



Place-based Development as an Alternative to Infrastructure Mega-Projects: A Political Economy Perspective and Everyday Resistance in Ranong Province, Southern Thailand*

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ABSTRACT

Ranong Province, located in southern Thailand, is endowed with rich and diverse coastal and marine ecosystems, traditional economy reliant on artisanal fisheries, and a service sector rooted in eco-tourism and health-based industries, has been designated as a strategic site for national-scale infrastructure development. However, this top-down spatial designation reflects a development trajectory primarily shaped by macroeconomic imperatives, rather than by ecological, socio-economic, or cultural specificities of the area. Drawing from a political economy perspective, this trajectory reveals how centralized state planning privileges capital accumulation and investment-led growth while marginalizing local needs, knowledge, and livelihoods. Moreover, by incorporating the everyday politics, this paper highlights how local communities experience, contest, and negotiate development interventions in their daily interactions with state institutions and local's sociopolitical context. This paper advocates for a place-based development approach and place-sensitive strategies in shaping sustainable development trajectories for Ranong Province. Such an approach not only acknowledges local socio-ecological contexts but also recognizes the agency of subaltern actors in co-producing more just and equitable futures. The analysis is situated within broader concerns of community rights, spatial equity, and the capacity of local actors to meaningfully participate in defining their own development pathways.

Keywords: place-based development; environmental politics; political economy; everyday politics; Ranong Province

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Introduction

Although Thailand began to increasingly adopt the concept of sustainable development in the 1980s, the capitalist, growth-oriented framework has remained the dominant guiding principle in state policy formulation. These developments reflect Thailand's integration into the global economic structure driven by capital and free markets (Luengaramsri, 2021; UNESCAP, 2017). The Landbridge project has been proposed as an infrastructure mega-project intended to propel Thailand into a new era of prosperity. In fact, the project has undergone several relocations over the past three decades under the Seaboard Development Plan (SSB). Currently, it is promoted under the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) framework and geopolitically aligned with initiatives such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reflecting regional competition among global powers.

This paper focuses on Ranong Province, located in southern Thailand along the Andaman coast. Ranong is one of Thailand's least densely populated provinces, with a population of fewer than 200,000 people (Ranong Provincial Statistical Office, 2025). It is home to a diverse mix of Thai, Chinese, Indian, and Malay residents, indigenous groups such as the Mokan, and various ethnic groups from Myanmar. Ranong's economy is rooted in natural-resource-based sectors—fisheries and agriculture—complemented by cross-border trade, a growing eco- and wellness-based tourism industry (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023).

Designated as a strategic site for the Landbridge initiative, Ranong now faces a dramatic economic and ecological reorientation through the planned construction of a deep-sea port at Ao Ang Cape and an interregional logistics corridor linking the Andaman Sea to the Gulf of Thailand. Residents and critics argue that the project is driven by narrow macroeconomic imperatives, sidelining local livelihoods, environmental risks, and public health. The designated port zone directly overlaps with fragile marine ecosystems vital to biodiversity, artisanal fisheries, and tourism. The influx of industrial activities threatens to displace tourism and wellness operators—the backbone of Ranong's service economy.

The examples from the Map Ta Phut Industrial Complex in Rayong Province, along with other development areas, reflect the limitations of a state-led and mega-development model that prioritizes economic indicators while neglecting

principles of environmental justice and the rights of communities to participate in shaping development trajectories. This has resulted in severe consequences, including soil, water, and air pollution; conflicts over water resources; and chronic health problems among local populations (Rayong Provincial Administrative Court, 2009). While the government may highlight ‘economic success’ in parts of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC)—as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), local testimonies have painted a markedly different picture.

From a political economy perspective, the Landbridge can be interpreted as a product of centralized policymaking shaped by institutional power dynamics, transnational capital, and geopolitical competition (Jessop, 2002). This top-down approach often marginalizes local voices and redistributes spatial resources to serve national and global agendas. Meanwhile, the responses of Ranong’s civil society reveal forms of everyday resistance—subtle yet powerful acts such as strategic silence, symbolic gestures, local media production, and grassroots alliances—that challenge the legitimacy of externally imposed development models (Scott, 1985). These dynamics underscore the importance of integrating both structural analysis and lived experiences in understanding contested development trajectories in Ranong.

