

The Politics of Villagers in Smoke Management: A Policy and Decision-Making Case Study in Chiang Rai Province *

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Abstract

This study examines the perspectives of the community in Chiang Rai province regarding the haze crisis, considering local needs and the government's policy measures. It assesses the effectiveness of state policies in reducing forest fires and encouraging sustainable agriculture, asserting that public engagement is crucial for lasting solutions. The analysis of policy implementation and societal responses utilizes a case study methodology. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet's "Everyday Politics" concept is employed to understand interactions within local communities. It examines their methods of communication, the conditions they establish, and their ability to compromise during negotiations with state agencies that affect their livelihoods. The investigation framework shows that the everyday political practices of villagers significantly impact their lives. However, despite the considerable impact of their everyday political activities, the residents' influence on state intervention strategies and policy outcomes remains limited. Furthermore, the study indicates that public participation is vital for the effective management of smoke. The analysis finds that policies aligned with local realities are essential for sustainable smoke

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management in Chiang Rai province. These findings emphasize the need to ensure that the "voices of the community" are genuinely integrated into policy development and implementation.

Keywords: haze crisis; community voice; villager politics

1. Introduction

In recent years, haze caused by open burning and forest fires in the North, particularly in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand's northernmost province, has become a serious and recurring environmental problem that affects public health, ecosystems, and the overall local economy. PM2.5 dust particles accumulate in haze due to agricultural burning and natural or human-caused forest fires. Chiang Rai residents live under the accumulation of these dust particles in the air. Their quality of life has significantly deteriorated, especially in terms of health, causing diseases related to air pollution, such as respiratory diseases, heart disease, and other diseases (Green & Squires, 2017, pp. 461-472; Sresawasd et al., 2021).

The "haze problem" is much more than just controlling air pollution; it is also about economic, social, and cultural management, which is firmly ingrained in the way of life of Chiang Rai's villages. For the farming sector, which has traditional practices that rely on forest burning and burning weeds to prepare for increased agricultural production in the growing season, researchers found that villagers still use forest burning for their livelihoods as a traditional agrarian method due to economic constraints, as well as reflecting the social necessity to rely on the market system and maintain the local community's cultural ways (Dressler, Smith, Kull, Carmenta, & Pulhin, 2021). The state launched a strategy to decrease burning. Consequently, the community strongly opposed the government's strategy to restrict burning. This problem demonstrates the conflict between long-standing agricultural methods and the introduction of new policies in the



community, which inevitably leads to resistance and indifference to implementing such approaches that do not come from the village's direct participation (Dhakal, Bigsby, & Cullen 2012; The Institute for Sustainable Development of Natural Resources and Environment, 2023; Office of the Cane and Sugar Board, 2024).

State agendas meet several constraints, particularly among villagers who depend heavily on traditional agricultural practices, mainly burning, which is low-cost and shortens the time required for weed management and land preparation for cultivation. These represent the economic needs villages must face (Lee, 2021; Phulkerd et al., 2022). In this sense, it can be considered that the local communities in Chiang Rai who still use traditional agricultural methods, in addition to the linkage between the economy, have deep cultures that support and push the way of life that relies on burning to continue and cannot be easily separated (Kasem & Thapa, 2012; Amekawa, 2010).

The investigation explores the "community voice" or "the needs of the villagers" in Chiang Rai Province regarding the haze issue and their responses to governance initiatives and policies. The analysis is divided into three parts: exploring the haze problem and its impact on local livelihoods, analyzing government policy implementation and community reactions, and analyzing community participation in haze management using Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet's "Everyday Politics" framework. This framework helps explain how local communities negotiate, establish conditions, and compromise with administrative agencies to resolve haze-related issues concerning local realities.

