

# Inter-Local Relations between Thailand and Lao PDR: Collaborative Efforts of Thoeng and Paktha in Combating Environmental Threats in the Borderland

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## Abstract

This article proposes the concept of inter-local relations through an examination of environmental collaboration between Thoeng District, Chiang Rai, Thailand, and Paktha District, Bokeo, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). Situated on the land border, these districts face shared environmental challenges, including PM 2.5 pollution, smog, and forest fires, which threaten both human security and ecological stability. Drawing on a qualitative methodology comprising group discussions with 56 informants conducted in 2023 and 2024, including Thai and Lao district chiefs and officers at the administrative offices of Thoeng and Paktha, this study explores the mechanisms and dynamics underpinning cross-border collaboration at the local level. It argues that the existing international regime such as ASEAN addressing transboundary haze remains insufficient, and that inter-local relations should operate in tandem with international efforts to more effectively promote clean air across both states. The findings reveal that district-level actors and village headmen implemented joint monitoring systems, shared resources, and coordinated community-led responses to mitigate environmental threats. These efforts highlight the capacity of local actors to address transboundary issues without awaiting central government directives, showcasing a more agile and context-sensitive approach to governance. The article introduces the concept of inter-local relations to frame these interactions, emphasising their coexistence with traditional international relations while operating within the practical realities of borderland communities. By analysing the successes and challenges of the Thoeng-Paktha collaboration, this study advances the understanding of non-traditional security threats, borderland governance, and the role of local actors in international cooperation. The findings underscore the potential of inter-local relations as a model for addressing global challenges in

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other border regions, contributing to the discourse on cross-border environmental governance and offering actionable insights for policy and practice.

**Keywords** Inter-Local Relations, Thai-Lao Relations, Borderland Studies, Environmental Threats

## 1. Introduction

The 1,810-kilometre Thai–Lao border is defined by both riverine and overland boundaries, encompassing diverse geographical, cultural, and environmental landscapes (Paribatra, 2013). Of this stretch, 1,108 kilometres follow the Mekong and Hueang rivers, while the remainder—such as the Thoeng–Paktha corridor—forms overland borders. Located between Chiang Rai (Thailand) and Bokeo (Lao PDR), Thoeng and Paktha represent a historically entangled and environmentally vulnerable areas. Seasonal smog, forest fires, and PM 2.5 pollution are recurring threats that disregard national borders and severely impact local health, agriculture, and livelihoods (Fongissara, 2021). These challenges highlight the limitations of centralised governance which is single-commanded. Less actors are able to take part in the policy implementation.

Historically, Thoeng and Paktha were space in between of Lanna and Luang Prabang's broader sphere of influence. Despite being on the left of the Franco–Siamese Treaty of 1893 and the Convention of 1904 ceded these mountainous territories from Siam to French Indochina under colonial pressure, overlooking the cultural continuity of Lao-speaking communities west of the river (Breazeale, 1975). During World War II, these lands were re-annexed by Thailand with Japanese backing and designated as the Province of Lan Chang. This move was part of Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram's Pan-Thaiism, which aimed to unify all Dai and Tai-speaking peoples scattered in Southeast Asia. Within this ideological shift, the country renamed itself from Siam to Thailand to reflect ethnolinguistic unity (Strate, 2015). However, the re-annexation was reversed after Japan's defeat in 1945, and the pre-war borders were reinstated.

Nowadays, although national borders have long been settled, the historical ties and shared cultural landscapes between Thoeng and Paktha persist. These connections shape contemporary cross-border interactions, particularly in addressing shared environmental challenges such as haze pollution—where local cooperation is increasingly vital amidst the limitations of centralised state responses. Thoeng and Paktha remain among the few overland zones along the Thai–Lao border with strategic location for inter-local collaboration. Between 2023 and 2024, they were recognised by Thailand's Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, for exemplary cross-border haze management, demonstrating the capacity of provincial authorities to address transboundary environmental issues. As haze pollution crosses sovereign borders, no single state can resolve the issue alone. This necessitates international cooperation.

In response to worsening haze conditions in the past, ASEAN as an international mechanism established the 2003 Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (ATHP) (Fongissara & Buddharaksa, 2022). Within the ATHP framework, annual Conferences of the Parties (COP) endorse protocols, and two regional committees are tasked with coordinating data and policy: the Sub-

Regional Ministerial Steering Committee on Transboundary Haze Pollution in the Mekong Subregion, and its counterpart in the southern subregion—comprising Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Recently, the issue of haze in Northern ASEAN, particularly affecting Thailand and Lao PDR, has become more prominent. Hotspot data contributing to haze in the northern Mekong region from 2015 to 2018 are as follows: in 2015, Thailand recorded 15,589 hotspots and Lao PDR 7,751; in 2016, Thailand had 6,747 and Lao PDR 9,005; in 2017, Thailand reported 4,126 and Lao PDR 4,750; and in 2018, the figures were 4,226 in Thailand and 3,227 in Lao PDR (Fongissara, 2021). These statistics highlight the limitations of the ASEAN framework, constrained by its strict adherence to territorial integrity and lack of enforcement mechanisms (Fongissara & Buddharaksa, 2022). As a result, greater emphasis has been placed on provincial cooperation. Notably, despite being affected by haze originating from Lao PDR, Chiang Rai consistently reports the lowest PM2.5 levels in northern Thailand and is recognised as a model of best practice by the Thai Ministry of Interior.