This paper proposes a place-based alternative and sustainable development approach for Ranong. As a province known for its rich natural resources and diverse environmental assets, the economy heavily depends upon these factors, particularly in the sectors of fisheries, agriculture, tourism, and services. Among these, the tourism and service sectors form the core of Ranong’s productive base, especially in the areas of eco-tourism and health tourism.

The concept of Place-Based Development and Spatial Justice

Place-based development presents a critical alternative to conventional centralized development paradigms that concentrate investment and decision-making in capital or industrial hubs, often at the expense of peripheral or rural regions. By emphasizing territorial diversity, decentralization, and meaningful local participation, this approach seeks to reduce regional inequality and advance spatial justice. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model, place-based development calls for policies grounded in the specific socio-ecological and

cultural contexts of localities (Pike et al., 2017).

This perspective challenges the Growth Pole Theory, originally proposed by Perroux, which posits that economic growth should begin in dynamic urban centers—such as ports or industrial zones—and then diffuse outward via economic linkages (Varela-Vázquez & de Francisco, 2024). In practice, this theory gained prominence during the 1960s–1980s, influencing policy strategies like China’s Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, Latin American industrial corridors, and Thailand’s Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate (Luengaramsri, 2021). However, empirical evidence has revealed that such approaches often exacerbate regional disparities, as core areas draw resources from surrounding zones without creating sufficient spillover benefits—resulting in backwash effects (Fujita & Thisse, 2013).

While Growth Pole strategies may assist macroeconomic growth and infrastructure planning, they often fail to accommodate local complexity or foster equitable outcomes. Conversely, place-based approaches foreground the role of territorial capital, including natural resources, human skills, and social networks, as the foundation for policy design (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Barca, 2009). They also align with the notion of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and draw from place-sensitive policy frameworks that seek a middle ground between place-neutrality and deeply localized development (World Bank, 2009).

Nonetheless, place-based development is not without limitations. It often faces challenges related to insufficient data, weak local institutions, and limited administrative capacity—particularly in highly centralized bureaucratic systems. In Thailand, where the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) retains strong authority over regional planning, local participation often becomes symbolic rather than substantive. Megaprojects such as the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) and the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), including the Landbridge initiative, reflect a continued reliance on centralized, infrastructure-led development that sidelines local potential and community knowledge. Thus, there remains an ongoing tension between top-down efficiency and bottom-up inclusion (Barca, 2009; Pike et al., 2017). This tension underscores the need to embed place-based strategies within broader political structures, where local participation is not only symbolic but influential in shaping development pathways.

The Concept of Political Economy and the Politics of Everyday Life

To further understand these dynamics, the political economy framework provides a critical lens to examine how development policies are shaped by asymmetrical power relations and institutional arrangements within capitalist systems. Rather than treating public policy as a neutral or technical exercise, this perspective views it as the outcome of negotiations among the state, capital, and civil society—often marked by unequal influence (Lindblom, 1977; Leftwich, 2008). In many developing countries, the state frequently functions to serve the interests of business elites, while development agendas are influenced by global financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF (Jessop, 2002).

Thailand's Landbridge initiative is embedded within these broader political economy dynamics, where national agencies, global powers seeking to expand their presence in the Indo-Pacific, and foreign investors collectively drive the project agenda with minimal regard for local voices or ecological vulnerability. Simultaneously, local political structures—configured as state–capital alliances—play a key role in suppressing dissent and facilitating the smooth implementation of top-down decisions.

To complement this macro-level critique, James C. Scott's concept of everyday politics draws attention to micro-level resistance and the subtle forms of negotiation through which marginalized communities navigate structural constraints (Scott, 1985, 1990). These forms of political agency are enacted through daily practices, cultural expressions, and alternative knowledge systems. In this way, the politics of development is not limited to formal institutions but is deeply embedded in community life and local meaning-making processes.

