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From Centralized Development to Local Dissent: Spatial Contestation in Ranong's Landbridge under Southern Economic Corridor[1]

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Abstract

The Landbridge, positioned as one of Thailand's flagship infrastructure initiatives, aims to establish a strategic connection between deep-sea ports on the Andaman coast and the Gulf of Thailand through an integrated multimodal transport corridor. Like many national megaprojects, it embodies a centralized development paradigm, resulting in violations of community rights and long-term socio-environmental impacts. Focusing on the Ao Ang (Ranong) – Laem Rio (Chumphon) Landbridge, this article critically examines the policy trajectory, highlighting the predetermined nature of the master plan. The analysis draws on the conceptual frameworks of place-based development to examine how national infrastructure policies generate uneven spatial outcomes at the local level. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining data collection with the observation of everyday political practices to inform and shape the analysis. Through the lens of everyday politics, it illustrates how power is reproduced and contested across scales, from entrenched centralized authority to localized patronage networks. Ranong, a region with an ecologically fragile, resource-based economy, large-scale infrastructure projects contradict the territorial ecology and community potential. Public participation is constrained not only by top-down planning but also by local socio-political structures. The article shows how everyday resistance, through collective mobilization and subtle acts, serves as a strategy to contest imposed development and challenge entrenched power. The study argues that public policy analysis must move beyond centralized decision-making and engage with local dynamics that influence policy outcomes. Achieving spatial justice requires more than policy reform; it demands a fundamental restructuring of political space to allow communities meaningful participation in their own development.

Keywords Landbridge, Ranong Province, Everyday Politics, Place-Based Development, SEC

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, large-scale infrastructure development has served as a central pillar of Thailand's national economic strategy, positioned as a mechanism to enhance regional connectivity, improve national competitiveness, and redistribute spatial growth. Thailand's geographic location—at the crossroads of land and maritime transport routes in Southeast Asia—has been framed as a strategic advantage in these development narratives. Within this framework, the Landbridge Project—initially proposed under the Southern Seaboard Development Plan (SSB) and currently advanced through the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC)—represents one of the country's most enduring and ambitious infrastructure undertakings.

The masterplan was first formally introduced in the late 1980s (OSSB & NESDB, 1990; OSSB & NESDB, 1991) with the initial objective of establishing a multimodal transport corridor connecting deep-sea ports on the Andaman coast and the Gulf of Thailand. The corridor was envisioned to integrate highways, railways, oil and gas pipelines, and industrial zones, with the strategic aim of offering an alternative trade route to the Strait of Malacca, while supporting energy and petrochemical industries. These sectors were to rely on crude oil imported via the Andaman Sea from the Middle East and natural gas from the Gulf of Thailand as primary raw materials.

Subsequent feasibility studies, however, concluded that the project lacked economic viability as a transoceanic logistics route due to the high costs and inefficiencies associated with container unloading, overland transport, and reloading. Instead, the project demonstrated greater potential as an 'Oil Bridge,' serving the expansion of energy and petrochemical industries (NESDB, 1992; Ministry of Energy, 2005; Dubai World, 2009; OTP, 2023c)—particularly through industrial linkages with the Eastern Seaboard (ESB) and later, the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), in line with Phase 3 (2004–2018) (Bureekul et al., 2009) and Phase 4 (2018–2037) of Thailand's national petrochemical development plan (BangkokBizNews, 2020)

For more than three decades, the Landbridge has exemplified enduring structural tensions between centralized planning and the spatial realities of local development. Since the initial Krabi–Khanom proposal in 1993—opposed by stakeholders in agriculture, fisheries, and eco-tourism—the project has been repeatedly relocated, shifting from Tub Lamu–Sichon (1997), to Thai Muang–Sichon (2003–2004), to Pak Bara–Songkhla 2 (2005–2018), and from 2018 onwards, Ao Ang–Laem Rio (Figure 1). In each instance, rather than reconsidering the core development strategy, the state responded to local resistance or structural barriers by relocating the project. This logic of strategic selectivity illustrates how development sites are chosen based on strategic-political calculations rather than inclusive or participatory planning processes.

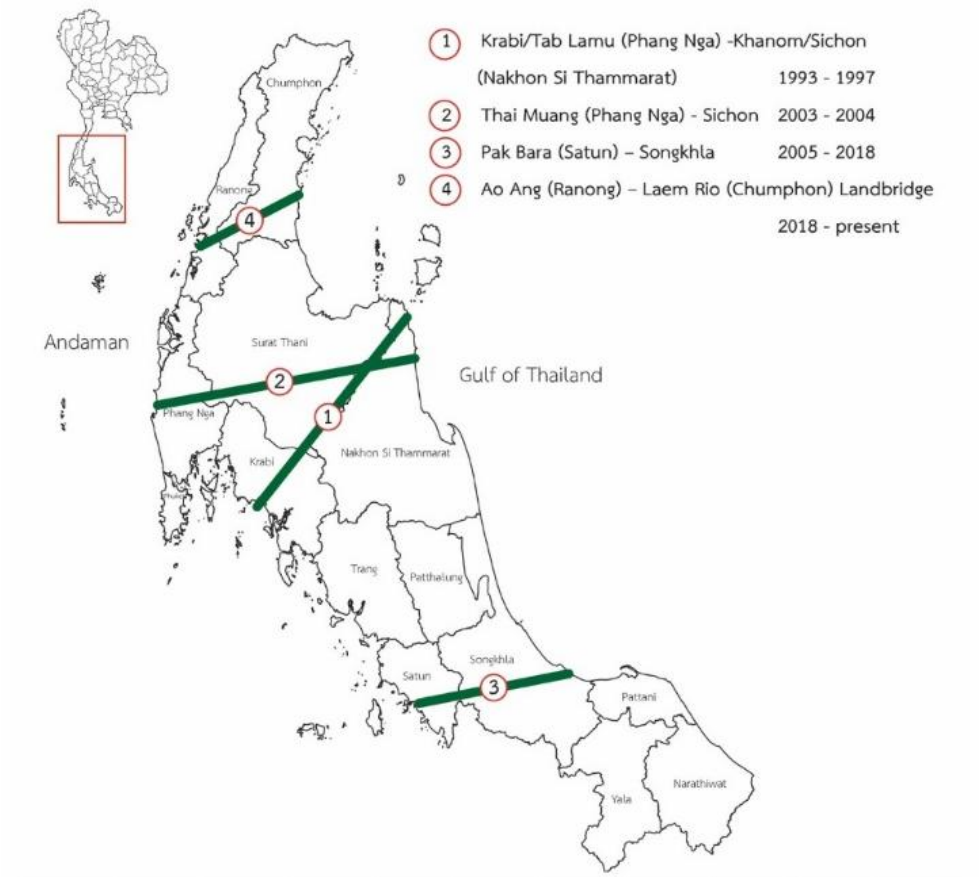
Despite state narratives presenting the Landbridge as a means to distribute economic benefits to Thailand's southern region, in practice, the project exemplifies a model of infrastructure-led growth that prioritizes large-scale investment and industrial expansion— particularly in the energy and petrochemical sectors. Simultaneously, it advances geostrategic objectives in alignment with regional and global power realignments. The project is integrated into several intergovernmental cooperation frameworks, including BIMSTEC, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (UNESCAP, 2017; Hao, 2025). The Thai government positions the Landbridge as a key initiative to enhance national competitiveness and to serve as an alternative logistics corridor within the regional transport network (Department of International Economic Affairs, 2023). However, local needs, capacities, and territorial identities have consistently been marginalized, leading to persistent tensions between national development objectives and community-based livelihoods (NHRCT, 2012; GreenNews, 2023).

In the present context (2025), the advancement of Ao Ang (Ranong) – Laem Rio (Chumphon) Landbridge under the SEC— especially in Ranong Province, where the economy depends heavily on fisheries, agriculture, eco-tourism, and health services (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023)—illustrates the continued dominance of top-down planning that disregards local agency. The draft SEC Act, modeled on the 2018 EEC Act, proposes the establishment of a national policy committee with sweeping legal authority to govern SEC zones and to grant long-term investment concessions—particularly to foreign investors (OTP, 2023). This development reflects a broader trend of recentralization through legal exception, wherein special legislation is employed to bypass local governance structures and generally applicable laws, thereby institutionalizing an investor-driven development model. Such a strategy enables legal and institutional mechanisms that prioritize investor interests over the promotion of context-sensitive, locally grounded development processes.