This article argues that provincial cooperation remains not only domestic but also constrained by a single-command structure imposed by central ministries, thereby limiting local flexibility, which results in the delay of the policy implementation. In this context, the district-level efforts between the border districts of Thoeng and Paktha merit closer examination as promising examples of inter-local collaboration. It requires collaboration from local actors on both sides of the border. Notably, from 2023 to 2024, these districts were also recognised by Thailand's Ministry of Interior for exemplary cross-border haze management. As borderland districts, Thoeng and Paktha often rely on informal mechanisms such as quasi-state checkpoints that permit mobility without identification through non-restricted area of Ban Rom Phothong and Ban Rom Fa Thai which reflect the everyday realities of fluid and socially negotiated borders. While national policies remain significant, they are often too rigid and slow to respond to rapidly evolving local challenges. An inter-local framework provides a more adaptive and context-specific approach to transboundary environmental issues, foregrounding the role of district-level actors and challenging the state-centrism that dominates International Relations discourse. The following sections will first review the literature on inter-local relations as a concept, particularly in relation to non-traditional security threats such as environmental concerns. This will be followed by an exploration of the Thai-Lao border dynamics specific to Thoeng and Paktha. The methodology section outlines the qualitative group discussions conducted as part of this study, leading into an analysis of how inter-local relations contribute to border governance in these districts. Finally, the conclusion will offer reflections on reimagining borders as zones of cooperation rather than rigid divides, advocating for a more flexible and inclusive model of regional governance in the Thai-Lao border.

## 2. Literature review: Inter-local relations, environmental threats and non-traditional security

Non-traditional security threats have attracted attention in recent years, challenging conventional paradigms of security that were traditional and focused on territorial integrity and military strategies. These threats encompass a broad range of issues, including environmental degradation, human security, economic instability, transnational crimes, and the impacts of globalisation. As a result, the conceptualisation of security has expanded, and a more inclusive approach is now required to address these emerging challenges, especially as does this article on the environmental issues. The focus has also shifted to the role of local actors, such as district-level communities, in dealing with these threats. This section explores the concept of inter-local relations, which highlights the importance of local governances and communities in addressing non-traditional security issues, particularly environmental challenges in the Thai-Lao border.

### 2.1. Non-traditional threats

Traditionally, security studies have focused overwhelmingly on state-centric threats, particularly those pertaining to military conflict and the defence of territorial sovereignty (Morgenthau, 1948). Along the Thai-Lao border, military clashes in 1984 and again between 1987 and 1988 underscored such conventional concerns (Viraphol, 1985; Paribatra, 2013; Eumsin, 2022). Yet, in tandem with shifts in the global security landscape, there has been a discernible move towards recognising non-traditional threats. In the post-Cold War period, the very conceptual foundations of security have broadened to incorporate non-military dimensions—most notably through the notion of human security (Chinwanno, 2015). This paradigm reorients attention from state survival to the well-being of the peoples and communities, encompassing the issues of economic vulnerability, equitable access to resources, and ecological sustainability. These concerns fall within the scope of what is now termed non-traditional security. The growing prominence of non-traditional security in international politics reflects the urgency of cross-border challenges that conventional military frameworks are ill-equipped to resolve. In this redefined security context, issues such as environmental degradation, transnational crime, and structural human insecurity calls for greater both academic and policy attention in these following aspects.

First, non-traditional security pays attention at the immediate threats to human life and well-being. Traditional military threats, while still present, are no longer the sole or even the most pressing dangers for many peoples. Non-traditional threats like environmental degradation, pandemics, and human trafficking pose direct risks to individuals and communities on their everyday life. For instance, the Thai-Lao border has been a hotspot for human trafficking and prostitution, particularly in areas such as Nong Khai (Molland, 2012), illustrating the persistent and complex nature of transnational crimes. Simultaneously,

environmental threats—such as haze, water pollution, and deforestation—affect people's health and livelihoods in this region, directly undermining their human security (N. Nakorn, 2022). As Dalby (1998) critiques, development often comes at the cost of ecological sustainability, reinforcing the need to shift from a narrow focus on state defence to protecting the environment and people's lives. Chinwanno (2015) further affirms that security must be reconceptualised to prioritise the well-being of peoples rather than state sovereignty.