2. Haze Problem Causes and Impact

2.1 Primary Causes of Haze Issues

2.1.1 Burning in Agriculture: Burning agricultural residue occurs before the growing season to prepare the land for crops like maize or rice, including weeds and rice stubble, which is common among local farmers (Thola, Salam, Dhakal, &



Winijkul, 2022). However, the land preparation strategy for cropping relies mainly on cost savings through burning (Wiriya, Chantara, Sillapapiromsuk, & Lin, 2016; Autsavapornporn, 2024). Another key factor contributing to the continuation of agricultural burning is a lack of long-term solutions for handling agrarian waste. Although new techniques have been created to give additional options, they are still undesirable since they are complex and involve several stages, such as organic farming (Romruen, Karbowiak, Tongdeesoontorn, Shiekh, & Rawdkuen, 2022; PRACHACHAT Online, 2023). The reluctance points out the vital link between economic rationales and practical constraints that govern farmers' decisions, which often conflict with state-led environmental goals.

2.1.2 Forest Fires: Such as lightning or drought conditions, as well as human activities, such as agricultural forest burning, mountain forest burning, and burning in or near community forests (Paluang, Thavorntam, & Phairuang, 2024). The northern locals' natural aids have become an essential source of sustenance and income during the fruitful season for these vegetables. The plants of *Astraeus hygrometricus* (Hed-Thob) and *Melientha Suavis* (Pak-Wan-Pa) flourish after the soil is burned. The locals earn a significant income during these plants' growing seasons, and many villagers like to use them for culinary purposes (Premjet, Obeng, & Premjet, 2020). These plants require increased burning methods, which cause severe air pollution and significantly impact the environment (Thammanu, Han, Marod, Srichaichana, & Chung, 2021). These practices, deeply embedded in local livelihoods and ecological knowledge, represent a form of resource management that often clashes with centralized state control over forests, creating a site for everyday political contestation over access and use rights.

2.1.3 Geographical Factors: The topography of Chiang Rai Province is characterized by mountainous terrain and valleys. Hence, the terrain's inability to facilitate air circulation, particularly during the dry season when the air is arid, and there is insufficient wind to disperse the pollutants (Kliengchuay, Meeyai,



Worakhunpiset, & Tantrakarnapa, 2018). The aggregation of air pollution has become more concentrated due to neighboring countries' similar farming and burning activities, such as Myanmar and Laos (Luong, Chuersuwan, Viet, & Trung, 2022). This situation has led to a tremendous amount of haze being transferred to Chiang Rai Province. Thus, smog management is addressed internationally and is a problematic and challenging issue. This point is because it necessitates coordination and collaboration at a higher level than can be achieved by communities or localities and central government agencies that provide international policy management (Kayee et al., 2020). Transboundary haze complicates local and national policy efforts, reducing locals' willingness to comply with regulations and participate in local mitigation efforts.

2.2 The Impacts of Haze Pollution in Chiang Rai Province

2.2.1 Public health impact: PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ dust particles found in the air of Chiang Rai Province during the burning season have been shown to affect public health. The inhalation of these pollutants can lead to respiratory and heart problems, resulting in increased mortality rates (Ramakreshnan et al., 2017). The daily experience of these health impacts shapes public perception of the crisis, influences local governance and healthcare systems, and forms part of many villagers' everyday lived experience of environmental injustice.

2.2.2 Economic impact: Chiang Rai residents' primary sources of income are the local tourism and agriculture sectors. One clear example is that the number of visitors or tourists visiting the area decreased by 15% during the haze season (Chiang Rai Provincial Public Relations Office, 2024). In addition to reducing tourism income for Chiang Rai residents, this economic impact has also affected other related businesses in the area, including hotels, restaurants, and tourism activities, which have declined significantly (PRACHACHAT Online, 2023). These economic losses impact villagers' livelihoods, possibly causing them to rely more on low-cost, fire-based agriculture, creating a feedback loop where economic insecurity exacerbates



environmental problems. This economic vulnerability is a key factor influencing villagers' everyday political decision-making and participation to survive.

3. Evaluation of State Forest Fire Policies: Successes and Obstacles

3.1 Plan of action to address the haze issue: the action plan to resolve the haze issue in Chiang Rai Province is executed in three phases: preparation, response, and recovery.