This article examines three decades of Landbridge promotion—from SSB to SEC— asking what, if anything, local communities have gained from this state-led initiative and why Ranong has emerged as a final fallback destination despite widespread resistance—particularly from small-scale fishery, agriculture, and eco-tourism sectors across the southern region. The analysis addresses the disjuncture between national development objectives and the actual potential of local areas, while also interrogating the interplay between centralized policy frameworks and local socio-political dynamics. Drawing on the conceptual lenses of place-based development, spatial justice, and everyday politics, the article seeks to expose institutional exclusion, layered socio-political hierarchies, ritualized forms of participation, and everyday forms of resistance in order to reveal how power is embedded in infrastructure governance. In doing so, it explores the possibilities for

creating new political spaces in which communities may assert genuine agency in determining development trajectories on their own terms.

Figure 1 Map of Proposed Landbridge Sites under SSB and SEC



Project	Components of transportation infrastructure					Industrial development in the project area				
	Andaman Port	Gulf of Thailand	Road	Railway	Pipeline system	Heavy Industries (Andaman)	Light Industries (Andaman)	Heavy industries (Gulf of Thailand)	Light industries (Gulf of Thailand)	Industries along the route
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	~
2	X	~	✓	~	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	✓	✓	~	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	~
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	~	~	~	~	~	✓

✓ Implementation plan in place
X No implementation plan
~ Currently under review / planned but not yet studied / potential for future implementation

Source: Created by a researcher

This sets the stage for the following sections: 1) Case study outlining Ranong's geographic and socio-economic profile, and summarizing the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge under SEC; 2) Conceptual Framework combining place-based development and everyday politics to analyze spatial contestation; 3) Research methodology; 4) Analysis of the disjuncture between Landbridge ambitions and Ranong's economic capacities; 5) Critique of the predetermined project, ritualistic public hearings, and knowledge production industry; 6) Examination of strategic territorial selection, socio-political dynamics, everyday politics, and community mobilization; and 7) conclusions and recommendations from the study of the Ranong Landbridge.

2. Case Study

This research examines the case of the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge under SEC, with a particular focus on development in Ranong Province. The case is outlined as follows:

2.1 Research Site

Ranong Province is situated in a geographically strategic location in upper southern Thailand. It shares a border with Myanmar and is a coastal province along the Andaman Sea, with potential connectivity to the Gulf of Thailand. The province is endowed with abundant natural resources and high biodiversity. Its economic structure is primarily driven by fisheries, agriculture, ecotourism, and wellness-related services. The Ranong Provincial Development Plan (2023–2027) explicitly identifies tourism and services as the primary productive sectors driving both spatial and economic development in the province. This high dependency on natural resources renders the province particularly vulnerable to transformations brought about by large-scale development plans— especially infrastructure development led by the state under the Landbridge initiative.

2.2 The Landbridge Project

The Landbridge represents the most extensive economic infrastructure development initiative ever undertaken in Thailand. Initially conceived under SSB plan, it is currently being advanced within the framework of SEC. Its core infrastructure components include a deep-sea port on the Andaman coast at Laem Ao Ang in Ranong Province and another deep-sea port on the Gulf of Thailand coast at Laem Rio in Chumphon Province. These two ports are to be linked via an integrated multimodal transport corridor— Route MR8— which comprises an intercity motorway and a railway line. A central strip along the MR8 alignment has been reserved for the potential future installation of oil and gas pipelines. Moreover, both sides of the MR8 corridor are designated for the development of industrial estates and commercial zones, considered key strategies for ensuring the economic viability and return on the project investment. This initiative is also

accompanied by the drafting of the SEC Act, the core provision of which is the establishment of a dedicated SEC Policy Committee —a national-level governing body with full authority to oversee and manage the development of the designated area (OTP, 2023b). This approach reflects the Thai state's intention to institutionalize a centralized and top-down governance structure to exercise comprehensive control over spatial development.

Figure 2 Composition of the Landbridge



Source: OTP (2024b)

Note: As this document was prepared OTP, it does not yet include references to the liquid cargo pipeline system.

3. Conceptual Framework: Place-Based Development and Everyday Politics as a Critical Lens for Analyzing Spatial Contestation in Thailand's Landbridge Project

Place- based development presents a compelling alternative to conventional centralized development paradigms, which often concentrate investment and decision-making authority in capital cities or industrial hubs—frequently at the expense of peripheral and rural regions. By emphasizing territorial diversity, decentralization, and meaningful local participation, place-based strategies aim to mitigate regional inequality and promote spatial justice. Rather than applying one-size-fits-all policy models, place-based development advocates for policy design rooted in the specific socio-ecological, economic, and cultural contexts of each locality (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2017).

This approach directly challenges the foundational premises of Growth Pole Theory, first introduced by Perroux (Varela-Vázquez & de Francisco, 2024). Which posits that economic development should begin in dynamic urban centers— such as ports, industrial zones, or special economic areas— and subsequently diffuse outward through spatial-economic linkages. In practice, this

theory informed a range of development policies during the 1960s– 1980s, including China's Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, Latin America's industrial corridors, and Thailand's Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate (Luengaramsri, 2021). However, empirical evidence increasingly suggests that these core-centric models often deepen regional disparities by extracting resources from surrounding areas without generating sufficient spillover benefits—a phenomenon described as the "backwash effect" (Fujita & Thisse, 2013).

While Growth Pole strategies may facilitate macroeconomic growth and large- scale infrastructure development, they are typically ill- suited to accommodate the complex, context- dependent realities of local territories. In contrast, place- based approaches prioritize the role of territorial capital—including natural resources, local knowledge, human skills, and social networks—as foundational to inclusive policy-making (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Barca, 2009). Complementary to place- based development is the concept of spatial justice, articulated by Soja (2010), which analyzes spatial inequities in the allocation of resources and opportunities. Similarly, the place-sensitive policy approach (World Bank, 2009) offers a flexible alternative to both growth pole and place- based strategies, emphasizing that effective policy design must be grounded in an understanding of local context, without rigid attachment to centralized authority or fixed local capital structures.

Since the 2000s, participatory approaches to territorial development have gained broader acceptance—both as tools for critiquing traditional development paradigms and as means of promoting more inclusive governance. Place- based approaches, together with spatial justice, have been applied to analyze structural injustices stemming from unequal resource access and the limited rights of communities to participate meaningfully in development processes. This perspective has also informed national policies (OECD, 2016) — such as Scotland's Community Empowerment Act 2015 (Scottish Government, 2017), which enhances the role of communities in managing their resources, and Japan's Regional Revitalization strategy, which emphasizes citizen participation and local capacity in driving regional economic recovery (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2018).

Despite its merits, place-based development is not without limitations. Its implementation often faces challenges such as insufficient data, weak local institutions, and limited administrative capacity— especially in states with strongly centralized bureaucracies. These limitations reflect a persistent tension between top- down efficiency and bottom- up inclusion (Barca, 2009; Pike et al., 2017). Overcoming this tension requires embedding place-based strategies within broader political structures that allow local participation to be not merely symbolic but substantively influential in shaping development trajectories.

In the Thai context, there has been a consistent effort to integrate place-based development approaches that prioritize public participation into national

policy, most notably since the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001). However, numerous studies—such as those by Suvanamongkol (2011), Decentralization: Concepts and Experiences from Asia, and Thanapornpan (2002), The Economics of Constitution: An Analysis of the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand—highlight the limitations of decentralization under Thailand's centralized state apparatus. These limitations are particularly evident when democratic mechanisms are weakened or overridden by authoritarian interventions.

Sanamchai (2021) similarly argues that although the decentralization movement gained momentum in the late 1990s, it was short-lived. By the 2000s, especially after the 2014 coup, Thailand witnessed a recentralization of state power through legal and policy mechanisms that curtailed public participation. These included the use of Section 44 executive orders by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), and the entrenchment of centralized control in the 2017 Constitution and the 20-Year National Strategy.