Second, non-traditional security sheds light on the imperative of regional and international cooperation in an increasingly interdependent world. Environmental challenges such as climate change and transboundary haze pollution transcend national boundaries. Resolution through unilateral state will no longer be effective. ASEAN's gradual shift from a traditional, state-centric security paradigm towards a broader human security framework is reflected in its institutional responses (Nguitragool, 2011). Although territorial integrity is still respected, there are ongoing talks and dialogues about how other states could domestically address the issue of haze, even though these efforts have not yet been effective. For examples, the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (ATHP), signed in 2003, and the subsequent Haze-Free Roadmap (2016–2020), exemplify the organisation's evolving capacity to confront shared environmental risks (Charusombat, 2022). Haze became a serious issue as fires in Indonesia during 2003–2004 affected 75 million people across Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei, disrupting daily life and economic activity (Fongissara, 2021). The tourism sector lost an estimated USD 280 million, while health-related damages were valued at USD 941 million (Varkkey, 2020). Early attempts to resolve the issue were hindered by the dominance of local elites in environmental policymaking. The ATHP's effectiveness has been limited, partly due to concerns over territorial integrity—one of the core principles of the ASEAN Way. Member states are often reluctant to share hotspot data, and Indonesia initially refused to sign the agreement. For example, although Singapore enacted the Transboundary Haze Pollution Act in 2014, Singaporean companies implicated in causing haze in Indonesia were not penalised, as Indonesia initially declined to provide supporting data. Eventually, Indonesia eventually joined the ATHP in 2015 in which the roadmap for a Transboundary Haze-Free ASEAN by 2020 was proposed. It outlined several key objectives: to work towards a haze-free region, implement the Sustainable Management of Peatland Ecosystems (2014–2020), and establish the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control as the primary agency. Efforts to eliminate haze were to be aligned with both national and regional activities, supported by stronger national legislation for better enforcement. The plan also emphasised enhancing monitoring and surveillance systems, including early warning and forecasting capabilities, as well as improving prevention and preparedness for forest fires. It called for the active participation of all stakeholders—plantation companies, financial institutions,

local communities, NGOs, and development agencies—and stressed the importance of implementing ASEAN's coordinated mechanisms to effectively manage transboundary haze pollution. (Fongissara & Buddharaksa, 2022).

Third, non-traditional security challenges traditional notions of sovereignty and state power, redefining borders and security roles. Non-traditional threats, especially environmental ones, do not recognise territorial borders of the state. The Royal Thai Air Force, once tasked primarily with traditional defence, now plays a key role in combating haze pollution—underscoring a significant shift in how security roles are being redefined (N. Nakorn, 2022). Yet, the reliance on centralised state mechanisms has its limitations. Border communities along the Thai-Lao and Thai-Burmese borders are often the first to face the consequences of environmental degradation. For instance, Lamb (2024) describes the Salween River border not as a fixed and frozen territorial line, but as a dynamic, socially lived space shaped by the borderland communities. Environmental changes that could threaten the border communities would be explained and researched better with the local knowledge. This highlights the need to integrate actors along the border into security planning, recognising their lived experiences and environmental vulnerabilities. Thus, redefining borders through a non-traditional security lens places the emphasis not on defending territory, but on managing risks and enhancing resilience across boundaries.

Non-traditional security is crucial to global politics as it directly addresses human vulnerabilities, necessitates multilateral cooperation, and redefines security mechanisms in the contemporary world. This approach reflects the realities of an interconnected and fragile global system, where power extends beyond defending borders to preserving life and well-being within and across them. In the context of the Thai-Lao borderlands, the post-Cold War era underscores the significance of inter-local relations, where local actors actively engage in addressing non-traditional security threats. Security, therefore, requires the collaboration of state and societal actors alongside local communities along the Thai-Lao border.

## ***2.2. The role of local actors in border challenges: The context of Thoeng and Paktha***

Efforts to deal with environmental hazards have been largely driven by cooperation at the national and regional levels, yet the role of local actors remains underexplored. In the European Union, environmental crises at the borders, such as the accumulation of migrant boats on the Italian island of Lampedusa, have led to emergency interventions to manage pollution risks. However, these responses are often reactive, addressing environmental damage only after it has escalated into a crisis (Soliman, 2023). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has made significant strides in tackling transboundary haze pollution through the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (ATHP) (Charusombat, 2022).

While the agreement has faced criticism for its limitations, the involvement of external actors—such as the European Union, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)—has strengthened ASEAN's institutional framework and financial support, leading to more effective regional environmental management.

At the bilateral level, cooperation between Thailand and Lao PDR highlights a structured response to environmental threats. The Royal Thai Air Force has played a crucial role in humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations, including addressing transboundary haze pollution. Since 2018, Thai government as state actors actively engaged with their Lao counterparts through ASEAN mechanisms, gradually evolving into direct bilateral coordination. This collaboration has expanded from emergency relief missions to joint training exercises between the Royal Thai Air Force and the Royal Lao Air Force, reinforcing long-term environmental and disaster response strategies (N. Nakorn, 2022).

Despite these multi-level efforts, there is a critical gap in research on how local actors contribute to managing environmental hazards. While national and regional cooperation frameworks provide the foundation for environmental governance, the role of local communities, municipalities, and grassroots organisations in mitigating environmental threats remains underexplored. Understanding how these actors engage in hazard management could offer new insights into sustainable and community-driven solutions, especially at the level of city. For example, Charoensri (2022) argued that mainstream International Relations often focuses on state power and international structures, overlooking the role of cities. While local actors are studied in urban-focused disciplines, their interconnectedness with international politics is often neglected. This article shifts attention to local actors at borders whose roles transcend state boundaries, yet remain local as they do not officially represent the state, unlike the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It introduces the term inter-local relations, where local roles extend across state borders (Wisaijorn, 2022).