Together, the frameworks of place-based development and political economy offer a multidimensional lens to analyze spatial development. Place-based strategies bring attention to context, participation, and equity, while political economy situates these efforts within broader power structures and historical dynamics. Meanwhile, the politics of everyday life reveals how resistance and negotiation occur within communities, challenging imposed narratives and asserting alternative visions.

This integrated framework is particularly relevant for analyzing contested development projects such as Thailand's Landbridge initiative, where centralized

planning, geopolitical interests, and local resistance intersect. It enables a critical inquiry into not only who decides development, but also whose knowledge counts, who benefits, and who bears the cost—questions central to advancing spatial justice and democratic development.

Related Documents

The book “Southern Development Plan Under the Shadow of Industry” by Decharat Sukkamned and Kuametha Ruekpornpipat (2009) analyzes the Southern Development Plan by structurally questioning the SSB policymaking process, highlighting its disconnects from the actual economic base and the aspirations of local communities. As a result, such development may lead to structural changes in the local economy without adequately considering the long-term impacts. Within the framework of spatial justice, this work highlights the unequal distribution of power and benefits from development, especially when considering lessons from Rayong Province. Although Rayong has the highest per capita gross provincial product (GPP) in the country, its residents face severe social, environmental, and health impacts.

From the perspective of place-based development, the authors propose that regional development should be grounded in the “problems, potentials, and aspirations of local communities.” This approach not only addresses sustainability but also restores local empowerment by allowing communities to play a meaningful role in shaping their own futures through the creation of development options that align with the specific economic, social, and cultural contexts of the area.

The study titled “Community Rights and Impacts from Development Projects in the South” (National Human Rights Commission of Thailand [NHRCT], 2012) was conducted in response to numerous complaints submitted to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), particularly concerning violations of community rights resulting from the implementation of various projects under the Southern Seaboard Development Plan (SSB). According to data from the Subcommittee on Community Rights and Resource Bases of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), there have been over dozens complaints related to the SSB plan.

The study therefore focused on analyzing the community rights situation

in these areas, employing document analysis, provincial-level workshops, and stakeholder consultations. The findings reveal that the top-down implementation of projects under the SSB plan has resulted in violations of community rights across multiple dimensions, which can be categorized into four key issues: 1) Right to Self-Determination – Development policies and project plans are predetermined without opportunities for local people to participate in shaping development paths that align with their own potentials and ways of life; 2) Right to Livelihood – External development raises concerns about impacts on natural resources and agricultural land that serve as the economic base for local communities; 3) Right to Access Information – Although the SSB plan is systematically designed in advance, local people lack transparent access to critical information; and Right to Participation and Local Resource Management – Public consultation processes are limited both formally and substantively, resulting in community voices being excluded from policy decision-making.

When viewed through the lens of spatial justice, this information reflects a development structure that benefits the industrial sector and central policymakers, while the rights of local people in target areas are diminished—in terms of access to resources, livelihood, and participation in shaping the future of their own communities.

Based on these findings, the research team recommends a review of the plan to include public participation from the earliest stages of policymaking, the establishment of “meaningful participation” processes which would serve as the foundation for development that is both sustainable and just, in terms of spatial equity and rights.

The book “The Emergence of Pollution Cities in the South: Will the South Become a Food Production City or a Pollution Base?” (Thailand Future Writing Network and Southern People’s Assembly, 2021; edited by Prasitchai Noonuan) is considered one of the most comprehensive studies compiling data on development projects in the South, which reflects structural problems within a centralized policy approach that focuses on economic growth without considering spatial justice. The book recommends that the state reconsider the centrally dictated development approach and instead adopt a participatory planning process linked to the area’s potential (place-based development) through three

main strategies of 1) Building upon agriculture and fisheries sectors, 2) Enhancing the capacity of small and medium-sized industries focused on product processing, and 3) Strengthening the tourism industry.