A case study by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) (2020) on Thailand's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) illustrates the structural injustices inherent in top-down spatial development. Although these projects were officially justified as tools for poverty alleviation and regional development, their implementation—especially through orders issued by NCPO—resulted in widespread violations of community rights. These included forced land expropriation, imposition of infrastructure without local consent, and exclusionary planning processes that denied affected communities the ability to shape their own developmental trajectories.

Despite the clear relevance of place-based and spatial justice frameworks to such cases, no study has systematically applied a place-based analytical lens to the Landbridge project and Ranong Province. This research addresses that gap by examining the policy–practice disconnect in the execution of this nationally driven initiative, while simultaneously identifying Ranong's latent development potential.

To extend this analysis, the study incorporates the politics of everyday life, drawing on James C. Scott's work (1985; 1990). This perspective shifts focus from formal decision-making arenas to micro-level practices, subtle negotiations, and culturally embedded acts through which marginalized communities navigate—and quietly contest—structural constraints. While such actions may appear apolitical or inconsequential, they often function as forms of 'hidden resistance' that challenge dominant development agendas without engaging in direct confrontation. By foregrounding these lived and localized forms of agency, the politics of everyday life enriches place-based analysis, revealing that community participation and contestation are not confined to official consultation processes but also unfold through informal mechanisms embedded in daily social relations, the creation of alternative spaces for policy debate constrained by formal

procedures and local power structures, cultural expressions, and locally grounded knowledge systems.

These structural and everyday dynamics are particularly salient in the case of Ranong—a small province where national-level power structures advancing the Landbridge project are deeply intertwined with local patronage networks, exerting influence across multiple levels of governance. In such contexts, open dissent toward the project can be politically sensitive and socially constrained. Yet this apparent silence should not be mistaken for consent; rather, it reflects a latent energy of resistance awaiting opportunities to resurface. Integrating place-based strategies with the politics of everyday life thus offers a multidimensional lens for analyzing contested spatial development. While place-based frameworks highlight the importance of context, equity, and inclusive governance, the everyday politics perspective illuminates how resistance and negotiation unfold in lived space—challenging imposed narratives and asserting alternative visions of development.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, guided by two interrelated approaches. The research observed the study area between 2018 and 2024 and conducted in-depth fieldwork between November 2024 and May 2025.

Documentary Research involves a comprehensive review of theoretical literature, academic publications, policy documents, and digital archives. Anchored in the integrated framework of place-based development and everyday politics, this method critically examines whether state-led projects like the Landbridge genuinely respond to local needs or reinforce centralized, growth-oriented agendas. Sources include peer-reviewed journals, media reports, theses, and government records to trace shifting narratives and institutional rationales shaping Ranong's development trajectory.

Field Research reflects a commitment to participatory and critical inquiry and includes:

(1) Semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders—local residents, fishers, business owners, civil society actors, officials, and scholars—to explore varied perspectives on the Landbridge and regional development.

(2) Focus group discussions in directly and indirectly affected communities to uncover local concerns, resistance, and aspirations for community-defined futures.

(3) Participant and non-participant observation in public hearings, community forums, and planning events to capture the micro-politics of engagement, dissent, and negotiation in both formal and informal spaces.

Through these layered methods, the study seeks to illuminate the contested terrain of spatial development and advance more inclusive and just policy alternatives.

5. Disjuncture Between Landbridge Ambitions and Ranong's Context-Specific Economic Capacities

The Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge project, implemented under the framework of the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), represents a large-scale infrastructure development initiative focused on transportation and energy. It is designed to facilitate investment in strategic industries, particularly the expansion of the energy and petrochemical sectors that extend from the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). However, when juxtaposed with the development vision articulated in the Ranong Provincial Development Plan (2023–2027)—which serves as the guiding framework for area-based development—a significant divergence emerges. The plan emphasizes enhancing the local economy through the sustainable use of natural resources and place-specific assets, with the province envisioning itself as a hub for 'wellness tourism and high-value agriculture aimed at improving quality of life' (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023).

Ranong possesses two interrelated spatial-economic potentials that have long served as the foundational pillars and driving forces of its development. These localized assets not only shape the province's economic trajectory but also reflect a coherent and integrated path toward sustainable, community-rooted growth;

(1) Natural resources—including forestlands, mineral deposits, and especially one of the most biodiverse mangrove ecosystems in Thailand and the Asia-Pacific region—constitute the province's ecological core. These mangrove areas have been designated as part of the Ranong Biosphere Reserve, recognized as internationally significant wetlands under the Ramsar Convention, and are integral to the Andaman Marine Conservation Network, which is currently under nomination for UNESCO World Natural Heritage status (Plathong, 2022).

(2) Geographical location—Ranong's position as a port city on the Andaman coast has historically connected it to maritime trade routes and to Myanmar's Tanintharyi Region. This strategic placement has long facilitated the circulation of labour, economic activities, and cross-border trade, dating back to the era of tin mining, timber extraction, and commercial fisheries. Today, Ranong continues to serve as a critical gateway, linking maritime tourism routes to the Mergui Archipelago and sustaining transboundary trade between Thailand and Myanmar (ITD, 2022).

Since the early 2010s, following the decline of the commercial fishing sector—largely due to regulatory measures under the IUU Fishing framework—Ranong's economic structure has undergone a significant transformation. The

province has shifted from an extractive resource-based economy to one centered on sustainable resource management, particularly through the growth of ecotourism and health-related services. This transition has given rise to a tourism- and service-based economy that now constitutes the province's most valuable productive sector. It is grounded in Ranong's abundant natural assets—mountainous forests, hot springs, and rich multiethnic cultural heritage—which collectively serve as the foundation for value creation (NESDC, 2019; Ranong Provincial Office, 2023).

The marine fishery and aquaculture sectors continue to play a vital role, encompassing small-scale, commercial, and processing industries, all of which are deeply interlinked with support activities such as logistics and ice production. As of 2022, Ranong province has 3,236 registered local fishing boats, with 1,295 freshwater fish farmers. From 2022 to 2023, a total of 354 commercial fishing vessel licenses were issued to residents of Ranong and neighboring provinces. Notably, small-scale fisheries have been extended into community-based tourism initiatives and have synergized with other service sectors such as local gastronomy. Similarly, agriculture in the province goes beyond cash crops, producing goods that reflect the locality's distinctive identity and its relationship with environmental capital—for instance, Ranong durians and cashew nuts (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023).

These economic activities are deeply embedded in the local context, exemplifying the concept of place-based development and local embeddedness, which emphasizes the interconnection among producers, entrepreneurs, service providers, workers, retailers, and community business networks. This integration contributes to the formation of a circular economy that fosters inclusive and sustainable income distribution at the provincial level.

Within this context, the promotion of the Landbridge project as a foundational infrastructure to support industrial expansion and large-scale investment stands in marked contradiction to the development trajectory aligned with Ranong's place-specific capacities. Although proponents of the project claim that it will generate over 280,000 jobs—approximately 130,000 of which are projected to be in Ranong (OTP, 2023b). However, data from the Ranong Provincial Statistical Office in the fourth quarter of 2023 presents a starkly different picture. The province's labor force was recorded at 157,359 individuals, of whom 156,704 were employed, leaving only 655 unemployed. This discrepancy underscores a significant misalignment between the projected employment benefits of the project and the actual conditions of the local labor market (Ministry of Labour, 2024).

Moreover, the Landbridge aims to raise GDP growth from 4% to 5.5% and is frequently promoted by referencing the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) as a successful model that has enhanced quality of life and alleviated social problems in Ranong, Chumphon, and other southern provinces through the establishment of

the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) and the drafting of the SEC Act (OTP, 2023b). However, the lived experiences of communities in Map Ta Phut, Rayong—home to the Eastern Seaboard (ESB), now integrated into the EEC's industrial core—reveal a starkly contrasting reality. While the ESB played a pivotal role in Thailand's emergence as a Newly Industrialized Country by the late 1980s (World Bank, 1993). the development model it advanced has resulted in serious violations of community rights. In addition, despite Rayong consistently ranking among the highest provinces in terms of Gross Provincial Product (GPP), reaching 897.1 billion baht in 2016, over 81.7% of that income was concentrated in the industrial sector. In contrast, the majority of the population—engaged in small-scale fisheries, subsistence agriculture, and tourism services—accounted for less than 20% of the economic share (Rayong Province Office, 2019).