Unlike traditional international relations, which often focus on central governments and international structures, inter-local relations emphasise the role of cities, local governance, and citizens in shaping global and regional dynamics. In the context of Ubon Ratchathani, for instance, a province in Thailand, inter-local relations highlights the importance of local actors in fostering cross-border economic connectivity and addressing non-traditional security issues, such as economic and human security (Wisaijorn, 2023). The province exemplifies inter-local relations by bridging the gap between local communities and international actors. Despite not being part of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Ubon Ratchathani contributes to regional economic integration by providing essential infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools, that benefits not only its residents but also thousands of people in neighbouring Lao PDR and Cambodia. This

infrastructure supports the movement of people across borders, fostering economic regionalisation (Charoensri, 2022). Ubon Ratchathani is a key player in addressing non-traditional security threats, such as human trafficking, through local governance and collaboration with neighbouring countries.

In terms of human security with regard to access to food, the Mekong serves as the territorial boundary between Thailand and Lao PDR, shaping not only national borders but also everyday interactions across them. In districts such as Khong Chiam in Ubon Ratchathani and Sanasomboun in Champasak, local communities frequently cross the river for communication and livelihood purposes, often without using official border checkpoints. These informal, yet routine, movements underscore the fluidity of borderland life and challenge the rigid state-centric view of International Relations. When combined with the intimate local knowledge of environmental changes—such as the river turning red to signal the fish breeding season or turquoise blue to indicate a decline in fish populations (Wisaijorn, 2021)—it becomes clear that borderland communities play a pivotal role in maintaining regional connectivity and resilience. These dynamics illustrate how Ubon Ratchathani exemplifies inter-local relations, where locally rooted actions transcend state boundaries and contribute to broader stability, especially along the Thai-Lao border.

### ***2.3 Inter-local relations as a concept***

This article proposes the use of the concept of inter-local relations, which refers to the interactions, collaborations, and partnerships that develop between local governments and communities across borders in response to shared challenges. Unlike traditional state-centric frameworks, which focus on the role of sovereign states in managing security and foreign relations, inter-local relations emphasise the importance of local actors in addressing non-traditional security threats. For example, Wisaijorn (2023), using the concept of inter-local relations, argued that Ubon Ratchathani, a Thai border province, contributes to economic relations between Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR. More than thousands of Cambodian and Lao people are reported to use health care service in Ubon Ratchathani per annum as aforementioned. However, this article shifts the focus away from provincial level to the district one, exploring the lesser-studied yet equally significant collaboration between Paktha in Lao PDR and Thoeng in Thailand.

Once marked by military tensions during the Cold War, the Thai–Lao border has increasingly become a site of cooperation in areas such as water resource management, disaster response, and cross-border trade (Evans, 2002). However, the Xayaburi Dam exemplifies the problems of top-down governance. As Chattranond (2018) notes, the project—largely financed by Thai banks and driven by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand—lacked transparency and public participation, sparking protests downstream in Cambodia, Vietnam,

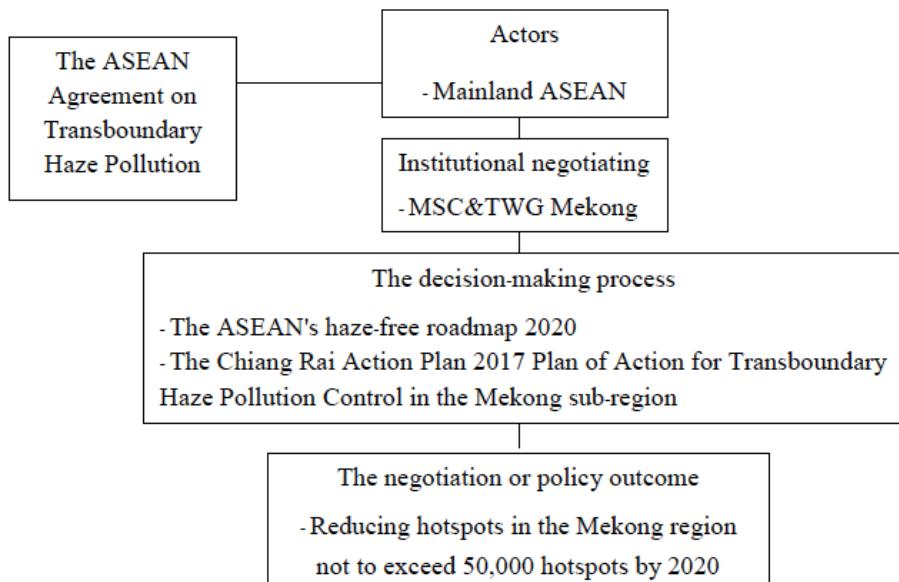
and Thailand. With a construction value of 1.7–1.8 billion USD and annual output of 6,000 GWh, it reflects elitist planning. This article instead proposes the examination of participatory collaboration for more inclusive and effective governance along the border. This transition aligns with Charoensri's (2022) concept of regional connectivity, where economic and security challenges necessitate inter-local relations. The Thai border province of Mukdahan, for instance, illustrates how infrastructure development enhances integration between Thailand, Lao PDR, and Vietnam (Krisnachuta & Srisupun, 2019). Likewise, Nong Khai has made a substantial economic contribution, ranking first in trade volume with Lao PDR in 2022.