Methodological Approach and Research Methods

This research is grounded in a critical methodological stance (Rose, 1997) and draws from the perspective of activist research (Martinez, 2024), which views the research process not merely as a tool for academic knowledge production, but as a means of redistributing power and fostering democratic engagement. It recognizes knowledge as situated and co-produced, and seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized communities—especially those often excluded from official development narratives (Smith, 2012). The research design is therefore oriented towards co-production of knowledge, creating dialogic spaces where local actors—viewed as knowers—can articulate their lived experiences, contest hegemonic narratives, and propose alternative development pathways aligned with their specific socio-ecological contexts.

The study aims to contribute not only to academic critique but also to social transformation by supporting local agencies and political subjectivity. In doing so, it aligns with the principles of participatory justice and spatial justice, foregrounding the capacity of communities to define development futures on their own terms.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, guided by two interrelated approaches:

1. Documentary Research serves as a foundational method in this study. It involves an extensive review of theoretical literature, academic publications, policy documents, and digital archives. The study adopts an integrated analytical framework that combines place-based development with a strong emphasis on spatial justice. This allows for a critical interrogation of whether state-led development projects—such as the Landbridge—truly address local needs or merely reproduce centralized, growth-driven agendas. Documentary sources, including academic journals, news articles, theses, and government reports, are utilized to trace the shifting narratives and institutional rationales behind Ranong's developmental trajectory.

2. **Field Research** is designed to reflect the study's commitment to participatory and critical inquiry. The field study was conducted continuously between 2019 and 2025. The researcher began monitoring the policy from the moment the government approved, in principle, the development of the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) in 2019, and especially after the formal initiation of the Ao Ang-Laem Rio Landbridge project in 2021. In the initial phase of fieldwork, the researcher relied primarily on informal conversations with local residents, as well as participation in public activities related to the SEC, insofar as pandemic-related COVID-19 restrictions permitted. Although these early interactions did not yet constitute in-depth data collection, they served as a critical foundation for accumulating knowledge, building understanding, and establishing relationships necessary for accessing high-quality data in subsequent stages.

The final phase of in-depth fieldwork was conducted between November 2024 and May 2025 with a diverse range of stakeholders. In the Landbridge project—particularly within the EHIA process for the Ao Ang deep-sea port—the responsible agency defined the study area as a 3–5 kilometer radius from the designated construction site. However, the researcher contends that such spatial delimitation is overly narrow and does not fully capture the breadth of potential impacts or the spectrum of stakeholders affected by the project. The planned port site is situated along a coastal zone of ecological richness and high biodiversity, intricately connected to marine tourism ecosystems and a network of significant islands. These interlinked resources form a shared commons for fishers and residents throughout Ranong Province.

Accordingly, the researcher expanded the fieldwork scope using a relationship-to-the-project framework that incorporated both spatial and substantive dimensions, ensuring comprehensive representation of all relevant stakeholders. This multi-sited and processual approach enabled the researcher to capture the layered, evolving, and politically embedded dynamics of the Landbridge project as they unfolded at the community level, including:

- (1) Community members residing within the EHIA-defined boundary;
- (2) Communities located outside the 3–5 kilometer radius but considered proximate to the deep-sea port and situated along projected land-

and sea-based routes for transporting construction materials;

(3) Member and individuals whose livelihoods or professional responsibilities are connected to natural resource management, including small-scale and commercial fishers, tourism and service-sector operators, civil society groups, members of the general public, and provincial officials.

Field data collection employed the following methods:

- (1) In-depth interviews with 31 informants;
- (2) Five focus group discussions with 2–4 participants;
- (3) Five informal conversations, both individual and group-based, with 3–6 participants;
- (4) Eight informal dialogues combined with community observation;
- (5) One semi-formal meeting with approximately 30 participants.