Compounding this, the continued expansion of industry in Map Ta Phut and adjacent areas has triggered intense competition over natural resources—particularly water, which is disproportionately allocated to industrial use—alongside severe environmental and public health crises. The area was officially designated as a pollution control zone in 2009, and since the formal establishment of the EEC, the problems have not only persisted but intensified. The 2022 Environmental Quality Report documented excessive levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which have been linked to rising cancer incidence in the area (ThaiPublica, 2023). As of 2025, the pollution control designation remains in place, underscoring the ongoing nature of the crisis.

The experience of industrial development in the Eastern region—especially the case of Map Ta Phut (ADB, 2008)—reveals the structural limitations of a developmentalist policy orientation that prioritizes economic growth above all else (Escobar, 1995). Such an approach systematically neglects the long-term protection of citizens' rights and environmental integrity, while disregarding the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of place. These shortcomings are directly connected to the principles of environmental justice, which emphasize procedural fairness, the equitable distribution of environmental impacts, and the inclusive participation of local communities as stakeholders in decision-making processes (Schlosberg, 2007).

Within this context, the transplantation of the EEC model to the SEC—without careful consideration of Ranong's specific context, which is fundamentally rooted in natural resource dependence and cultural capital—poses serious risks to the sustainability of the local economy. Such a transfer may undermine the province's economic foundations and lead to long-term structural vulnerabilities, including resource conflicts, environmental degradation, diminished quality of life, and threats to occupational security for local populations. These risks are particularly acute if policy processes continue to exclude meaningful participation from local communities (Cornwall, 2008; Schlosberg, 2007).

6. Predetermined Project, Ritualistic Public Hearings, and Knowledge Production Industry

The Landbridge project serves as a paradigmatic example of a predetermined development initiative—one whose objectives and trajectory were established in advance and have been persistently promoted by the state since the late 1980s. Despite encountering resistance from civil society and facing substantial limitations related to the suitability and capacity of proposed locations, the project has undergone multiple site relocations over the decades. Yet these constraints have not prompted a thorough reassessment of the policy direction. On the contrary, they illustrate the state's strategic adaptation: a continued search for new locations that remain politically viable for advancing the project. Within such a policy framework, processes such as feasibility studies, engineering designs, and the preparation of EIA/ EHIA reports have largely functioned to reaffirm the state's and investors' predetermined objectives, rather than serving as mechanisms for generating genuine policy alternatives or creating space for the voices and concerns of local communities.

Over more than three decades of the Landbridge project's evolution—from its origins under SSB initiative to its current framing under SEC—a vast body of knowledge has been produced by consulting firms and academic institutions, amounting to over 50 studies. This phenomenon reflects the dynamics of what can be termed a policy-oriented knowledge industry, in which consultants and research institutions act as key actors who benefit from policy studies that primarily reproduce technical knowledge in support of large-scale development, while offering little space for local participation or the recognition of situated knowledge in shaping, questioning, or revisiting policy objectives. In other words, the form and goals of the Landbridge project have remained largely unchanged, despite successive iterations and changing political conditions. Technical knowledge produced under the constraints of contract-based knowledge production often functions in a ritualistic manner—serving to confer legitimacy on the project rather than acting as a tool for safeguarding the public interest.

A clear example of a predetermined development initiative can be seen in the examination of Ranong's territorial capital and the provincial development plan, as discussed above. The plan reveals that the province seeks to leverage its geographical advantages and natural resources to drive the local economy and aligns with development approaches that prioritize sustainability and spatial justice, grounded in the natural and cultural capital of local communities (Soja, 2010; Barca, McCann, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). Simultaneously, the province has attempted to adapt to national strategic frameworks. However, the development vision articulated in Ranong's plan continues to emphasize the balance between resource utilization and context-specific appropriateness. This

stands in contrast to the objectives of the Landbridge, which prioritize the development of large-scale infrastructure to support industrial expansion and position the province as a hub for international logistics.

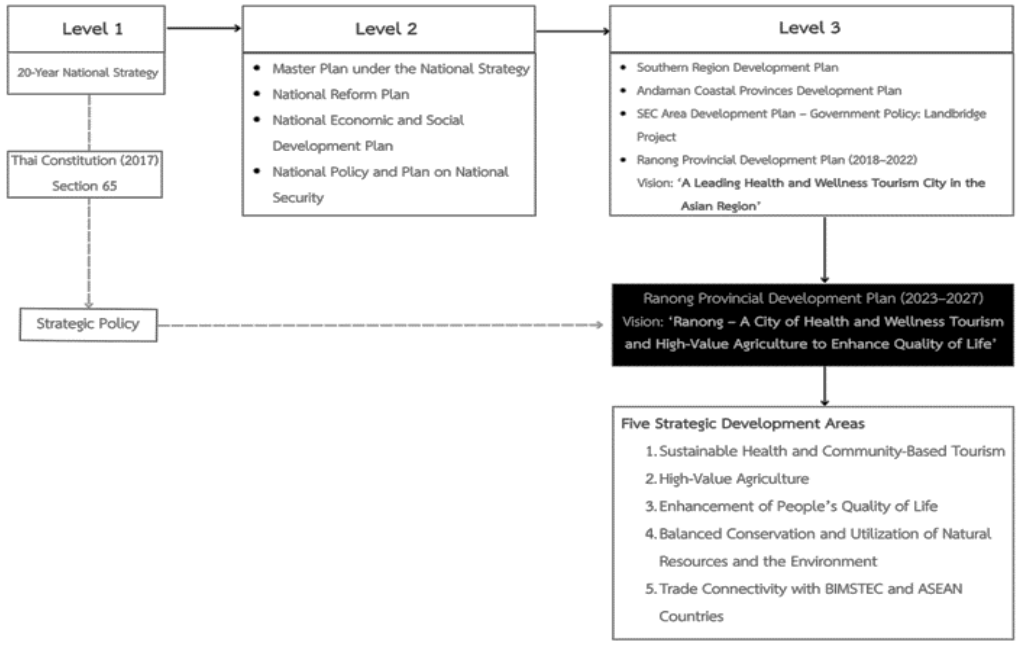
In this context—where Ranong's economy remains resource-based and its coastal ecosystem is highly vulnerable to the impacts of large-scale projects—the relocation of the previous Landbridge project's target area, recently shifted from Satun–Songkhla to Ranong–Chumphon, was not merely a geographical strategy to circumvent local opposition. Rather, it reflects a policy trajectory driven by centralized territorial logic, a persistent feature of institutional centralism in Thailand's development paradigm. Specifically, the Landbridge project is not grounded in a place-sensitive approach or informed by place-based knowledge, but instead redefines spatial targets through the lens of the central state and elite capital interests (Jessop, 2002).

This structural imbalance is further reinforced by the legal framework under Article 65 of the 2017 Constitution, which requires all state agencies to align their plans and budgets with the 20-Year National Strategic Plan. Although intended to ensure policy continuity, in practice this framework restricts provincial flexibility, reduces public participation, and limits prospects for meaningful local self-determination. Such mechanisms curtail de facto decentralization and embody the politics of territorialization and spatial injustice (Soja, 2010), reducing provinces to mere executors of centrally defined priorities. Within this framework, SEC has been incorporated into the national strategic plan as a core infrastructure priority (National Statistical Office, 2023).

An interview with a high-ranking civil servant from the provincial bureaucracy in Ranong (22 January 2025) illustrates the province's passive role in supporting centrally driven policies:

"In planning the development of the province, we considered the local potential. Ranong focuses on health tourism because of its high-quality hot springs near the town, which is our key strength. As for the Landbridge project, it is a national government policy. The province's duty is only to support it; we do not play a leading role. Currently, it is in the study phase. In the future, if it is constructed and becomes operational, with responsibilities transferred to the province, then our provincial development planning priorities will adjust accordingly."