A compelling case study that exemplifies the potential of inter-local relations in addressing non-traditional security threats is the haze management network between Chiang Rai province in Thailand and Bokeo province in Lao PDR. Operating under the Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act B.E. 2550 (2007), this network includes multiple actors across four government sectors—Ministry of Defence, Department of Forestry, Department of National Parks, and government officers—as well as representatives from civil society and academic institutions based in Chiang Rai. Fongissara (2021) provides an in-depth study of three generations of provincial governors in Chiang Rai, identifying their proactive approaches in reducing hotspots. This article builds upon that insight by shifting the analytical lens to the district level, specifically Thoeng in Chiang Rai and Paktha in Bokeo, thus contributing a new layer of understanding to the literature. It argues that district-level cooperation cannot be overlooked as it also contributes to effective cross-border environmental governance. Thanks to such multi-actor collaboration, Chiang Rai has consistently recorded the fewest burn hotspots among northern provinces. Despite this success, PM2.5 pollutants from Lao PDR and Myanmar continue to affect air quality across borders, highlighting the limits of provincial action alone. This necessitates a multi-level governance approach involving four layers: district-level coordination, provincial-level engagement, the Township Border Committee (TBC), and regional platforms such as the Mekong Subregional Cooperation (MSC) and Technical Working Groups (TWGs).

The Chiang Rai 2017 Plan of Action for Transboundary Haze Pollution Control in the Mekong Subregion, as outlined by Fongissara and Buddharaksa (2021), recommended four key strategies: 1) managing wildfires in agricultural areas, 2) developing and utilising information technology, 3) promoting cooperation across all sectors, and 4) reducing health risks and environmental impacts. However, despite these recommendations, the international mechanisms have fallen short. The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution (ATHP), which aimed to reduce hotspots in the Mekong Subregion to fewer than 50,000 by 2020, failed to meet this target. This failure is largely attributed to the enduring norm of territorial integrity, which limits cross-border interventions and

cooperation. The figure below presents the conceptual framework underpinning the implementation of haze management policy in Chiang Rai. Recognising these institutional weaknesses, Fongissara and Buddharaksa (2022, p.15) called for an “additional protocol” to strengthen the international regime. This article contends that inter-local relations—exemplified by the collaboration between Thoeng and Paktha—can offer a complementary pathway to support this effort. While the Thai–Lao border may not yet be haze-free, it can serve as an emerging example of effective inter-local cooperation towards a less haze-affected future.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**



**Source:** Fongissara and Buddharaksa (2022, p. 3)

This article argues that the notion of inter-local relations underscores the importance of human security, prioritising the peoples’ rights, well-being, and economic stability over purely territorial concerns. As non-traditional security threats increasingly define global politics, inter-local relations offer a flexible and context-specific framework for addressing cross-border challenges, particularly in dynamic and environmentally vulnerable areas such as the Thai–Lao borderlands.

### 3. The Context of Theong and Paktha: Thai-Lao Border Dynamics

#### 3.1. Geographical and Cultural Proximity

Unlike other areas of the Thai-Lao border defined by the Mekong, Thoeng and Paktha are two districts situated along the overland border. These share significant geographical and cultural proximity, shaping the interrelationship

between local communities as well as the political and economic dynamics of the border region. The connection between Thoeng and Paktha extends beyond geography to encompass deep-rooted cultural ties that have developed over centuries. The people in both areas share linguistic, religious, and historical similarities. The majority of residents in Thoeng and Paktha speak varieties of the northern Thai dialect and the Lao language, reinforcing the cultural interaction between them. This shared language facilitates communication and fosters a sense of kinship across the border, allowing for the continuation of family ties and social networks that transcend the boundaries of the two nation-states. Religion also plays a significant role in uniting the people of Thoeng and Paktha. Buddhism, the predominant religion in both Thailand and Lao PDR, forms an essential part of the social fabric in both districts. Many traditional festivals and religious practices, such as Songkran, the Thai-Lao New Year in April, are observed on both sides of the border.

Moreover, the economic interdependence between Theong and Paktha is undeniable. In recent years, the increasing trade between Thai and Lao border markets has strengthened these economic ties. People from Theong regularly cross the border into Paktha to engage in commerce, and vice versa, often trading agricultural products, textiles, and locally made goods. Cross-border trade is facilitated by relatively open borders in the region, where individuals move across without the need for excessive bureaucracy or restrictions, contributing to the shared sense of identity and mutual dependence.

### ***3.2. Environmental threats in the borderlands***

One of the most pressing issues facing both Theong and Paktha is the growing environmental threat posed by air pollution, particularly the widespread problem of PM 2.5 pollution and forest fires that have become recurring phenomena in the region. The environmental challenges faced by these borderland communities are not only harmful to local ecosystems but also pose significant health risks to the peoples in these areas.

