



Management of Agricultural and Socio-economic Features in the Border Regions of Southern Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand's Deep South provinces include Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Being important, these areas provide challenges and opportunities. This paper discusses how to manage its unique characteristics related to agricultural and socio-economic. These are associated with a long-standing ethno-political conflict. This region economy is based on agriculture. Having a contrast between large agro-industrial plantations and smallholder subsistence farms, this produces serious socio-economic issues. These include poverty, inequality, limited access to education and land, and the economic marginalization of the Malay-Muslim majority. The ongoing riots worsen these issues. These create a cycle that economic despair leads to unrest, and instability hinders development. Thus, simple management cannot follow a standard development plan. It needs a conflict-sensitive, culturally aware, and integrated approach that goes beyond mere economic measures. Success depends on government infrastructure projects that balance with community involvements. Key strategies include diversifying agriculture, enhancing processing value, reforming land tenure, investing in human capital, and fostering cross-border economic cooperation. Ultimately, sustainable management must address grievances to the root causes. This is by incorporating economic justice into a broader framework of social justice, cultural recognition, and political inclusion.

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1 Introduction

The border regions Southern part of Thailand, particularly the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—often referred to as the "Deep South"—along with Satun and some areas of

Songkhla province. It shows a unique and complex connection between farming practices and socio-economic traits. This complexity is heavily shaped by their geographical proximity to Malaysia, which has a distinct cultural and religious atmosphere (primarily Malay Muslim), in addition to the ongoing conflict that has impacted the area for many years. (Cilliers, 2024)

1.1 Agricultural Features

Agriculture remains a key part of the economy in the border areas of Southern Thailand, supporting a large portion of the population. However, it faces both long-standing issues and challenges that have been worsened by local conditions.

1.1.1 Main Crops and Land Use

Table 1 provides details regarding significant agricultural products and land use in the southern region of Thailand. The primary products include rubber trees and palm oil, which significantly influence the region's economy. It is estimated that 20% of careers are related to aquaculture and fisheries in the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

Table 1: Main crops and land use in the Deep South region of Thailand.

Item	Detail
Rubber (Hevea brasiliensis)	Historically and currently, rubber is the most important cash crop. Large areas are dedicated to rubber plantations, which vary from small family farms to bigger corporate farms. The climate and soil in this region are particularly suitable for growing rubber. Changes in global rubber prices greatly impact the livelihoods of many farmers, leading to economic instability.
Palm Oil	The growth of oil palm cultivation has also increased significantly in some areas, driven by the need for cooking oils and biofuels. However, this expansion has raised environmental issues related to deforestation and land use disputes.
Fruits	Southern Thailand is well-known for its diverse selection of tropical fruits, with durian being a particularly profitable export. Other fruits like longans, mangoes, and pineapples are also cultivated. The demand for these fruits, especially from China, heavily influences farming practices and farmers' incomes. There are ongoing efforts to improve quality control and speed up export processing for these perishable goods.
Rice	While rice is the main staple crop in Thailand, its farming in the southern border provinces is not as common as in the central plains or northeast. Although there are paddy fields, their numbers have decreased due to the rise of rubber and oil palm, especially during times of high rubber prices. Efforts are being made to restore the declining paddy fields in some regions.
Aquaculture and Fisheries	The long coastlines by the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand make fishing and aquaculture, particularly shrimp farming, really important. But, overfishing and pollution have caused a drop in wild fish populations, and shrimp farming has occasionally harmed essential mangrove ecosystems.

1.2 Farming Practices and Challenges

Table 2 presents a discussion regarding agricultural land utilization in Deep South Thailand. The majority of the farming is conducted by smallholders employing traditional farming techniques, although some have begun to adopt smart farming practices and modern agricultural technologies. Similar to other areas, southern Thailand is facing a shortage of labor.

Table 2: Details of farming land use in Deep South Thailand.

Item	Detail
Smallholder Dominance	A significant number of farmers in the area are smallholders, who often use traditional farming methods while also starting to adopt modern techniques.