Figure 3 Planning Structure of the Ranong Provincial Development Plan (2018–2022)



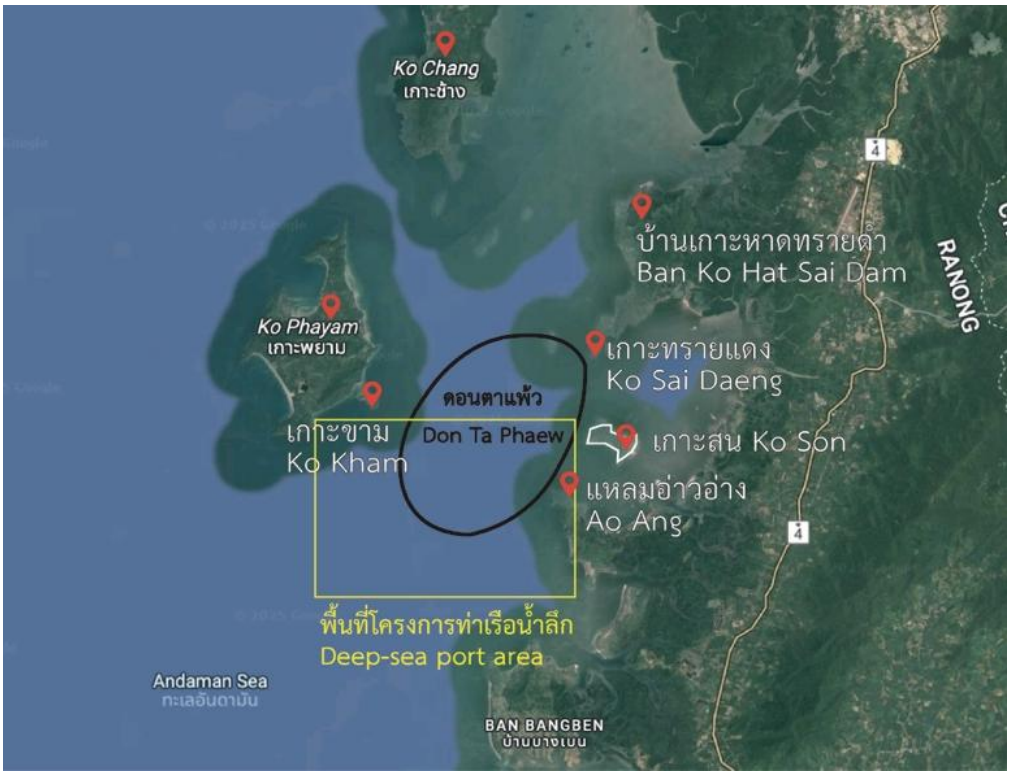
Source: Ranong Provincial Office (2023) (Modified by a researcher)

Framed as a predetermined policy, the Landbridge under SEC planning process has not been designed with expectations for meaningful participation, as evident in the public hearing processes conducted as part of the EHIA for the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge and the Laem Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port projects. During the COVID-19 pandemic (DOH, 2021; OTP, 2023b). Public consultations were held via electronic platforms—specifically Zoom meetings—as a substitute for in-person engagement. While the adoption of digital technologies was presented as an adaptive response to pandemic-related restrictions, in practice, it posed significant barriers to participation, particularly for local residents lacking access to appropriate devices, technological infrastructure, or the digital literacy required to engage effectively in online consultations.

In addition, the public consultation process conducted under the EHIA for the Laem Ao Deep-Sea Port project illustrates a systematic marginalization of the area's ecological complexity and the value of the Ao Ang coastline as it relates to local communities. This is particularly evident in the narrowly defined study area, which was restricted to a radius of only 3-5 kilometers from the project site. Such a limitation fails to account for the broader environmental footprint of the project, despite the fact that Phase 1 of the port's construction will involve approximately 11,287.5 rai of dredging and land reclamation in the coastal and marine zone

(OTP, 2024a). Once completed, the Ao Ang port is projected to accommodate up to 20 million TEUs per year, making it the largest deep-sea port in Thailand—surpassing even Laem Chabang Port, which currently has a maximum planned capacity of 18 million TEUs per year upon full development across all three phases, and presently handles approximately 11. 10 million TEUs annually (EECO, 2025).

Figure 4 Map of the Don Ta Phaew and its surrounding areas



Source: OTP (2023b) (Modified by a researcher)

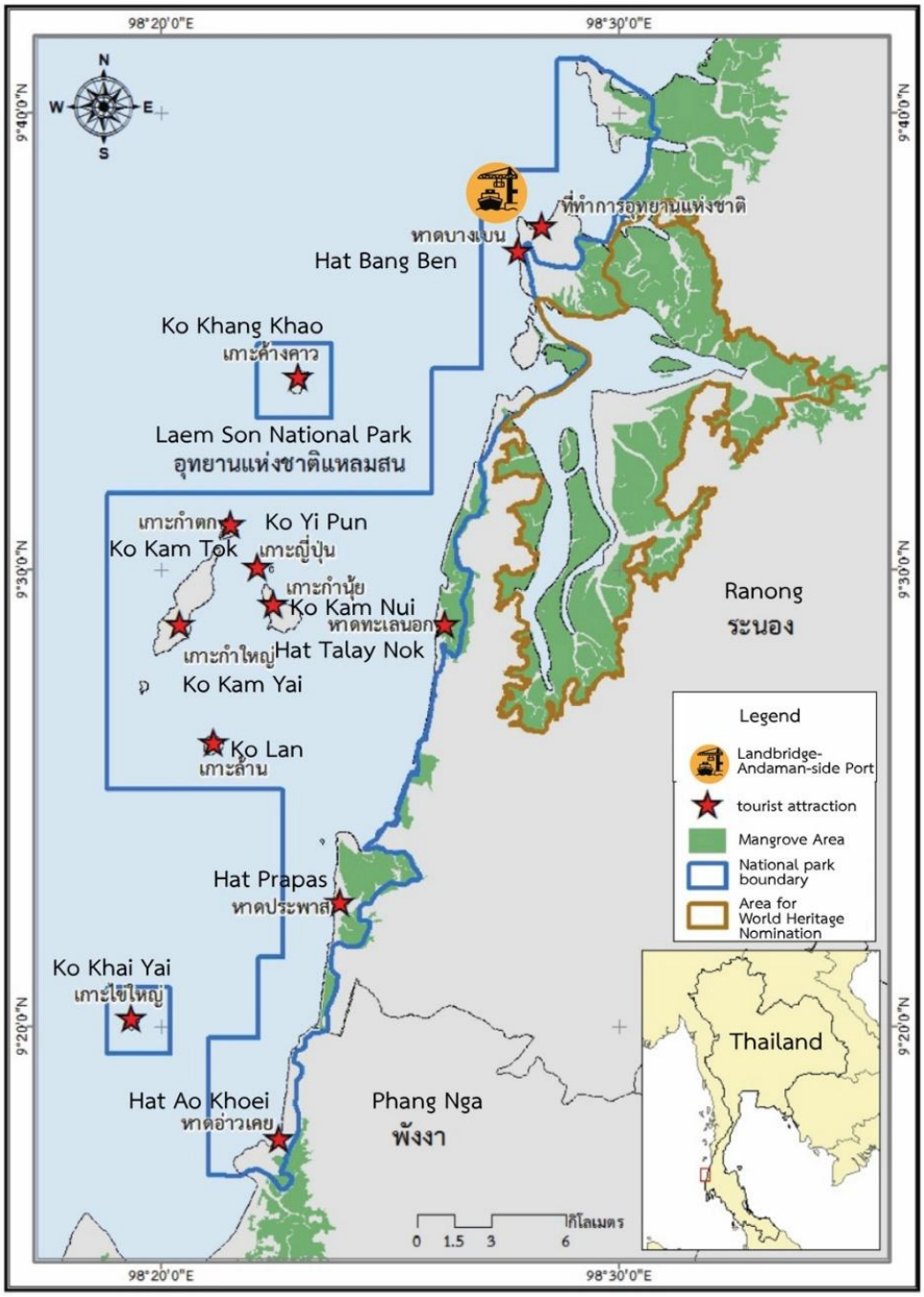
The Ao Ang coastline—targeted for state-led development—is not merely a zone of natural resources but a place-based livelihood, where ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions are deeply interwoven. These areas support spatially embedded networks of resource-sharing among diverse local communities. The designated project site, locally known as "Don Ta Phaew" or "the fishermen's treasure trove," is a key fishing ground and marine resource supporting nearly all coastal communities in Ranong. Surrounding islands—such as Ko Kam (Ao Khao Khwai), Ko Khankhao, and Ko Yipun—also function as important ecotourism destinations, generating income for both small-scale fishers and private tourism operators (see Figure 4).