At the provincial level, in 2022, data from the Suomi NPP satellite using the VIIRS system revealed that Chiang Rai province recorded a total of 123,006 rai (approximately 19,681 hectares) of burned areas. Of this, 7,467 rai occurred in conservation forests, 95,036 rai in national reserved forests, 10,069 rai in agricultural areas, 161 rai along highways (within 50 metres), and 2,308 rai in communities and other zones (Chiang Rai's Headquarter of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, 2022). This data reinforces the fact that, while the haze issue is highly visible in Chiang Rai, it is deeply interwoven with broader transboundary dynamics. The problem cannot be understood merely as a domestic one. Although it originates locally, the haze transcends national borders, rendering it both international and inter-local. Neighbouring provinces in adjacent nation-states, such as Bokeo in Lao PDR and Tachilek in Myanmar, contribute to the smoke

through similar burning practices. These are often driven by weed-clearing activities and economic expansion linked to contract farming under the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). Thus, the PM2.5 problem in Chiang Rai, though rooted in local actions, is best understood as an inter-local issue requiring collaborative regional solutions (Fongissara, 2021).

PM 2.5 pollution, which refers to particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter, has become a severe health concern in the Thai-Lao border region, particularly during the dry season. The rise in the concentration of these fine particles in the air is primarily attributed to agricultural burning, forest fires, and industrial emissions (Jainontee et al. 2023). During the early months of the year, both Thoeng and Paktha, like other parts of the Thai-Lao border, experience severe levels of smog and haze caused by burning practices in agriculture. Farmers burn crop residues and clear land for cultivation, which contributes significantly to the deterioration of air quality. Additionally, forest fires, particularly in the mountainous areas of Lao PDR and northern Thailand, exacerbate the problem by releasing vast amounts of particulate matter into the air.

The effects of pollution are particularly harmful to the health and well-being of borderland communities. Exposure to PM 2.5 has been associated with respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, and other chronic health conditions (Roudreo, 2022). In Chiang Rai, Fuwongsitt and Porruan (2023) found that high levels of PM 2.5 (fine particulate air pollution) exceeding  $50 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  were strongly linked to worsening symptoms in patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). While smoking is a known contributing factor, the study revealed that PM 2.5 exposure played a more significant role in triggering flare-ups, underscoring the severe impact of air pollution on lung health, particularly for those with COPD. Additionally, older age and being male were identified as significant risk factors for these exacerbations. A total of 1,549 people experienced worsening conditions during the research conducted at Prachanukhroh Hospital between 2018 and 2019. For the border communities like those in Thoeng and Paktha, who rely on agriculture as a primary source of income, the effects of such pollution are doubly detrimental, as it not only harms their health but also affects agricultural productivity. The smog from forest fires can significantly reduce visibility, disrupt transportation, and interfere with daily activities, making it increasingly difficult for people to go about their lives.

### **3.3. Current governance structures**

The governance structures in Thoeng and Paktha, though shaped by different administrative systems, confront similar challenges in environmental threats and cross-border cooperation. In both contexts, provincial governments play a central role in addressing the needs of their peoples, but their capacities are often constrained by limited resources, rigid bureaucracies, and the complexities

of coordinating with higher levels of government. In Thailand, Thoeng's district office operates under the Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, and is tasked with implementing national policies while providing essential public services such as infrastructure and safety. According to the data elaborated in the following sections, the top-down nature of Thai government means that district authorities often lack the autonomy and flexibility needed to respond swiftly to multi-faceted issues like haze pollution and environmental degradation. While recent efforts have been made to decentralise some authority and resources to district-level administrations, challenges persist in translating national directives into effective local action.

Paktha faces similar struggles under Laos' even more centralised system, where decision-making remains heavily concentrated in Vientiane. Laos operates under a single-party political system dominated by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which exercises significant control over the country's governance. According to Evans (2002), the nature of Lao politics is characterised by a highly centralised and authoritarian model, where the central government holds overwhelming power, and local authorities have limited autonomy. The LPRP ensures that all major political decisions are made at the national level, particularly in Vientiane, which creates a top-down policy structure that is rigid and inflexible. As Meechan (2022) notes, this limits local governments' capacity to independently manage pressing local concerns, especially in rural areas like Paktha in Bokeo. The lack of financial and technical resources further hampers district-level responses to complex transboundary problems such as haze and deforestation. Despite these constraints, Thoeng and Paktha have demonstrated a growing reliance on inter-local collaboration—both within their respective national borders and across them—to manage shared environmental risks. Notably, they have worked together, share data, and coordinate activities aimed at addressing air pollution, deforestation, and water quality management.

Such local-level collaboration has proven more agile and responsive than efforts led at the provincial level. In Chiang Rai, haze management at the provincial scale is still hindered by institutional and structural obstacles. As Fongissara (2021) highlights, the Provincial Governor operates under a single-command system. Although there is increasing awareness about the need for transboundary environmental governance, provincial administrations remain tied to national priorities and often treat cross-border cooperation as secondary to domestic mandates. As a result, progress is slow and inconsistent. Moreover, both Thai and Lao government's civil service reshuffling policy compounds this challenge. As part of routine bureaucratic management, key district-level civil servants are frequently rotated to new postings across the nation-state. This practice undermines local continuity and cooperation with neighboring districts, particularly across borders. Relationships built over time—essential for trust-

based environmental collaboration—are disrupted, leaving inter-local initiatives vulnerable to delays or abandonment.

