily life activities ( $b=0.233$ ,  $\text{Beta}=0.210$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.005$ ); 2) the prospect of future contributions from a robust economy and tourism when the SEZ development projects along the Indo China marketplace were finished ( $b=0.281$ ,  $\text{Beta}=0.166$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.043$ ); and 3) a positive attitude toward the land usage management during the development and the expropriation and compensation procedures ( $b=0.286$ ,  $\text{Beta}=0.178$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.013$ ).

The findings show the juxtaposition of the local community, which was caught in between the transitional period of the current development process and the expectations or imaginings about life after the establishment of the SEZ.

### **The Actors and their Interplay within the Network of Mukdahan Industrial Estate Development**

According to the Mukdahan SEZ annual progress reports from 2014 to 2020, four infrastructure projects were prioritized as "Flagship Programs" which had to be accomplished as the fundamental components of the SEZ by 2025. Therefore, most of the administration, budget, and local adaptation of the development process revolved around them (Office of the National Economic and Social Development, 2017). In line with this principle, the projects were considered the nodes of change within the network of this study.

The purpose of the projects, as stated in the provincial implementation plan, was categorized by the NCPO into two groups. One is the industrial zone, which consists of the industrial estate establishment, the double-track railroad, and the "Economic Ring Road" construction. These three interconnected projects were designed to support the industrialization of the area. The construction and operations sites were clustered in three villages of Kham Ahuan sub-district, located 15 kilometers from the Thai Lao border crossing bridge. Another project was categorized into a different group because its purpose was to create

a new economic and tourism space along the Mekong River border in downtown Mukdahan, which has been the traditional hub of unofficial Thai-Lao cross-border trading for local merchants and tourism activities (Paitoonpong, 2016).

The first project implemented was an industrial zone, Nikhom Kham Ahuan. The area covered 1.736 square kilometers of communal land that had been utilized on a daily life basis by seven villages in the sub-district for several decades (Chatipa [Pseudonym], 2021). The development project started in 2015 and was carried out under the NCPO special decree on SEZ land rights reform, which was the new legal framework designed to accelerate the development process by cutting procedures that the government perceived as time-consuming or conflict triggering (NCPO, 2015). The regulations intentionally allowed an exception of specific law enforcements and overrode significant pre-existing social check-and-balance mechanisms such as public hearings and environmental impact assessment (EIA) (Kuaycharoen et al., 2020).

Consequently, the bureaucracy around the SEZ border implementation proceeded in a “fast-track” manner (Open Development, 2021). In comparison to the prior wave of national SEZ development, the current network not only included new actors, but also underwent an unusual political and legislative structure, namely the state of “graduated sovereignty” (Ong, 2008). That is, power relations between main actors like the state, resource materials, and communities were dominated by the government which had exercised its manipulative power through new legal actors such as NCPO special decree and Section 44 of the Interim Constitution of Thailand (2014). In this sense the SEZ is no longer progressing according to its original liberalism ideology, but as more of an unexpected neo-liberalism fantasy.

According to the implementation plan to enhance the capacity of the planned estate, two transportation projects were launched in parallel with the estate establishment. One, the double-track railroad project, is a new rail line cutting across the northeastern region. The strategic significance of the route is to connect the industrial zone with

the regional logistic system, the EWEC, by which Mukdahan would serve as a gateway to Indochina markets at the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (GMS Program, 2015). The rail line through Kham Ahuan sub-district and one of the transit stations were planned in the same area with the estate.

Following the project, the Economic Ring Road project was announced. It is a 14.50-kilometer route cutting through a former local road of seven villages in the same district aimed at connecting the industrial estate and the railway transit station with the pre-existing Asian Highway route heading toward the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. Therefore, a huge land disposition for three infrastructure establishments in the area was imposed in 2015 (Kuaycharoen et al., 2020). The communities were turned into passive actors because their right to participate was totally suppressed. Through the endorsement of the legal actors, the state altered the power relations within the network. As a result, the relational flow between actors was diffracted<sup>3</sup> and the meaning and power relation between actors within the network changed or shifted to a new direction. Thus, the governmental actors were empowered to act manipulatively in the network while the local community was treated as a passive object of development.