Land Ownership and Conflict	Issues related to land ownership and disputes are common. Although a large part of Thai farmland is owned by the public, private ownership tends to be held by a small number of individuals or companies. Many farming families in the southern regions do not own the land they farm, which leads to problems with tenancy and debt. Conflicts over land, especially with large palm oil companies, have caused serious social unrest and even violence in some places.
Technological Adoption	There is a movement towards "smart farming" and new agricultural technologies, such as drones and automated systems, to make better use of resources and boost yields. However, smallholders often struggle to adopt these technologies due to financial limitations and a lack of access to information.
Labor Shortages	The agricultural industry in southern Thailand, similar to other regions, is experiencing a labor shortage, especially for migrant workers needed for intensive jobs like fruit picking. This can raise production costs and make it harder to expand operations.
Climate Change Impacts	The area is at risk from climate change, such as droughts and floods, which directly affect farming productivity and water supply. Managing water for agriculture is a major concern, with a focus on improving how water is used efficiently.

1.3 Government Initiatives

The Thai government is working to boost agricultural development, including backing fruit exports and research and development (R&D) to improve the competitiveness of Thai products. There are plans to establish a "Thailand Halal Valley" in the southern border provinces, with the goal of making Thailand the halal food hub of ASEAN by 2027. This initiative aligns with the cultural and religious practices of the mainly Muslim population.

This paper discusses how to handle the unique agricultural and socio-economic traits of the region. These traits are connected to a long-standing ethno-political conflict. The economy here primarily relies on agriculture, highlighting a difference between large-scale agro-industrial plantations (like rubber and oil palm) and smallholder subsistence farms. This agricultural environment faces significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, inequality, restricted access to education and land, and the economic marginalization of the Malay-Muslim majority.

2 Literature Review

The scholarly work on Southern Thailand's border provinces can be divided into several intersecting themes: the agrarian economy, the socio-economic dimensions of the conflict, and the policies (and their critiques) enacted by the central government.

2.1 The Agrarian Structure and Its Constraints

A significant body of literature focuses on the agrarian economy, which is the lifeline for the majority of the population. Arai (2012) and Li (2014) highlight the dominance of perennial cash crops, particularly rubber and oil palm. Thailand is one of the world's largest rubber producers, and the South is its heartland. However, this mono-cropping creates vulnerability. As noted by Ferguson (2018), smallholder rubber farmers are acutely susceptible to global price fluctuations, which can plunge entire communities into debt and poverty. This reliance on a single commodity traps farmers in a cycle of economic precarity.

Furthermore, land tenure is a critical issue. Guan (2013) and Ullah (2016) document the problems of landlessness and insecure land titles among the Malay-Muslim population. Historical processes, including state forest conservation policies that designated traditional farming areas as protected forests, have dispossessed many local communities. This lack of formal land title (e.g.,

Sor Kor 1 or Chanote deeds) not only creates insecurity but also prevents farmers from using land as collateral for loans, limiting their access to formal credit and trapping them in informal debt cycles with high interest rates.

2.2 Socio-Economic Marginalization and the Conflict Nexus

The second major theme in the literature is the intrinsic link between socio-economic conditions and the ongoing insurgency. Scholars such as McCargo (2008) and Srisompob (2013) argue that while the conflict is primarily rooted in ethno-nationalist and religious identity, historical economic marginalization is a powerful accelerant. The data consistently show that the deep South provinces lag behind the national average on key development indicators: higher poverty rates, lower GDP per capita, and poorer educational outcomes.

Croissant (2005) and Barter (2013) discuss how the region's integration into the Thai state involved not just cultural assimilation (e.g., the enforcement of the Thai language in schools) but also economic integration that often benefited ethnic Thai Buddhists and outside capitalists. Key positions in the civil service, police, and military were (and still are) predominantly held by Buddhists, and major business contracts often went to outsiders. This created a perception, and often a reality, of economic exclusion for the local Malay-Muslims. Ansori (2012) posits that this economic grievance provides a fertile recruiting ground for insurgent groups, offering disaffected youth both a sense of purpose and, in some cases, a source of income.

2.3 Critique of Government Policies

The literature is also rich with critiques of the Thai government's policy responses. For decades, the primary approach has been securitization—prioritizing military solutions over developmental ones. Development projects, when they do occur, have often been top-down and poorly aligned with local needs. Dueraman (2012) critiques large-scale infrastructure projects, arguing they are often designed for national economic integration rather than local community benefit, and can lead to further land dispossession.

Conversely, some scholars point to alternative models. Melvin (2007) and Jitpiromsri (2020) discuss the potential of community-based, culturally-sensitive development. This includes supporting local ‘waqf’ (Islamic endowment) land for community use, promoting ‘halal’ agro-industry to access global Muslim markets, and integrating local knowledge into farming practices. The literature suggests that projects which respect local identity and are developed with community participation have a higher chance of success than impersonal, large-scale initiatives imposed from Bangkok.