As will be elaborated more in the finding section, the district-level cooperation between Thoeng and Paktha, supported by flexible communication tools such as the LINE messaging application and reinforced by frequent informal interactions, has allowed for quicker response times and more grounded, people-centric solutions. Given the persistent bureaucratic slowness at the provincial level, inter-local relations at the district scale have emerged not only as a pragmatic alternative but as the most promising and sustainable avenue for effective haze governance in the Thai–Lao borderland.

#### 4. Research methodology

This article draws on qualitative data collected through a focus group discussion, conducted as part of the project Enhancing People-to-People Connectivity to Address Non-Traditional Security Challenges in the Mekong Region, organised by the Department of Provincial Administration under Thailand’s Ministry of Interior. As the academic advisor to the project, the researcher played an active role in both designing and facilitating the process. The Department of Provincial Administration categorised the participating border region to include state officers from Northern Thailand and Lao PDR, specifically covering the transboundary stretch from Chiang Rai and Bokeo southward to Nong Khai and Vientiane. These borderlands are considered the northern part of the Thai–Lao border by the Department. A total of fifty-six informants participated—thirty-three from Thailand and twenty-three from Lao PDR. Importantly, the selection of participants was not done directly by the Department. Instead, the Department requested district officers along the Thai–Lao border to send representatives. Each district on both sides of the border selected its own officers deemed most knowledgeable and involved in cross-border collaboration. This ensured that the voices heard came directly from those with grounded, practical experience.

Focus group methodology was particularly suitable for this study, as it allowed participants to discuss and interpret their shared realities. It is widely favoured in social science for its capacity to reveal collective reasoning and lived experience (Liamputpong, 2011). Notably, discussions did not end in Vang Vieng; communication has continued via an active LINE chat group. The focus group discussions took place over a four-day workshop in Vientiane and Vang Vieng, Lao PDR, in July 2023. The first session was held on the opening day in Vientiane, lasting three hours. Informants then participated in various activities, including attending lectures, visiting tourist spots, and engaging in discussions as the workshop continued in both cities. On the final day, another three-hour focus group session was held, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and deepen their discussions. Throughout the workshop, all informants stayed

together, fostering continuous interaction. For both sessions, the informants were divided into four groups based on their respective border provinces. They were asked to reflect on four core questions structured under the SWOT framework: 1) What are the strengths of cross-border collaboration? 2) What are the weaknesses? 3) What are the opportunities? 4) What are the threats?

Among the groups, the collaboration between Thoeng in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and Paktha in Bokeo, Lao PDR, emerged as a particularly effective model. Their joint response to haze and forest fires—including coordinated firebreak construction, early warning exchanges, and community-level awareness initiatives—was later recognised as a best-practice example. Following the initial discussion, the Department of Provincial Administration continued monitoring these areas. In June 2024, they made a site visit to Thoeng–Paktha to observe the collaboration first-hand. Later, in September 2024, a final workshop was held, where border districts demonstrating successful practices were invited to share their experiences on stage. The Thoeng–Paktha partnership was officially acknowledged at this event.

## **5. Findings: Inter-local relations for border governance in the borderland of Thoeng and Paktha**

Thailand and Lao PDR operate under distinctly different political regimes—Thailand as a constitutional monarchy with electoral competition, and Laos under a one-party socialist system led by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. Despite this ideological divide, interlocal relations across the border have been notably successful due to the pragmatism at the local level and shared cultural, economic, and environmental concerns. The key strength of the relationship between Thoeng and Paktha is the strong rapport between the officers on both sides. By focusing on practical issues such as forest fires, air quality, and environmental protection, the district has ensured that the initiative addresses the immediate concerns of the communities involved. This approach has created a cooperative atmosphere that is both practical and effective. Another important factor in the success of this initiative is the district’s ability to communicate directly with neighbouring officials, without the need for interpreters. This has been very helpful in establishing a smooth and efficient working relationship between the two districts. Thai and Lao are mutually understandable languages (Ngaysyvathan & Ngaosyvathan, 1994). The ability of government officials to communicate fluently with their counterparts on both sides of the border has fostered a mutual understanding of goals and strategies, ensuring clarity and transparency in the implementation of the project.

Thoeng and Paktha have developed a strategic cross-border partnership to address critical environmental challenges, particularly forest fires, haze, and the escalating PM 2.5 pollution. Far from being a top-down policy exercise, this

initiative reflects a long-term, grassroots-oriented collaboration, anchored by a robust monitoring system that includes village headmen, local leaders, and community representatives from both sides of the border. Importantly, two key Thai informants—a sub-district headman and a deputy district chief from Thoeng—play pivotal roles in shaping and sustaining this effort. On the Lao side, fifteen officers from Xaiyabouli province, located just south of Paktha in Bokeo but sharing a border with parts of Thoeng, are actively involved.