Ko Son or also called "Ko Pae" [goat] or "Ko Toh Yiseem"—located between Hat Sai Dam village and Ao Ang cape—is a sacred site for local Muslims. It houses the Toh Yiseem Mosque and is the burial ground of the revered Islamic scholar Toh Yiseem. To the west, the seas around Ko Kham and Ko Phayam are home to the Indigenous Moken, whose lives are deeply intertwined with the marine environment. However, in the first EHIA hearing presentation (OTP, 2023a), the sacred mosque on Ko Son was merely labeled as an "unnamed mosque." Furthermore, none of the official documents recognized the Moken as an Indigenous people of Ranong.

Further, the second round of public hearing documents, dated July 2024, listed only "polychaetes and sand fish" as benthic fauna in the area. During the second hearing, although community members pointed out that this description failed to encompass the full ecological, economic, and cultural significance of the area, they also proactively provided supplementary information regarding their relationship to the area, including details on marine resources, fishing, tourism, and livelihood practices (see figure 5 and 6). The community's statements are supported by scientific data from government agencies, such as Plathong (2022), and more notably the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (2024), which conducted an assessment of marine and coastal resources in Ranong Province in 2023. The study found that the area's marine resources were in good condition, with seawater quality rated as excellent. Rare marine species such as dolphins and dugongs were also observed. Additionally, the Marine Fisheries Research and Development Division (2023), identified the area as a key fishing ground with a diverse range of marine species, including blue swimming crabs, black crabs, squid, shrimp, and fish (see figure 6).

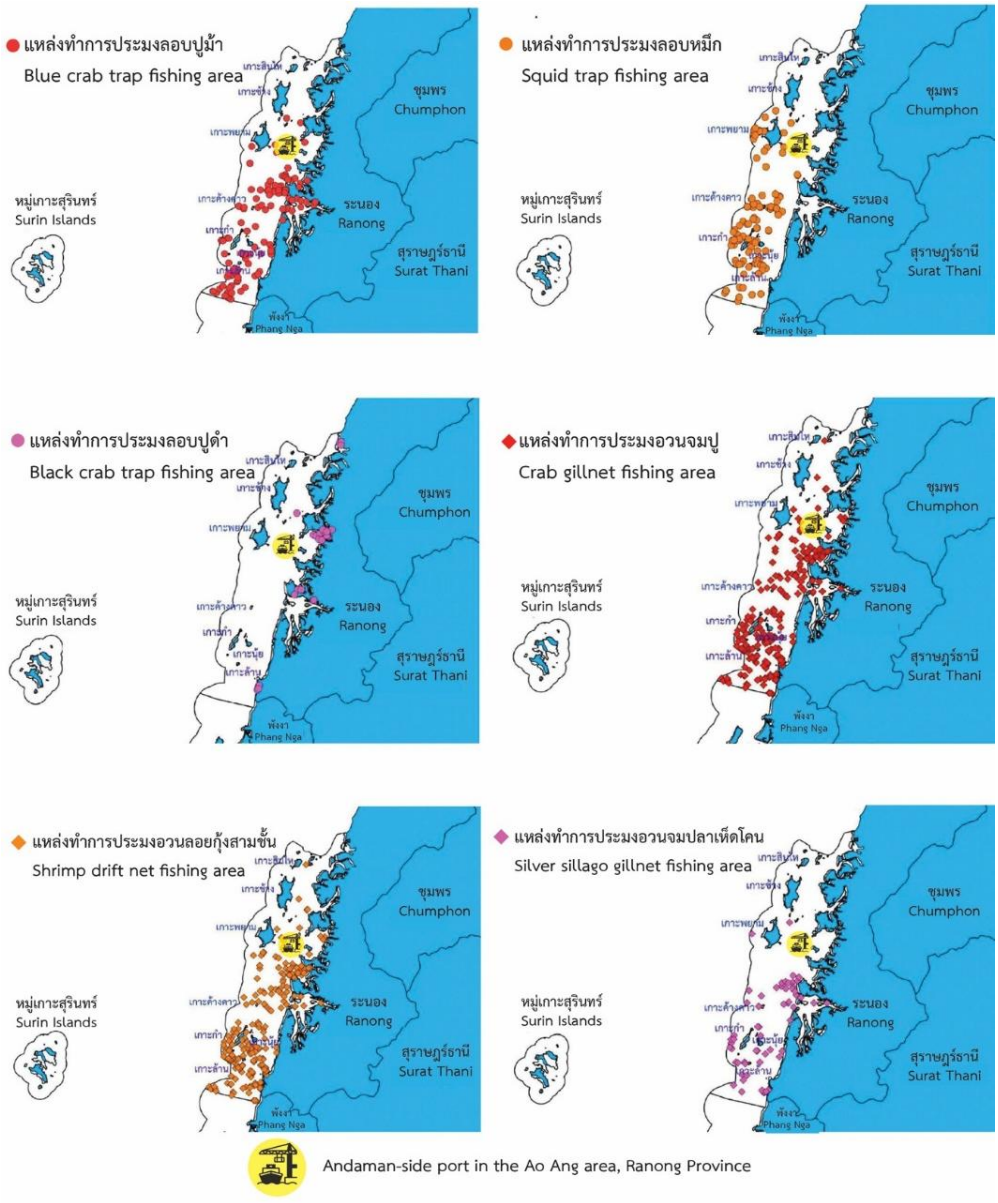
However, this information was organized under the section 'Concerns, Comments, and Recommendations,' without being formally acknowledged as knowledge pertinent to policy decisions. This omission underscores the unequal epistemic status between local knowledge and the technical expertise derived from state-contracted consultancy, revealing a systemic undervaluation of indigenous knowledge in the decision-making process.

Figure 5 Tourism map and the location of Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port



Source: Plathong (2022)

Figure 6 Sources of marine resources in the vicinity of Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port



Source: Marine Fisheries Research and Development Division (2023)

Moreover, the draft EHIA report as of July 2024 (OTP, 2024a), which discusses the first phase of port development involving dredging and land reclamation over 11,287.5 rai, states only that ‘the benthic organisms in the dredging zone include polychaetes of the Capitellidae, Nephtyidae, and Spionidae

families,' and frames the environmental impact as 'loss of benthic biomass, which may affect the food chain of marine species during the dredging process.' This mode of presenting environmental data does not merely downplay ecological value—it also reflects an assessment process lacking a holistic understanding of community life and its deep interdependence with the marine ecosystem.

This failure to integrate local knowledge and potential into policymaking reflects not only the institutional limitations of centralized development but also erodes public trust. This has resulted in growing resistance to both the impact assessment process and the state's development agenda. During the third public hearing on the overall Landbridge project on May 19, 2025, participants openly criticized the project and the state's study process. On May 20, civil society held a parallel forum to present community perspectives. By May 21, public protests escalated to the point where government agencies could not proceed with their planned activities. This series of events illustrates a discursive confrontation between the state—viewing land and sea merely as 'resources'—and communities who perceive these spaces as 'life,' 'community,' and 'place-based livelihood' composed of integrated ecological, economic, social, and cultural elements.

From the perspective of place-based development and spatial justice, the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge project treats space primarily as an economic instrument rather than as a foundation for participatory policymaking. The project lacks meaningful decentralization, fails to recognize local knowledge, and excludes community capital from the policy design process. Especially given Ranong's resource-dependent economy and the multidimensional significance of Ao Ang to local communities, this policy process—which neglects meaningful engagement with local resources and socio-cultural values—renders the province particularly vulnerable.