Gap in the Literature: While many studies examine either the conflict or the economy, there is a growing need for an integrated analysis that explicitly links agricultural management strategies with conflict resolution and social cohesion frameworks. The literature is also shifting from describing problems to evaluating specific, on-the-ground interventions that have shown promise in this unique context.

3 An Integrated Management Framework

Managing the agricultural and socio-economic landscape of Southern Thailand requires a multi-pronged, sensitive, and integrated strategy that acknowledges the conflict dynamics. There are four key pillars for an effective management framework.

3.1 Reforming Agricultural Practices for Resilience

Table 3 provides information regarding the reform grounded in an integrated agricultural management framework. This approach emphasizes diversification, increasing value rather than just quantity, and ensuring security of land ownership. Within this framework, all elements can be addressed concurrently and cohesively.

Table 3: Integrated Agricultural Management Framework.

Item	Detail
Diversification	Moving beyond rubber and oil palm is essential. Pilot programs should promote intercropping (e.g., fruit trees, spices, or medicinal herbs between rubber rows) and the cultivation of alternative high-value crops suitable for the climate and halal market, such as premium coffee, tropical fruits (e.g., durian, mangosteen, Longkong), or organic vegetables. This buffers farmers from commodity price crashes.
Adding Value, Not Just Volume	Instead of exporting raw rubber sheets or palm fruit, investment must shift to local value-added industries. This includes promoting the production of processed halal rubber products (e.g., surgical gloves, condoms), certified sustainable palm oil, and halal-certified food processing. This creates higher-skilled, higher-wage jobs locally and captures more of the supply chain's value within the region.
Land Tenure Security	A transparent and accelerated program of land titling for smallholders is a fundamental prerequisite for development. Secure land ownership empowers farmers, enables investment in land improvement, and provides access to formal credit. This must be done in consultation with community leaders to ensure it is not perceived as another state land grab.

3.2 Addressing Core Socio-Economic Drivers of Conflict

Table 4 gives solutions based on utilizing the socio-economic method as a means to resolve conflict. This involves three major paradoxes, including education reform, inclusive economic participation, and investing in human capital.

Table 4: Solutions using the Socio-Economic method as a tool for conflict.

Paradox	Utilizing the Socio-Economic method as a means to eliminate conflict.
Education Reform	The education system must be transformed from a tool of assimilation into one of empowerment. This includes integrating the Malay language (Jawi script) and local history into the curriculum, improving the quality of vocational training aligned with the halal economy, and creating pathways for higher education that meet local economic needs.
Inclusive Economic Participation	Government and private sector procurement policies should actively favor local Malay-Muslim businesses. Entrepreneurship programs, particularly for women and youth, providing access to microfinance and business development services, are crucial for creating alternatives to the illicit economy or insurgency.
Investing in Human Capital	Targeted investments in healthcare, social services, and community infrastructure (e.g., clean water, internet access) are necessary to improve the quality of life and build trust between the state and its citizens.

3.3 Leveraging Geographic and Cultural Position

A key part of a successful management framework for the agricultural and socio-economic aspects in the border areas of Southern Thailand is to utilize the geographic and cultural

advantages. Two significant actions that can be taken are fostering economic collaboration with Malaysia and creating a halal food hub (Table 5).

Table 5: Utilizing Geographic and Cultural Location

Item	Detail
Cross-Border Economic Cooperation	The border with Malaysia is not just a security challenge but a massive economic opportunity. Formalizing and expanding cross-border trade through Special Economic Zones (SEZs) can catalyze growth. This includes streamlining customs, promoting joint ventures in halal logistics and manufacturing, and facilitating the legal movement of labor and goods.
Developing the Halal Hub	The region's Muslim identity is a unique economic asset. Thailand can position the deep South as its premier halal production and certification hub, leveraging its geographic position to serve the ASEAN Economic Community and the global Islamic market, estimated to be worth trillions of dollars.

3.4 The Imperative of Conflict-Sensitive Implementation

The how is as important as the what. Any management initiative must be

- Participatory: Involving local community leaders, religious figures, farmers' associations, and civil society in the design, implementation, and monitoring of projects.
- Culturally Respectful: Acknowledging and incorporating local Malay-Muslim customs and practices, and ensuring that development does not threaten cultural identity.
- Transparent and Accountable: Ensuring that economic benefits are distributed fairly and that projects are free from corruption and patronage networks that have historically plagued the region.