The Landbridge: Geopolitical Strategy and the State–Capital Alliance

The Landbridge project is a development plan aimed at leveraging the geographical location of southern Thailand to enhance economic infrastructure. It consists of two key components:

(1) The development of an integrated transportation network—including deep-sea ports, motorways, railways, and pipelines—to connect the Gulf of Thailand with the Andaman Sea. This infrastructure is intended to facilitate the transport of crude oil and serve as an alternative transoceanic shipping route.

(2) The development of new economic zones to support the energy and petrochemical industries, which constitute Thailand's core industrial sectors. The primary production base for these industries is located in the Eastern Seaboard (ESB), now formally designated as the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). This area has received significant support from the Japanese government, and Japanese capital has consistently been the leading source of investment in the region since the 1970s.

The Landbridge project under the Southern Seaboard Development Plan (SSB) was initiated in the early 1990s by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), with both technical and financial support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Asian Development Bank

(ADB). Although the project claims to capitalize on southern Thailand's geographical advantages to develop a transoceanic shipping route, nearly all feasibility studies—conducted by NESDB (1992), the Ministry of Energy (2005), Dubai World (2009), and the Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning (OTP) in 2016 and 2023—conclude consistently that this route cannot compete with the Strait of Malacca. On the contrary, it is the oil pipeline and targeted industrial zones that are projected to serve as the main sources of revenue and as the key mechanisms for attracting port usage for both raw material imports and product exports, thereby making the overall infrastructure investment economically viable.

For this reason, the push for the Landbridge project may not be aimed solely at enhancing transportation connectivity. Rather, it reflects the strategic use of southern Thailand's geography in configuring logistics systems and infrastructure to benefit energy and industrial capital groups. Japan's involvement in the development process can also be interpreted as part of a long-term security strategy designed to support the expansion of investment networks from the eastern to the southern region of Thailand. At the same time, the geographical advantage of southern Thailand—linking the Gulf of Thailand with the Andaman Sea—aligns with broader regional and global logistics frameworks. It intersects with key economic cooperation initiatives, including the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), all of which play an increasingly influential role today (UNESCAP, 2017).

As discussed above, when the Landbridge project is analyzed through the lens of institutional and power-centered political economy, it becomes evident that, although the project is framed in terms of regional development and spatial redistribution, its implementation reflects a policy process driven by centralized power structures. It is primarily supported by domestic energy conglomerates, transnational industrial capital, and geopolitical competition embedded within the strategic context of the Indo-Pacific region. In this light, the Landbridge project is not merely a neutral, technocratically-driven policy, but rather constitutes a terrain of strategic selectivity (Jessop, 2002), in which actors at multiple levels—global, regional, national, and local—play active roles in shaping both the policy direction and its implementation processes.

‘Krabi–Khanom Landbridge’ under SSB marked the first attempt to implement the policy in 1993. However, it faced strong resistance from local communities engaged in agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, eventually leading to a relocation of the project to ‘Tab Lamu–Sichon Landbridge’. Japan continued to play a supporting role, notably through the construction of Highway No. 44. Nevertheless, the implementation slowed following the Asian financial crisis in 1997. The project was later revived in 2003 under the new name ‘Thai Muang–Sichon Energy Landbridge,’ with a focus on developing infrastructure to support the energy and petrochemical industries. However, the 2004 tsunami, which severely impacted the Andaman coast, led to the reassessment of Thai Muang as a high-risk disaster-prone area and resulted in the project being suspended once again (Ministry of Energy, 2004).