3.1.1 Pollution reduction indicators and targets: Chiang Rai Province has established indicators to reduce the burning area by 50% by 2024, and the number of days PM 2.5 dust exceeds the standard by 30%. The province has also established a target for the number of days on which PM2.5 dust exceeds the standard, not to exceed 64 days, and has reduced the average PM2.5 by 20% during the same period.

3.1.2 Methods employed: spatial and management measures, health and public care measures, surveillance and patrol measures, and comprehensive management measures to control forest fires in Chiang Rai Province. It also established a medical operation center for emergencies.

3.2 Analyzing the Action Plan

The policy aimed at reducing forest fires and encouraging sustainable agriculture in Chiang Rai Province has encountered several challenges, including ineffective control and changes in behavior among villagers, such as (1) Law enforcement is challenging due to vast, scattered agricultural areas and insufficient government officials. (2) Local knowledge and social networks can facilitate evasion, a common resistance to state power. The new method of state was initially rejected due to the villagers' long-standing use of traditional methods. (3) Economic support is challenging due to the lack of viable economic alternatives, making policy compliance highly contested.



3.3 Effectiveness and Conditions of Strategies for Addressing Haze and Forest Fire Issues

3.3.1 Solutions for haze and forest fire issues: (1) Preparation phase: Establishment of haze, forest fire, and PM2.5 operation center. Training of officials in burning reduction technologies. Public awareness about PM2.5 health implications. (2) Step of response: Enforce strict fire regulations and a burning ban. Collaborate with the private sector for forest fire management. (3) Recovery phase: Restoration of ecosystems through dam building, forest planting, burning-free agriculture, and exchanging knowledge.

3.3.2 The Measure's Limitations: These constraints include: First, there is not enough community participation. The farming sector faces essential issues due to low ward participation in forest fire control and reduction, with traditional methods still preferred for cost and convenience - the preference for traditional methods results from everyday rationalities and resource limitations. Second, the measure is unsustainable because rooted agriculture methods remain low-cost, and locals oppose organic agriculture due to production, business needs, and market dynamics. From the villagers' perspective, sustainability often prioritizes livelihood security in the immediate term; state-defined sustainability goals may not align with these everyday priorities without substantial and tailored support. Finally, local communities cannot handle the haze unassisted because the smog in Chiang Rai Province is caused by cross-border burning from Myanmar and Laos. Thus, international cooperation is critical to addressing the air pollution in Chiang Rai Province.



4. The Analysis of the Everyday Politics Concept

4.1 A study of public participation in haze management from the perspective of everyday politics

State agencies in Chiang Rai Province and northern Thailand have been responding to the haze and forest fire situation, where farmers continue to use traditional farming methods. The government intends to control forest fires by promoting organic farming, which directly affects local people's livelihoods, making it difficult to comprehensively enforce such policies among local communities in Chiang Rai Province. While the term "politics of villagers" may be defined in broader study contexts, including aspects like volunteerism or formal community roles, this analysis employs the lens of "everyday politics" to understand the subtle ways villagers navigate and respond to state power and environmental governance in their daily lives. Community participation in everyday politics is essential for villagers who make decisions about their lives outside the formal political framework. Tria Kerkvliet (2009), who explored residents' everyday politics, underscored the importance of societal participation in or impact on addressing local issues such as pollution and haze. Understanding these concepts will enable us to attain a better understanding of everyday political practices in local communities.

4.2 Everyday politics in Chiang Rai haze issues: A case study based on Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet's framework

The author employed everyday political theorists' concepts to evaluate the haze issue management in Chiang Rai Province by analyzing everyday politics, a critical segment of this effort. In 2001, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet underscored that the politics of everyday life for villagers are not limited to their involvement in formal decision-making processes; they also encompass their participation in daily actions that are not necessarily subject to systematic or formal political processes. In the case of the haze problem in Chiang Rai Province, it was determined that the



haze management methods enforced by the policies could not immediately alter the villagers' behavior in the community. Consequently, it can be claimed that this concept examines critical mechanisms that the government and the community must adjust to policies to reduce burning. This includes establishing a partnership to develop sustainable natural resource management approaches that follow the everyday lives of villagers based on the principle of mutual compromise between those in power and locals.