4 Results

From a thorough analysis of the findings regarding the management of agricultural and socio-economic features in the border regions of Southern Thailand, the finding is heavily influenced by the long-standing ethno-nationalist conflict. Research shows that the management strategies employed by the Thai government, local communities, or international organizations often produce complex and sometimes conflicting outcomes. The main findings indicate that top-down, security-focused methods often hinder socio-economic progress, while initiatives led by the community appear more effective but face significant limitations. The relationship between agriculture, identity, and insecurity creates a distinct and difficult management situation.

4.1 Results on Agricultural Feature Management

4.1.1 Prevalence of Smallholdings and Insecurity

The agricultural scene is primarily made up of smallholder rubber and oil palm farms. However, management is greatly affected by insecurity. Evidence include

- Market Disruption: Checkpoints, curfews, and road closures interfere with the supply chain, causing price fluctuations and higher expenses for farmers. Traders are often hesitant to enter conflict-affected areas.
- Forbidden Zones: Farmers tend to avoid working in the more remote sections of their farms due to

fears of being caught in crossfire, mistaken for fighters, or falling victim to extortion. This results in underused farmland and lower productivity.

- **Labor Shortages:** The violence has led to an outflow of labor, especially among younger people looking for safety and better opportunities elsewhere, resulting in an aging farming population.

4.1.2 State-led Agricultural Interventions

Government agricultural initiatives are frequently viewed through a security perspective, which limits their overall effectiveness. The proofs are

- **Crop Substitution Programs:** Efforts to replace rubber with alternative crops (like fruit trees and vegetables) have shown mixed to poor outcomes. The local Malay-Muslim community often sees these initiatives with skepticism, interpreting them as attempts to alter their cultural and economic identity and connect them more closely to the Thai state.
- **Elite Capture:** Subsidies for fertilizers, equipment, and high-yield saplings are sometimes mainly accessed by local elites or individuals with ties to authorities, which worsens local inequalities and breeds resentment.
- **Livelihood Programs for "At-Risk" Youth:** Initiatives aimed at preventing youth from joining insurgent groups have had limited success, as they often overlook deeper political issues and fail to provide dignified opportunities.

4.1.3 Community-Led Adaptation and Resilience

At the community level, people have created resilient, albeit limited, coping strategies. The proofs include

- **Informal Credit Systems:** Groups like "Kutu" (rotating savings and credit associations) are crucial for supplying agricultural capital where formal banking is either limited or not trusted.
- **Agroforestry and Diversification:** Some farmers discreetly diversify into mixed farming (like poultry and fruit gardens) to lessen their reliance on unstable commodity prices and ensure food security for their households.
- **Cooperative Models:** Local agricultural cooperatives, often based in religious or village frameworks, offer a platform for collective bargaining and resource sharing, although their scale is restricted.

4.2 Results on Socio-economic Feature Management

4.2.1 Education System under Duress

The education system is a major point of contention and a significant failure in managing socio-economic issues. The proofs are

- **Targeting of State Schools:** Teachers, seen as representatives of the Thai state and Buddhist authority, have been systematically targeted by insurgents. This has resulted in a severe disruption

of the education system, i.e., a significant lack of qualified teachers and the shutdown of schools in remote regions.

- **Dual System Segregation:** The presence of both the Thai state curriculum and private Pondok (Islamic schools) has led to a highly divided educational system. Graduates from Pondok frequently do not possess recognized qualifications for higher education or jobs in the public sector, perpetuating a cycle of economic exclusion.
- **Limited Curriculum:** State initiatives to incorporate 'moderate' Islamic teachings into the curriculum ('Pondok Jihad' reform) are largely viewed as intrusive and have faced pushback.

4.2.2 Economic Stagnation and Limited Opportunity

The formal economy is stagnant, and unemployment rates, especially among young people, are alarmingly high. The evidence includes

- **Deterred Investment:** Ongoing conflict discourages both local and international investment in sectors beyond basic commodity extraction. Tourism, a vital part of the Thai economy, is nearly non-existent.
- **Public Sector as the Main Employer:** For those educated in Thailand, the public sector (civil service, military, police) serves as the main source of employment, but this reinforces the idea of economic division based on ethnicity.
- **Informal and Illicit Economies:** A large informal economy exists, including cross-border trade with Malaysia. Additionally, the conflict zone supports illicit economies (smuggling, human trafficking) that provide jobs but also contribute to violence and corruption.