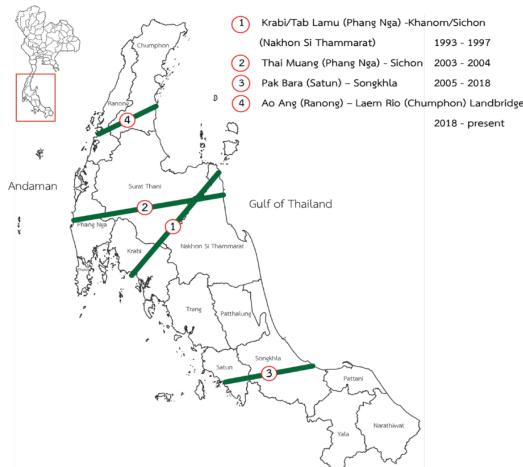
In the 2000s, the Thai state designated a new target area for the project, namely ‘Pak Bara–Songkhla 2 Landbridge’ corridor, which continued to receive support from Japan (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2008; Uabharadorn, 2011). However, the project faced widespread opposition from civil society groups in the region, particularly following the severe environmental crisis in Map Ta Phut. This crisis revealed the health and environmental costs borne by communities as a result of the expansion of the energy and petrochemical industries. The legal case filed in the Administrative Court (2009), which compelled the state to declare a pollution control zone and enforce stricter environmental regulations for industrial construction and expansion, became empirical evidence of the failure of state mechanisms and the limitations of growth-oriented policies that neglect social and environmental sustainability. From the perspective of civil society in the southern region, such events reinforced concerns that the Landbridge may represent a relocation of unsustainable industrial production from the Eastern region to the South (Thailand Future Writing Network, & Southern People’s Assembly, 2021).

In this context, the movement of civil society actors is not merely a resistance to a specific local project, but rather a challenge to the broader policy structure of state–capital alliances that prioritize economic growth while overlooking social and environmental costs. Although public opposition led the government to officially cancel the Pak Bara–Songkhla 2 Landbridge in 2018,

the underlying development vision was not abandoned. Instead, the project's geographic focus was shifted to the Ao Ang–Rio Landbridge, now framed under the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC). This relocation can be interpreted as a form of strategic recalibration, aimed at reviving the original project in a new area while retaining its industrial and logistics-oriented objectives. The growing influence of China through the BRI has further intensified the geopolitical dimensions of this renewed policy push.

In summary, the policy trajectory of the Landbridge project over the past three decades (Figure 1) reflects the collaborative operations of the state, capital, and global and regional economic powers in shaping spatial development policies that are not grounded in local needs. Rather, they are the result of strategic negotiations in the process of re-territorialization—physically, economically, socially, and politically—to serve the agendas of the state and industrial capital, particularly energy and petrochemical conglomerates that have consistently played a central role. This process also aligns with the geopolitical interests of Great Powers, while local communities have rarely figured into the initial equation of policy design. Nevertheless, the key lesson from the policy's history is that the legitimacy of such projects ultimately hinges on the decisions made by local populations. Resistance at the local level holds sufficient power to determine whether a centrally driven development project can, in practice, be realized on the ground.

Figure 1 Map of Proposed Landbridge Alignments under the 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

Living with the Sea and Structural Vulnerability under the Landbridge

Ranong has been designated as a target area for the Landbridge project on the Andaman coast. Ranong's economy is structured around two principal sectors: the **agricultural sector**—which includes fisheries, crop cultivation, and aquaculture—and the **non-agricultural sector**, comprising tourism, services, and cross-border trade. These economic activities are interconnected through networks of producers, entrepreneurs, service providers, laborers, and local businesses. Such territorial embeddedness fosters inclusive economic circulation and facilitates income distribution at the grassroots level.

From the interviews and focus group discussions, many informants expressed the view that the Landbridge project is misaligned with the spatial potential and economic structure of Ranong Province. Even among maritime

transport operators and cross-border traders—groups ostensibly poised to benefit from the growth of the logistics sector—there exists considerable skepticism regarding the project's actual economic prospects.

Those in tourism and service sector perceived that Ranong's strength is ecological system where local communities remain deeply dependent on natural resources. One of the tourism operators that Ranong is currently evolving into a wellness-oriented city, Wellness business has high potential and serves to add value to local resources, benefiting everyone. The province has already developed several supporting facilities, and tourism revenue in Ranong has steadily increase. If the area becomes a national or regional industrial zone, local capital cannot compete.