Under the new power relations, the significant capital assets of a community’s livelihood, namely land and natural resources, were redefined as “governmental property” waiting to be redistributed to the investors. Moreover, the locals were made more vulnerable because of the deactivated pre-existing social check-and-balance mechanism.

For local communities the site of the industrial estate was not just an underutilized state-owned property. Its long historical background was intertwined with the life of the local for many generations. In 1987, which was the period of the Indochina war, the area was a camp occupied by the Communist Party and it ended up as a conflicted red zone. After the battle ended, because of national security

<sup>3</sup> This term is derived from the process of scientific experiments to break up light or sound waves by making them go through a narrow space or across an edge. The Actor-Network Theory adopted the word to explain the process when power relations with the network change. See the diffractive methodology of Barad (2007).

policy, the government deforested the area and allowed the locals and the remaining patrol troops to establish permanent communities. The space, which is now an industrial estate site, was announced as a community forest which served as common pastureland and a natural food and water source for local communities (Manorom, 2019).

The diffraction of the meaning and role of “land” in the local livelihood network began in 1992 when the state transferred the land rights and administration from the local commune assets to the Bureau of Animal Nutrition Development and the National Crop Research Institute (Manorom, 2019). These organizations transformed the areas into crop research plantations. They tried to engage the local communities in using the land by hiring the residents and renting the underutilized areas to farmers. During the rainy season, which was the most fertile period of wild herbs and food, the organizations would grant the locals temporary access to harvest these products (Chatipa [Pseudonym], 2021). Through this policy, although management over the land had been taken away, the communities were still able to gain some income and access. Thus, the relational flow between the new governmental actors and the locals remained in balance.

The livelihood network of the community underwent another diffraction in 2014 when the NCPO announced the land acquisition act for SEZ development which was exercised under Article 44. This legislation allowed land reform in the district to proceed with an exemption of previous regulation regarding urban zoning, EIA, and public hearing procedures (NCPO, 2015). The addition of Article 44 dramatically changed power relations in the network. Its highly dominant authority shut down the official communicative platforms between involved parties and other sectors in society other than governmental agencies.

The in-depth interviews with the affected villagers and community leaders revealed that most of the residents decided to remain silent even though they were not pleased with the current land reform and the estate establishment process because they feared the impact exercised under Article 44, which gave absolute power to the authorities

to manage the development process regardless of pre-existing regulations. Consequently, villagers felt insecure about speaking up individually about their right to access information and compensation for the land expropriation (Kuaycharoen et al., 2020). The statistical findings support the statement. They showed that 5.3 percent of the volunteers expressed a strong negative attitude toward the land reform process in their community while 40.7 percent expressed medium to mild negative attitudes (Mean=39.7, S.D.=6.3, MIN=18.0, MAX=60.0), but no one protested to the involving governmental officers. The locals decided to express their concerns through a collective platform, namely, the following: 1) 56 percent chose a monthly community meeting held by village headmen and the representative officers from the subdistrict administrative organization; 2) 18.9 percent decided to become part of the active NGOs in the province and joined their platform from time to time once the concerning issues were presented; 3) 14 percent chose to wait for the official platform occasionally organized by the subdistrict administrative organization; 4) 11.1 percent chose to wait for the official platform held by the provincial level authorities when each round of the land concession auction for the industrial estate opened (Mean=13.9, S.D.=8.7, MIN=1.0, MAX=79.0)

Therefore, instead of organizing a strong resistance movement, villagers took a more compromising way. The adaptive act of the residents at the three SEZ development sites within the network shifted from classic land rights reform resistance to practical issues like how to relocate their livelihood with the currently available capital assets or how to reassemble their daily life with the new set of actors within the SEZ development network. The current stage of three projects in the industrial estate area is still an ongoing process.