Such cooperation is not the product of bureaucratic design alone. It is the outcome of years of trust-building, forged through personal relationships among Thai and Lao officials and the communities they serve. Success manifests in cultural festivals such as the Phra That Pluak Mueang Khop in Thoeng and the Bun Phakhwan in Paktha—events that function as both symbolic and practical arenas for environmental and cultural collaboration. These are complemented by regular sporting and recreational exchanges, often coordinated via the Line application, which further solidify interpersonal ties and nurture a shared sense of cross-border belonging.

A tangible example of inter-local relations contributing to haze reduction and PM2.5 mitigation is seen in ongoing collaboration between Thai and Lao communities in the Phu Chi Fa border area. For example, at the provincial level, the collaboration extended further on 18 February 2025, when a unique joint operation involved not only Thoeng and Paktha but also district officers from Wiang Kaen in Chiang Rai and Khop in another province of Xayabouli. This initiative was particularly significant as Thoeng lies near the boundary between Bokeo and Xayabouli Provinces. The activity—another firebreak construction—marked the coordinated effort between Lao districts across two provinces, Paktha and Khop, alongside their Thai counterparts. With a clear objective to reduce burning and mitigate haze and PM2.5 pollution, this effort showcased the expanding geographic and institutional scope of cross-border cooperation.

While large-scale inter-local activities occurred in June 2024 and March 2025, these were not isolated incidents. Tracing back, similar joint fire prevention efforts were recorded as early as December 2022, reflecting a sustained and evolving pattern of cross-border cooperation (Chiang Mai News, 2022). Insights into these collaborative practices were initially gathered during a focus group discussion the researcher conducted in July 2023 in Vang Vieng, Lao PDR, involving district officers from both nation-states under the framework of a Ministry of Interior project. Further detailed and updated information has been continually exchanged through a dedicated LINE chat group, in which the researcher has participated as the project's academic advisor. In June 2024, over 400 Thai and Lao villagers—from Tap Tao Subdistrict in Chiang Rai's Thoeng and Ban Chiang Tong in Paktha, Bokeo—trekked nearly three hours to establish a transboundary firebreak around Phu Chi Fa National Park. This joint activity, prompted by the devastating wildfires of 2023, significantly reduced fire risks in

2024 and contributed directly to lowering PM2.5 concentrations. Local environmental records show a drop in PM2.5 from over 200  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  in previous years to just above 100  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , an improvement attributed not only to the physical barriers but also to the strengthened social capital between communities (NTS Mekong, 2024).

These developments culminated on 6 March 2025, when more than 500 stakeholders—including district officers, forestry units, park rangers, military personnel, and local residents from both nation-states—coordinated the creation of a 3-kilometre firebreak along the Thai–Lao border (Government Public Relations, 2024). These practical initiatives were supported by public education campaigns that aimed to discourage open burning and promote sustainable land and waste management. Altogether, these inter-local relations demonstrate how mutual trust, shared environmental concerns, and institutional support can translate into sustained, community-driven responses to regional environmental challenges—offering a replicable model of inter-local relations and transboundary environmental governance.

Beyond environmental issues, the broader impact of this cross-border initiative also strengthens ties and fosters partnership between the neighbouring countries. The inter-local relations established between Thoeng and Paktha highlights the potential of higher level of relations between Thailand and Lao PDR, where the people's efforts can help build a deeper, more meaningful relationship. This form of inter-local relations not only addresses vital issues like environmental sustainability but also nurtures a shared sense of responsibility, creating an environment of trust, respect, and mutual understanding. Such initiatives pave the way forwards a solid foundation for long-term stability and prosperity in the borderlands.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has argued that inter-local relations present a promising and often overlooked approach to addressing the persistent transboundary haze crisis in the Thai–Lao borderlands. Moving beyond the dominant frameworks of provincial diplomacy and national-level negotiations, this study draws attention to how district-level collaboration contributes to more flexible, immediate, and context-specific responses to environmental challenges. Local actors—district officials, community leaders, civil society groups, and academic partners—play a crucial role in building cross-border trust, coordinating joint interventions, and sustaining communication mechanisms that are often absent in higher-level policymaking.

Inter-local relations along the Thai–Lao frontier have evolved into a dynamic form of subnational diplomacy, particularly in regions prone to recurring wildfires and haze. These collaborations typically involve coordinated efforts to reduce open burning, promote firebreak construction, and engage in public

education campaigns on sustainable land management. They also foster ongoing dialogue through informal channels and shared networks that enhance real-time responsiveness. While such initiatives may appear modest in scale, their cumulative effect is significant—lowering PM2.5 concentrations and building cross-border social capital. At the same time, the persistence of haze underscores the limitations of relying solely on national action or regional frameworks constrained by sovereignty norms. Instruments like the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution and provincial-level memoranda have yet to yield consistent outcomes. In this context, inter-local relations should be viewed not as a replacement but as a critical complement—an adaptive mechanism that operates within, around, and sometimes despite formal diplomatic architectures.

Ultimately, the emergence of district-level cooperation offers an alternative, grounded model of environmental governance. It highlights how local diplomacy can contribute meaningfully to Thai–Lao relations, transforming shared environmental vulnerabilities into opportunities for pragmatic, people-centred collaboration. As climate and ecological crises intensify, such grassroots cross-border partnerships are likely to grow in relevance and necessity.

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