Similarly, a resort operator on Koh Phayam described Ranong's visitors as a segment of “quality tourists” seeking simplicity and close connection with nature. In the case of Koh Phayam, most tourists prefer to use services provided by small, community-based enterprises—such as homestays, local restaurants, or nature-based tours run by residents. This spending pattern does not result from market mechanisms or pricing strategies but reflects the values of a niche group of tourists who choose Ranong as a long-stay destination to escape urban chaos and live in harmony with the environment.

Artisanal or small-scale fishers would be the first group adversely affected by the Landbridge. The construction of the Ao Ang deep-sea port would disrupt tidal flows in the canals and significantly alter the marine ecosystem, posing direct threats to the community's way of life, where fishing is the main occupation and tourism is a vital supplementary livelihood. Local fishing practices would begin to shift as soon as construction preparations start. The initiatives of provincial conservation offices to support community-based tourism and the upgrading of local marine products would soon fail.

Small-scale fishers mentioned that the proposed Ao Ang deep-sea port would be constructed over an area locally known as “Don Ta Phaeo,” a site widely recognized among fishers for its exceptional biodiversity. A local fisher from the Koh Had Sai Dam community even described it as a “fishery treasure trove.” Some seasoned fishers provided a detailed ecological account of Don Ta Phaeo, describing it as a marine ecosystem with multilayered trophic interactions that plays

a crucial ecological role by buffering wave energy and attenuating tidal currents, transforming the sandbar into a natural nursery for marine life. The sea area is not merely a physical and biological space; it is deeply interwoven with the cultural, spiritual, and everyday lives of the surrounding communities. It encompasses multifaceted dimensions of local identity, including belief systems, customary practices, and socio-cultural attachments.

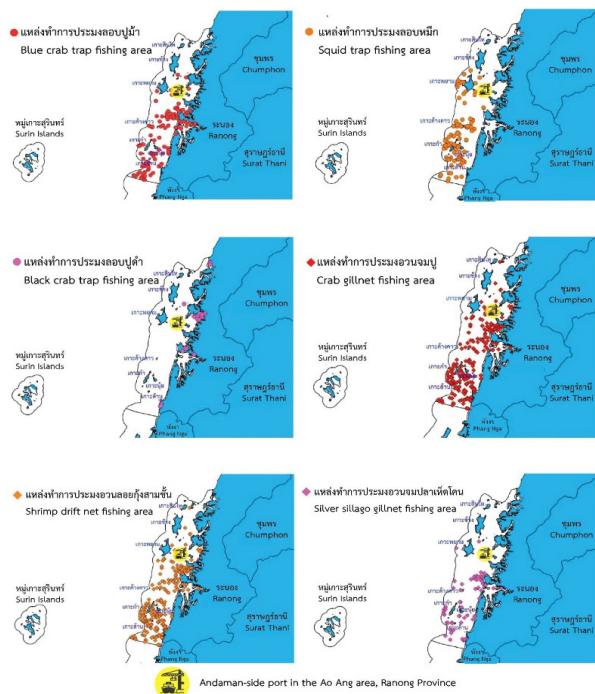
The community's statements are supported by scientific data from government agencies, such as Plathong, S. (2022), and more notably the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (2024), which conducted an assessment of marine and coastal resources in Ranong Province in 2023. The study found that the 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 Department of Fisheries (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 2).

The coastal and archipelagos surrounding the Ao Ang cape (figure 3)—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 who also operate community-based tourism activities 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.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the people of Ranong maintain a deep and enduring relationship with their environment. Although the province operates within a resource-based economy, the utilization of natural resources is not driven solely by economic returns. Rather, it reflects a mode of existence grounded in environmental cohabitation, moral values, and locally embedded norms governing communal resource management. Within this context, Ranong emerges as an especially vulnerable province in the face of the Landbridge project, which seeks to leverage its physical geography as a strategic node for logistics