Furthermore, Kerkvliet (Vu, 2006) underscored the informal and subtle strategies that individuals and communities employ to manage and counter-power in the context of resource allocation in their daily lives. Kerkvliet posited that the politics of everyday life encompass open resistance, compliance with, adaptation to, and negotiation of the rules, regulations, and norms present in the society or community being studied. Consequently, this conceptual framework is beneficial for comprehending the issue of how local communities in Chiang Rai can establish local practices to facilitate cooperation to enhance poor air quality through community and government collaboration after being impacted by toxic haze. Kerkvliet asserted that the influence of grassroots movements on policy changes can be demonstrated through collective actions and local discussions through the power of regional governance (Vu, 2006; Pincus, 2006). Since the politics of the villagers' everyday lives are not restricted to the framework of government political decisions but rather are processes that occur, these actions may appear trivial or ordinary. On this point, they are crucial in developing power and influence in the society of the villagers or lower-level individuals. This perspective aligns with scholars like Scott (1985), who emphasized how seemingly mundane actions can constitute meaningful political engagement.

4.2.1 Applying the concept of everyday politics to Chiang Rai's haze problem: Kerkvliet's framework is valuable in the Chiang Rai context as it transcends formal political structures to reflect villagers' experiences with state policies that



directly affect their livelihoods and cultural practices. Haze management policies, including burning bans and promoting alternative agriculture, are often met with apparent passive acceptance, yet local communities consistently interpret, negotiate, and contest these policies. Despite legal restrictions and awareness campaigns, the persistent practice of agricultural burning manifests as acts of defiance. Such acts stem from multi-faceted decisions deeply embedded in economic factors, labor constraints, and entrenched agrarian traditions. As principal stakeholders, villagers participate in a continuous, frequently implicit dialogue with state authority, wherein their daily decisions concerning land utilization and agricultural practices serve as political assertions regarding the feasibility and suitability of enforced policies.

4.2.2 Forms of negotiation and compromise by villagers: Considering the politics of everyday life, it can be seen that in response to state policies to curb agricultural burning, Chiang Rai locals use various strategies to find compromises, allowing them to continue their livelihoods while complying with state regulations. Such participation constitutes informal local interactions and adaptations that do not require formal state involvement. Thus, developing new natural resource management approaches responds to state pressure and community efforts to adapt policies to their specific contexts. This adaptive participation, consistent with Kerkvliet's concepts, requires state recognition of local knowledge and needs to foster genuine collaboration and long-term strategies for the haze crisis, thereby promoting local ownership of environmental management practices. In this case study, it is evident that communities reduce burning in exchange for leniency in law enforcement, a practice consistent with Kerkvliet's concept of everyday politics, wherein policy compliance emerges from negotiation. A key challenge involves establishing policy frameworks that acknowledge these everyday negotiations; such frameworks must align with outcomes perceived by villagers as fairer and more effective for them than top-down, directly imposed regulations.



4.2.3 The politics of resistance and adaptation at the community level:

The everyday politics of smoke management in Chiang Rai are not limited to negotiation and compromise; they also include a variety of resistance and adaptation tactics implemented by villagers to preserve their livelihoods in the face of inflexible state policies. This resistance to the ideas of Kerkvliet (2009) and scholars such as Scott (1985) frequently takes the form of non-overt, everyday actions designed to evade or reduce the impact of state power. This is not a rejection of the necessity to address the haze problem but an assertion of the right to choose methods appropriate to their socio-economic and cultural circumstances (as discussed in section 2.1.2 regarding traditional forest product burning). These are rational strategies from the villagers' perspective to minimize economic disruption or preserve cultural practices. Policies are thus not passively implemented but are interpreted and modified through everyday actions. Such resistance highlights the challenges to law enforcement (as identified in section 3.2.2). However, community adaptability is also expressed through informal networks and local knowledge to manage risks and burning schedules when faced with state restrictions and lacking viable alternatives. Recognizing these dynamics is imperative to achieving success in policymaking. Genuine participatory elements should characterize this process, and villagers should be considered active stakeholders whose knowledge, needs, and strategies are integrated into developing enduring solutions. Furthermore, the transboundary nature of haze (as detailed in sections 2.1.3) highlights the limitations of domestic policies, pointing out the necessity for robust global collaboration, which often lacks efficacy in the ASEAN context.