In addition, the draft Southern Economic Corridor Act centralizes authority in the SEC Policy Committee (OTP, 2023b), which is composed of representatives from national agencies and primarily aims to facilitate investment. This structure excludes local participation in both area management and spatial determination. It reflects a form of centralization through legal and institutional exceptions; wherein structural power is reallocated to dominant capital groups via concession-based mechanisms. Such arrangements exemplify authoritarian development and inherently undermine spatial justice, risking the reproduction of systemic problems previously seen in border special economic zones and the Eastern Economic Corridor (International Commission of Jurists, 2020).

7. The Strategic Territorial Selection, Socio-Political Dynamics, Everyday Politics and Community Mobilization in Ranong

The Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge, under SEC, has been conceived around the strategic use of Ranong's geographic position as a logistical node to

support large-scale industrial expansion. While the state envisions this physical terrain as a conduit for growth, local communities have long relied on the same geographical and ecological assets to sustain a resource-based economy centered on conservation and shared use—through fisheries, agriculture, tourism, services, and cross-border economic exchanges. This divergence illustrates that people in Ranong maintain a deep and multifaceted relationship with their environment, grounded in local livelihoods and ecological stewardship. It also reveals the structural vulnerability of the province under development models that prioritize macro-industrial growth over community-based economic systems.

Moreover, Ranong presents clear physical limitations to large-scale infrastructure and industrial development. Over 80% of the province consists of forested and mountainous terrain (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023), with insufficient flat land to support industrial zones or logistics hubs. These geographic constraints are exemplified by the failure of the Ranong Multipurpose Port project, which, since its launch in the late 1990s, has seen little to no commercial use. The primary reason lies in the state's inability to develop complementary infrastructure such as hinterland industrial areas or effective transport linkages to other economic zones in Thailand. A feasibility study conducted in the early 2010s on connecting the Andaman coast to the Gulf of Thailand—via a route from Ranong's multipurpose port to Chumphon—explicitly noted the severe limitations posed by the terrain for such infrastructure development.

Nevertheless, the state has continued to prioritize Ranong as a target area, shifting the project's site from the multipurpose port to the Ao Ang. This insistence, despite known geographic and developmental challenges, underscores what Jessop (2002) terms a politically selective logic of spatial development. Rather than being chosen on the basis of actual spatial capacity, Ranong appears to have been designated as a 'terminal geography' or 'a final fallback location'—a site where the project could still be advanced after other locations in the South had systematically rejected or resisted such mega-project proposals. This decision reflects not merely spatial strategy, but a deeper political calculus aimed at preserving the continuity of national policy agendas despite local opposition.

Ranong Province, with its relatively small population and socially centralized structure, presents conditions conducive to top-down development. The dominant local power groups—including bureaucratic, political, and business elites— are closely interconnected, enabling the state to easily invoke the discourse of 'neutral development' as a means of legitimization. This concentration of power also facilitates centralized control and project management, allowing state agencies to implement initiatives with minimal contestation.

The province's governance landscape is shaped by a tightly woven network of patronage that bridges the national and local levels. This system is

exemplified by the relationship between so-called "Ban Yai" [literally 'big house'] and "Ban Lek" [literally 'small house']—a configuration not limited to interpersonal ties, but rather indicative of a deeply embedded political network. This patron-client structure permeates multiple spheres, including resource management, policy communication, and the regulation of political space. It enables the central state to consolidate authority and suppress dissent, while maintaining an appearance of consensus and development legitimacy within the province.

Ban Yai is commonly understood among local residents to refer to a national-level political leader who has played a pivotal role in advancing the Landbridge project and in proposing the draft SEC Act. This figure is socially connected to the province—locally referred to as a "Khuey Ranong" [literally 'Ranong son-in-law']—a symbolic status that reinforces perceived legitimacy. In contrast, the Ban Lek] refers to a local figure affiliated with the same political party who has been elected to hold a national political position. This political network, linking national leadership with local representation, has extended its influence downward by supporting electoral politics and local administration at all levels.

Ban Lek plays a crucial intermediary role in translating policy intent from Ban Yai into messages that resonate with the local electorate. In the context of the Landbridge project, Ban Lek—who command strong local trust—have been instrumental in shaping the policy's public image. They frequently employ rhetoric grounded in local pride and territorial dignity, asserting that the very selection of Ranong as the project site is proof of its value: if the project were not beneficial, there would be no reason to choose this province in the first place.

Beyond the centralized political dynamics and indirect control exerted from the national to the local level, Ranong's social fabric is also marked by tightly knit interpersonal relations—particularly through kinship, business networks, and long-standing social ties. A telling example lies in everyday interactions: when elders in Ranong greet younger individuals, the question is rarely "What is your name?" but rather "Whose child are you?" or "Are you so-and-so's son or daughter?" Such greetings reflect a worldview in which social identity is fundamentally relational, anchored in networks of lineage and affiliation.

This embedded social structure makes Ranong a society characterized by closeness without symmetrical power relations. These intimate but hierarchical networks have profound implications for public participation, particularly on contentious issues like the Landbridge project, which involves overlapping interests and power structures at both local and national levels. In such a context, the consolidation of public acceptance for the project tends to occur more smoothly, while dissent or criticism becomes highly sensitive—often

circumscribed by the dense web of local relationships and power configurations that constrain the space for opposition.

Given these dynamics, Ranong may not have been selected solely for its geographic features that could be tailored to fit the project's design. Rather, its selection reflects a strategic outcome driven by the state's desire to avoid social resistance. This strategy proved effective in the initial phases of project implementation. As observed during public consultations, Ranong residents displayed a spectrum of responses to the Landbridge—ranging from support and concern to outright opposition. However, those in favor of the project emerged as the most vocal participants in public hearings. Meanwhile, individuals who expressed concern tended to do so cautiously, often framing their questions in terms of confidence in mitigation measures rather than challenging the project itself. Those opposed to the project largely chose not to speak out publicly or participate openly in consultation forums.

This socio-political atmosphere not only limits the visibility and viability of dissent within local spaces of deliberation, but also directly affects the limits of field inquiry, demanding that a researcher navigates such terrain with heightened sensitivity to ethical concerns, political nuances, and the safety of informants—prioritizing these considerations over the pursuit of data acquisition. A researcher must carefully adapt their methodologies to the local context, employing techniques that open space for the voices of those with less power to be heard, while placing the safety, comfort, and well-being of informants above the imperative to obtain data for research objectives. This entails not only methodological flexibility, but also an acute awareness of the complex interplay of power and social inequality that shapes patterns of expression and participation in policy processes.

This cultural disposition was echoed in remarks from local residents who opposed the project but chose to remain silent in public hearings. One noted, "Ranong is a small town— we must focus on managing relationships." Another explained, "This has always been the nature of Ranong people since our ancestors' time. The Chinese call it 'Seng Li'—we're business-minded, not confrontational. If problems arise, we'll help one another. If not, we just go on making a living."

Another clear example lies in the behavior of most informants in this study who expressed disagreement with or criticism of the Landbridge project. Many chose to provide information anonymously or without disclosing their identity. Some explained that they did not want others to know their views on the project, while others expressed concern that their opinions might conflict with those of others in the community, potentially leading to future social tensions.

In addition, some individuals in this group believed that the government would not be able to move the project forward in practice. As a result, they chose to preserve social relationships through silence—allowing studies and related activities to proceed without interference, while holding on to the hope that once

the studies conclude, the project would quietly fade away. In this view, only the research budgets would be disbursed to relevant agencies, without any actual construction or development taking place.

Others openly admitted that whenever they heard mention of the 'Landbridge project,' they instinctively searched for reasons to reassure themselves: "It will never happen," "The Thai government doesn't have the budget," or "Foreign investors aren't really interested." These self-consoling narratives functioned as coping mechanisms—ways to suppress dissent beneath a veneer of silence in order to maintain social cohesion amid political uncertainty.

In this light, the silence of Ranong's residents—particularly those in urban areas—who often refrain from overt opposition or avoid familiar forms of political mobilization, may be misinterpreted by the state and external observers as a sign of consent or acceptance of the Landbridge project. However, sustained ethnographic observation of everyday social actions and patterns of everyday resistance suggests otherwise (Scott, 1985). The absence of direct expression among Ranong's people should not be equated with acquiescence. Rather, it reflects a dual strategy: for the middle class, it is a means of preserving interpersonal and community relationships; for the disenfranchised, it is a survival mechanism under a deeply asymmetrical power structure dominated by the state, capital interests, and local elites.