### **Supportive Factors for Adaptive Livelihoods within the Network of SEZ Development**

The results from the qualitative phase were in line with the statistical analysis. From 375 volunteering residents, 25 percent were directly



affected by the land expropriation process. Over 71 percent perceived that the current developing process had already affected their daily life even though the expected industries have not activated their investment in the SEZ as the state had planned.

The first section of the survey asked the volunteering residents to rate the factors which they perceived as influential in livelihood adaptation during the transitional period of SEZ establishment in their community. The analysis showed six significant factors. Two negative factors are the following: having the main sources of income from working in the agricultural sector ( $b=-2.217$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.024$ ); and the amount of land engaged in the expropriation process ( $b=-0.950$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.041$ ). That is, if the residents' income depends on the agricultural production sector and if they have a higher amount of land in their possession or commune land in their community that will be expropriated, their livelihood will be more vulnerable under the current network of development.

On the other hand, there are positive factors, which are the following: the positive attitude toward the prospect of future contributions from the infrastructure ( $b=0.233$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.005$ ), and the location of workplaces within accessible distance from the infrastructure ( $b=3.034$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.006$ ). Both factors indicate that even though the residents were affected by the current project implementation, their positive attitude toward the fully furnished SEZ facilities in the future would enable them to adapt. Especially if they live an accessible distance from the infrastructures, they plan to utilize and engage in and adapt their lifestyle with the opportunities raised from the projects or substitute the lost capital assets and turn the accessibility to the new facility into a way of recovering their livelihood.

The policy-related factors are sufficient information and up-to-date news regarding land expropriation from the mandatory governmental actors ( $b=2.507$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.034$ ); and communicative and informative local governmental actors that regularly provided information about the progressing SEZs projects ( $b=2.040$ ,  $\text{Sig.}=0.031$ ).

Such accurate and efficient information from the governmental agencies involved is still lacking in the current process of development. Both the data from those interviewed and the statistics prove that livelihood adaptation would have been more flexible if the residents had had sufficient information and time to prepare beforehand. This would have allowed them to sort out their options and juggle their capital assets within their network to cope with the transition, especially on the land expropriation issue.

### **Voice of the Locals**

After the quantitative and qualitative phases, the results from both steps were presented to local stakeholders at the beginning of a focus group. There were three focus group rounds, consisting of community members and leaders, representatives from sub-district and provincial authorities, and active local private sectors. They were held to stimulate the communicative platform for actors from each sector interconnected through the current SEZ development network. During the small-group discussion panels, the representatives from each sector were divided into groups of 10 to 15 persons to exchange ideas on the obstacles and desirable roles of others in supporting the community's network under the SEZ development transition.

An interesting result was that the community members and the local private sectors both urged more active communication from the governmental actors, but at different levels of authority. Both parties agreed that Mukdahan SEZ establishment would bring about a great leap of economic challenges for the province and the risk or some effects were inevitable and not reversible. Therefore, adapting to fit the new socio-economic context is not an option but a must for all. The villagers expected that the community leader and sub-district authorities would develop a cooperative bond and provide an active communication platform for them during each development process. Because of the current legal framework exercise under the NCPO's absolute authority in Article 44, they felt insecure and powerless to act as individuals,

especially on issues of land expropriation and compensation, and information regarding accessibility to infrastructure projects. The statistical data supported the statement and revealed that information regarding the projects' planning and progress report of each stage of the developments were perceived as a kind of capital or a scarce resource for the locals' livelihood adaptation. The factors which the locals valued as supportive nodes mostly revolved around the governmental actors and local administrative actors as follows: 1) information and knowledge about SEZ projects provided by governmental actors ( $b=2.040$ ,  $\text{Beta}=0.190$ ,  $\text{Sig}=0.031$ ), and 2) information and regularly updated news regarding the land expropriation from the governmental actors ( $b=2.507$ ,  $\text{Beta}=0.178$ ,  $\text{Sig}=0.034$ ).