5. Summarizing

This analysis reviews the social and political dynamics, the effectiveness of government policies, and the participation of residents in handling haze in Chiang Rai Province through the lens of everyday politics. The findings show that despite the government's measures to reduce haze through various interventions, the effectiveness of such measures is often reduced because residents ignore them, as the measures are not connected to their daily lives and livelihoods. At the same time, it is found that haze is caused by various factors, notably agricultural burning and large amounts of transboundary pollution, which directly affect the regional economy and public health.

The core argument emerging from this research is that understanding "everyday politics" – the subtle negotiations, adaptations, and resistances enacted by villagers – is vital for explaining the limited success of top-down environmental governance. Villagers are not passive recipients but active agents who navigate and contest policies based on their immediate needs and local contexts. Theoretically, this analysis adds value to environmental governance literature by underscoring the imperative to integrate local agency and socio-economic realities into policy design. It extends everyday politics theory by demonstrating its applicability to ecological conflicts, where daily practices become politically charged. The considerable obstacle of transboundary haze also shows the limitations of purely domestic policy approaches. Consequently, policy interventions must become more participatory, adaptive, and supportive of sustainable local livelihoods, while concurrently pursuing robust global collaboration to address the cross-border dimensions of the haze crisis.

6. New Knowledge

This study illuminates the complicated dynamics of haze management in Chiang Rai Province by demonstrating the vital influence of "everyday politics" in shaping community responses to, and interactions with, state-led policies and



decision-formulation procedures. The new knowledge generated stems from applying this theoretical lens to understand how villagers, as key stakeholders, navigate, negotiate, resist, and adapt to environmental governance initiatives, thereby revealing the limitations of purely top-down approaches and underscoring the significance of local agency.

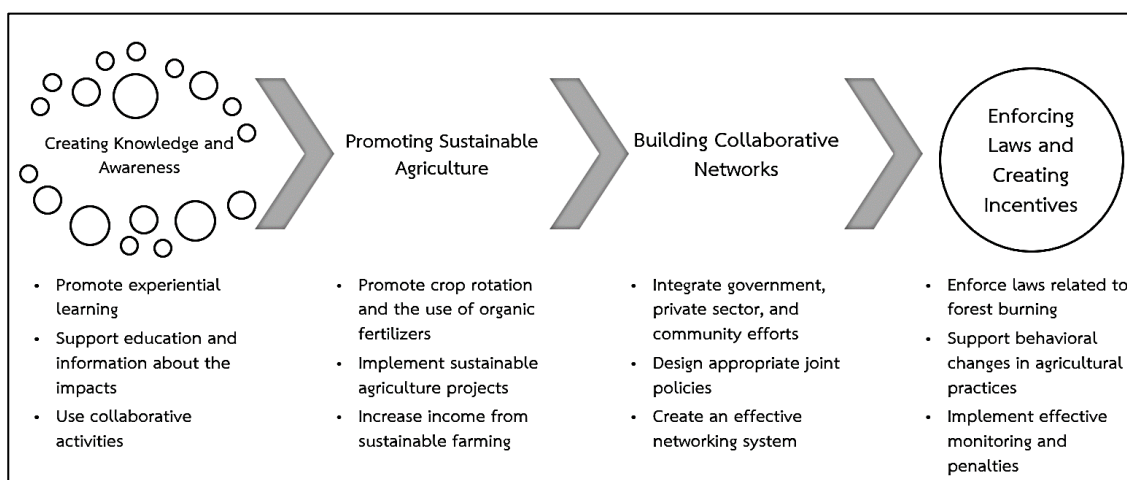


Figure 1. Chiang Rai Smoke Management Diagram: Community Interaction

The Chiang Rai Haze Management Diagram (Figure 1) outlines a community-based approach that begins with raising awareness about the impacts of forest burning and encouraging experiential learning to change behaviors. Following this, the approach promotes sustainable agriculture, such as using organic fertilizers and crop rotation, to increase farmers' incomes. Finally, law enforcement and incentives, such as rewards or penalties, will support sustainable agricultural reforms. Community participation drives efforts to reduce haze and environmental impacts. The interactions between these components, driven by community participation, aim to promote long-term changes, enhance farmers' quality of life through sustainable agriculture, and minimize haze and harmful environmental impacts.