Within this context, silence in Ranong carries latent social energy—a form of resistance that aligns with what James C. Scott (1985) conceptualizes as the weapons of the weak. It quietly undermines policy legitimacy while enabling the emotional accumulation of dissent, which may eventually crystallize into visible collective action. As residents increasingly experience the exclusion of their voices and the denial of their rights in policy processes, such silences may transform into political energy, manifesting in grassroots actions such as informal community discussions, which build local capacity for questioning in official hearings; or intercommunity dialogues with external speakers, which help expand public awareness about legal rights and lessons from development struggles in other regions.

Given that participatory processes have taken the form of 'ritualistic participation'—combined with the entrenched constraints of local socio-political structures and patronage systems—citizens in Ranong, with support from external researchers and legal rights networks, have expanded their roles beyond formal public hearings into various forms of 'social action'. These range from informal conversations among trusted individuals, gradually broadening into peer-group discussions, and eventually evolving into community dialogues that create spaces for collective learning. Initiatives include small-scale forums involving trusted participants and external speakers. Beyond local group discussions, these exchanges have extended to debates over conflicts of interest in land transactions—for example, identifying which political groups were involved in

the purchase of land parcels located near the project site. Such conversations also encompassed the informal grouping of local political candidates to reveal their affiliations with broader political factions, thereby influencing voting decisions; while these actions may not have determined election outcomes, they nonetheless challenged the legitimacy of entrenched power groups.

In terms of direct contestation against the Landbridge project, actions have included active participation in public hearings and collaboration with networks from Chumphon Province. These efforts involved the mobilization of community-based data to counter state and expert narratives in EHIA hearings, the submission of petitions to relevant agencies, and engagement in symbolic expressions of dissent. One striking example is the contestation over the meaning of Ao Ang, locally known as Don Ta Phaew. This contestation highlights how Ranong's silence does not equate to submission. Instead, it reveals a form of resistance through knowledge politics, where local actors— including conservationists, ecotourism entrepreneurs, and small- scale fishers— challenge state- led representations of space. While the state designates Ao Ang as the starting point of the Landbridge on the Andaman coast—framing it as 'Western Gateway' and constructing an EHIA narrative that downplays its ecological and socio- cultural significance— local residents reclaim the space by asserting its cultural, ecological, and historical meanings.

Through interviews and public hearings, locals have reaffirmed that Don Ta Phaew is not merely empty space: it is a vital fishery zone for small- scale fishers, a node for ecotourism, a life space for the indigenous Moken community, and a sacred site for Muslim. The resulting conflict is not simply about competing economic uses of the space but constitutes a discursive confrontation—a struggle over identity, meaning, and spatial rights in the face of state- led re- signification to justify development. Further evidence of local mobilization emerged on August 16, 2023, when a spontaneous coalition called the 'Network of People Affected by the Chumphon–Ranong Landbridge' submitted a formal letter of opposition to the organizing agency of the Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port EHIA public hearing (Phase 1). This marked the first public protest in the project's target area and was the result of collaboration among Ranong civil society, a researcher, and lawyer from the Community Resource Centre Foundation, who had been organizing discussion forums across Ranong and Chumphon.

Following this act of resistance, the movement diversified, giving rise to several groups with different strategies. While some engaged in public advocacy, the core Ranong network continued grassroots engagement— disseminating information, building alliances, and supporting resource- sharing among more openly mobilized groups, including actions during the May 19–21, 2025, EHIA public hearing for the Landbridge project. These forms of organizing reflect a growing spatial politics of resistance—struggles not only to address the impacts of development but also to reclaim learning spaces that the state neglects. They

foster a collective awareness around rights, citizenship, and the defense of undervalued local resources in national policy-making processes.

In sum, the selection of Ranong as the target site for the Landbridge project is not the product of neutral, technocratic planning. It is an outcome of spatial politics embedded in Thailand's centralized decision-making structures. The relocation of the project from one region to another does not reflect state responsiveness to public concerns, but rather a strategic search for territories perceived to be more governable—thus rendering Ranong a terminal geography burdened with a policy rejected elsewhere.

While Ranong's people may not have mounted large-scale or visible protests at the provincial level (as of May 2025, when field data collection was concluded), it would be overly simplistic to interpret this as uniform consent or support. On the contrary, the silence observed is interwoven with subterranean activity—networks, information gathering, and strategic readiness to respond. Although this article cannot predict whether Ranong's civil society will eventually bring about policy change, particularly as the Landbridge continues to advance toward implementation, it nonetheless reveals that silence in Ranong is not passivity. It is the foundation upon which diverse forms of grassroots mobilization are emerging, and it remains a potent force for enabling meaningful action from below.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations from the study of the Ranong Landbridge

The Landbridge project, initiated under the Southern Seaboard (SSB) and carried forward through the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), has been promoted at the policy level as a key mechanism for regional development decentralization— particularly through the strategic utilization of coastal geographies. However, a structural analysis of policy processes, spatial planning, and implementation mechanisms reveals that the project, especially in its current SEC configuration, exhibits characteristics of centralized expansion rather than genuine decentralization.

The project's repeated relocation over the past three decades—from Krabi–Khanom (opposed by agriculture, conservation, and tourism sectors), to Tab Lamu–Sichon (misaligned with national energy strategies), Thai Muang–Sichon (a tsunami-risk zone), Pak Bara–Songkhla 2 (met with strong civic resistance), and most recently Ao Ang (Ranong)–Laem Rio (Chumphon)—demonstrates the lack of alignment between development plans and the actual capacities of the targeted areas. It also exposes the structural failure of a planning paradigm that lacks comprehensive assessments of engineering feasibility, economic viability, social suitability, and environmental sustainability.

Public participation, primarily through the Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA), has been technocratic in practice—relying on centrally managed knowledge production and symbolic hearings rather than genuine deliberation. Relocation becomes a procedural workaround, resulting in redundant expenditure and cumulative burdens for local communities.

A key critique is the persistence of strategic centralism, privileging geography for industrial expansion while stripping away social, cultural, and ecological capital that underpins local economies. The selection of Ao Ang—known locally as Don Ta Phaew—as a deep-sea port site illustrates this. Ao Ang sustains small-scale fisheries, tourism, and one of the region's most biodiverse mangrove ecosystems. It also holds deep cultural and spiritual significance, including Ko Son's Mosque and the tomb of Toh Yiseem, as well as serving as a vital space for the indigenous Moken. Transforming Ao Ang for industrial use disregards these forms of territorial capital and undermines tourism- and conservation-based economies that have long sustained the area. In this sense, the project reflects a profound misalignment with place-based development (Barca, McCann, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012) and spatial justice principles (Soja, 2010).

In Ranong's socio-political context—characterized by close-knit yet asymmetrical power relations—everyday politics (Scott, 1985; 1990) provides a critical lens. Communities exercise agency through subtle acts: negotiation, selective participation, withholding information, or quiet non-cooperation. Such infrapolitics' can safeguard autonomy and livelihoods under structural vulnerability. Silence or apparent consent may thus be tactical, shaped by patron–client ties and political brokerage, rather than apathy.

For research and policy, integrating everyday politics means: 1) Engaging with informal arenas where negotiation occurs beyond formal forums; 2) Adopting methods that create safe spaces for marginalized voices through trust-building and knowledge co-production.

Place-based development must therefore be treated as a political and relational process shaped by history, identity, ecology, and power—not merely technical spatial optimization. In provinces like Ranong, this requires dismantling centralized frameworks that marginalize local agency. Without such restructuring, 'place' risks becoming rhetorical, disconnected from community realities.

Ultimately, the study argues that public policy analysis must go beyond centralized decision-making structures to account for the local power dynamics that critically shape policy outcomes. Spatially just development, therefore, cannot be achieved through policy reform alone; it requires a fundamental restructuring of political space to enable communities to exercise meaningful agency over development trajectories in their own territories.

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