4.2.3 Healthcare Access and Psychosocial Trauma

The public health system is overwhelmed, and the population endures widespread, unaddressed psychosocial trauma. The evidence is

- **Physical Access Issues:** Like farmers, patients, and healthcare workers face risks when traveling to clinics and hospitals, which are sometimes targeted as well.
- **Mental Health Crisis:** Years of violence, loss, and ongoing anxiety have resulted in a hidden mental health epidemic (PTSD, depression, anxiety) for which there are limited culturally appropriate and Malay-language services.
- **Brain Drain:** Healthcare professionals frequently seek transfers away from the area, causing a lack of skilled healthcare workers.

4.3 Results on Governance and Policy Integration

4.3.1 The Primacy of Security Policy

Socio-economic development policies are regularly placed below security goals. The evidence includes

- **Militarized Development:** Initiatives like the "Military-Civilian Partnership for Development" often include soldiers in constructing infrastructure or delivering services. This confuses the distinction between humanitarian assistance and counter-insurgency, diminishing trust and effectiveness.
- **Short-Term "Hearts and Minds" Projects:** Numerous development initiatives are short-lived, tactical attempts to gain local support instead of being sustainable, long-term investments created in collaboration with communities.

4.3.2 Cultural and Linguistic Mismatch

Result: Management is obstructed by a significant disconnect between the mainly Thai-speaking, Buddhist government and the Malay-Muslim, Yawi-speaking local community. The evidence includes

- **Lack of Bilingual Officials:** There is a severe lack of government officials, police, and military personnel who can communicate in Yawi or comprehend local traditions, resulting in misunderstandings and heightened tensions.
- **Alienation from the State:** The cultural divide creates a feeling of alienation and strengthens the belief that the Thai government is an outside, colonial entity rather than a representative authority.

4.3.3 Civil Society "In-Betweenness"

Local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and NGOs have a vital but unstable role as intermediaries. The evidence is

- **Bridging the Gap:** They frequently act as crucial intermediaries, providing services where the government fails and advocating for local interests.
- **Pressure from All Sides:** These groups are caught in a tough spot, facing skepticism from the Thai government, who sees them as possible insurgent supporters, while also being viewed as state collaborators by the insurgents. This situation really limits what they can do and how effective they can be.

When it comes to managing agricultural and socio-economic aspects in the border areas of Southern Thailand, the traditional top-down approach or a focus solely on security just does not work well. The biggest takeaway is that the conflict itself plays the biggest role in determining how management turns out. Successful efforts are pretty rare and usually have these key features:

- Community involvement in planning and ownership.
- Awareness of cultural and language differences.
- A clear distinction from military and security goals.

This creates a management system that, on a larger scale, keeps the cycle of underdevelopment, resentment, and conflict going, while on a smaller scale, local resilience and informal systems act as a weak safety net for the people.

5 Conclusion

The border regions of Southern Thailand present one of the most intractable management challenges in Southeast Asia. The region's agricultural potential is stifled by monoculture dependency and insecure land tenure, while its socio-economic development is crippled by a legacy of marginalization and a vicious cycle of conflict. As this discussion has outlined, traditional economic development models, especially those imposed from the top down, are doomed to fail or even exacerbate existing tensions.

Effective management requires a paradigm shift. It demands an integrated approach that consciously and deliberately weaves together economic development with conflict transformation. Strategies must be designed to build resilience from the ground up: diversifying agriculture, securing land rights, adding value locally, and investing in human capital. Crucially, these strategies must leverage the region's unique cultural and geographic assets, particularly its potential as a gateway for halal trade and cross-border cooperation with Malaysia.

Ultimately, managing Southern Thailand is not a technical or administrative problem; it is a profoundly political one. Long-term success will be measured not only by rising GDP figures or rubber yields but by the extent to which the local population feels a sense of justice, inclusion, and ownership over their economic and political future. Sustainable peace and prosperity will only be achieved when economic management serves as a tool for building trust, healing historical grievances, and creating a shared stake in a peaceful and prosperous future for all communities in the region.

6 Availability of Data and Materials

All information is included in this article.

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