6.1 Key Findings: The Interplay of Policy and Everyday Politics

6.1.1 Politics in the everyday life of the community: villagers' agency in smoke management: In this analysis, drawing from field observations and in-depth interviews, it was discovered that communities in Chiang Rai not only regard the settlement of the haze issue as obeying government commands but also see political processes in everyday life tied to decision-making and adaptability. Community agency in haze management is manifested through methods in which the community may propose alternatives and adjust habits as they see appropriate, often outside formal channels. In this respect, the haze issue in Chiang Rai is more than simply air pollution; it also becomes a site for political processes in the local community's everyday lives. The politics of village life include decision-making and behaviors based on economic need and cultural links, which may differ from state-defined sustainability.

6.1.2 State-community dynamics: compromise, resistance, and policy adaptation. This analysis finds that resistance to state-sponsored burning reductions is a tangible reality, as field interviews with farmers in affected sub-districts revealed that communities often perceive state-proposed methods as incompatible with their traditional way of life and economic needs. Communities usually developed burn-free agricultural practices using technologies that reduce burning or modify production processes. However, as observed in several case study villages, some groups of villagers in the community still resisted the changes due to financial problems and the convenience of agricultural weed management. This conflict reflects the challenge of developing policies that can genuinely access and understand the communities' real issues and decision-making rationales. This is not merely non-compliance, but political engagement where state directives are weighed against everyday survival strategies.

6.1.3 Successes and challenges of policy enforcement: A ground-level perspective. Although some areas of Chiang Rai have reduced agricultural burning



and increased the use of sustainable agricultural technologies, the results have been limited due to challenges such as a lack of adequate resources, a lack of knowledge about sustainable farming methods, and social and cultural resistance from the community. Through discussions with local officials and community leaders, this study discovered that state policy enforcement is often perceived as rigid and unresponsive to the community's specific needs and contexts. As a result, a compromise between the state and the community in changing behaviors must be built on long-term understanding and mutual support, rather than solely on punitive measures.

6.2 Originality and Contribution to Knowledge

Applying an "everyday politics" framework to analyzing haze management in Chiang Rai offers a novel perspective that challenges conventional top-down environmental governance narratives. This study's analytical contribution lies in its explicit emphasis on villagers' agency, not as passive policy but as active political actors engaged in continuous negotiation, adaptation, and resistance to state regulations and environmental pressures through subtle and delicate forms in their everyday lives. This study shows these micro-political processes and informs broader discussions on local autonomy and participatory ecological governance. It demonstrates that adequate and equitable haze management requires a shift from state-centric control to a more detailed understanding of how local communities interpret and reshape policies through their everyday practices, thereby adding a critical dimension to the knowledge of policy effectiveness and stakeholder participation in complex environmental issues, such as transboundary haze.

6.3 Suggestions for Implementation

6.3.1 Developing policies responsive to local contexts and everyday realities: Policies should be designed with communities to meet local needs and foster enduring development. This involves annual participatory review mechanisms, involving community representatives, and developing accessible agricultural



technologies. Policies should also incorporate local knowledge in haze mitigation strategies. Limiting resources and adapting conventional approaches should be prioritized over imposing external models without local validation.

6.3.2 Enhancing community participation in decision-making and implementation: The analysis finds that local community participation in policy design, implementation, and monitoring is critical for effective state-level improvement, and delegating budget and decision-making authority to local governments to facilitate community-led haze management projects. Promoting dialogue and incorporating local knowledge enables state agencies and communities to co-create solutions to haze problems.

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