At the same time, the local private sector called for a more proactive role and a definite implementation plan from the provincial-level authorities. Policy suggestions from the representative of the Chamber of Commerce and the Council of Thai-Vietnamese Merchants in Mukdahan urged having provincial administrative agencies provide a participatory platform for local businesses both at the policy-making and the implementation stages. They also proposed a new direction for the targeted investors for the industrial estate concession to shift from the large transnational conglomerate to the SME cooperative business model where the joint investment of local businesses and foreign companies should be prioritized and the preferable business type should be agricultural, logistic services, and cultural tourism instead of heavy industry.

The representatives from governmental organizations with different levels of authority had diverse feedback and suggestions. The provincial officers focused mainly on the implementation process of infrastructure development-related issues and called for the community to cooperate for the common good of the province as a single unit. The governmental agencies redefined the locals' loss of land or resource accessibility as the sacrifice one must contribute to the network in order to accomplish a fundamental step of the national goal. Therefore, the further development plan with details of local benefits or community

repositioning would be able to be processed after the main infrastructure establishment and the industrial estate were fully functioning. For the subdistrict level, the current role is on the passive side as a result of the highly hierarchical bureaucracy order whereby the administration and the budget regarding the SEZ are still centralized at the national and provincial level.

## Conclusion

The actor-network of the current development process described in this article is the overlapping of the new state-led infrastructure development regime endorsed by post-coup legislation, and the pre-existing local community network. The land was the node of change and the centerpiece of interactions between a reluctant assembling of actors within the merging networks.

The meaning of the land as an actor within the network went beyond its physical materiality. It was diffracted through the practices and interactions between actors in the process of land rights reform, post-coup SEZ legislation, and local daily life activities. The roles of land in the community network had been transformed from raw natural resources to the community's capital assets in the form of communal pastureland and private property within day-to-day life, and then shifted to the strategical governmental property under the national SEZ development regime. The diffractions, or changing power relations and meaning of each actor within the network caused by the new additional actor or different social context were caused by the imbalance in the power relations between governmental agencies and the local communities under the manipulative influence of the post-coup legislation.

The interaction pattern within the SEZ development network was dominated by state actors, especially the post-coup legal framework which had drastically changed the socio-political landscape of the policy implementation. The former power relations in the national development process were rearranged because the pre-existing social

check-and-balance mechanism was suppressed endorsement NCPO special decrees. This legal framework has legitimately allowed the community's engagement and the communicative platforms in the process to be absent in the name of "development facilitation policy" (Kuaycharoen et al., 2020). Hence, the relational flow between the governmental actors and the local communities was mostly one-sided and showed a low level of cooperation.

The SEZ development process has drifted away from its roots in liberalism ideology to the path of neo-liberalization. The state repositioned itself from the development state to one of neo-liberalism where the reciprocal bond between the state and investors is prioritized. Thus, the state's role shifted to that of "land broker and capitalism facilitator" (Abdelal and Ruggie, 2009; Manorum, 2019). Post-coup legislation transformed two main power relations within the network of the SEZ establishment. The first was between the local community and the land. Dispossessed of land, both in the form of private and communal property, the community was made vulnerable because of the loss of their livelihood's capital asset. The second was between the state and the community, which has become deeply diffracted in terms of national governmentality. The state treated the community as a self-entrepreneurial neoliberal subject where no subsidy measurement from the government would be provided within this development network (Levien, 2013).

Consequently, as the capital assets of their livelihood were missing and their rights to engage through an official platform were absent, the community developed an adaptative approach through the actor-network by forming an unofficial communicative platform with those who had undergone a similar transition process. This collective act aimed to increase their bargaining power with the local governmental actors and gain some access to information about development.

In terms of further development, the community still hopes that the state will play a more supportive role. Their expectations have shifted from great changes on the national policy level to active and

community-friendly local governance. Therefore, they suggested that an informative role by the municipality authorities, constructive engagement of developmental stakeholders on the area-based level, and solid collective cooperation within the affected communities should be endorsed in the network of SEZ development to foster supportive mechanisms for the community's adaptation within the process.

### Acknowledgement

The researcher is grateful for the support of the publication of this article by the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University.

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