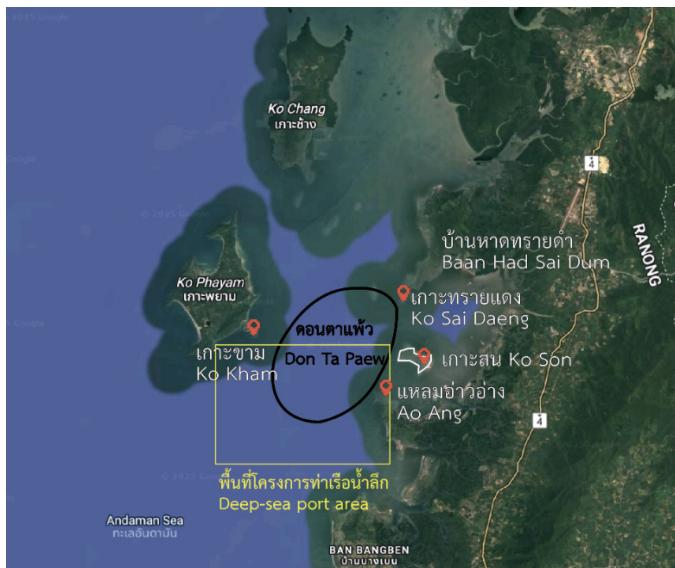
and large-scale industrial expansion. Particularly concerning is the proposed construction of a deep-sea port at Ao Ang cape—locally known as Don Ta Phaew—an ecologically rich coastal and marine area integral to the livelihoods of local communities. This area also underpins other key sectors of the provincial economy, notably tourism and services, which collectively represent the most valuable components of Ranong's economic structure.

Figure 2 Sources of marine resources in the vicinity of Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port



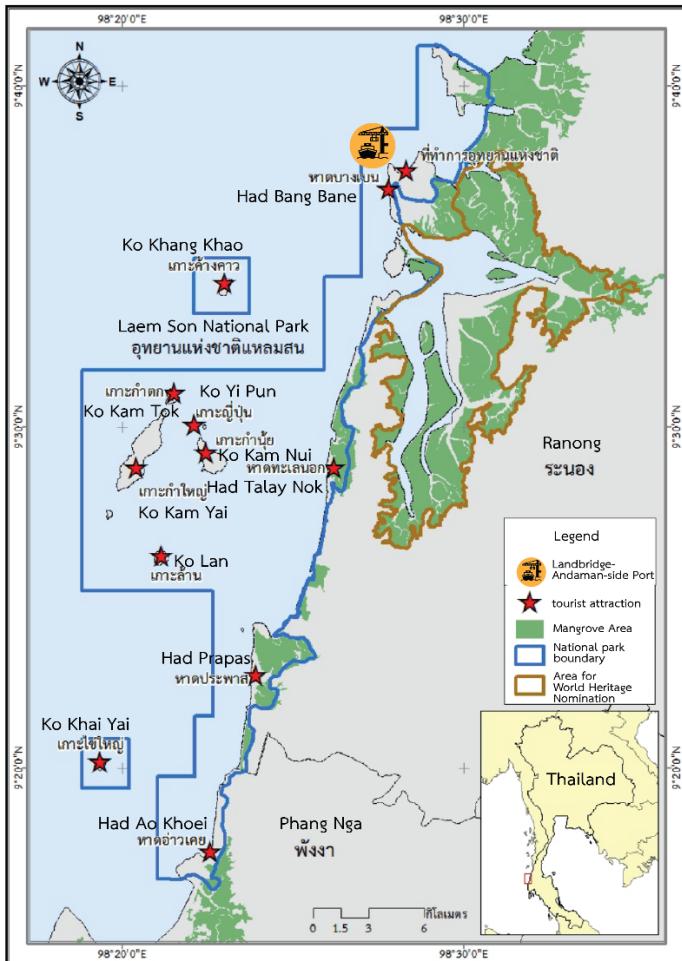
Source: Department of Fisheries. (2023). Provincial Governance in Chumphon and Ranong (Modified by the researcher)

Figure 3 Map of the Don Ta Phaew and its surrounding areas



Source: OTP. (2023a). Feasibility study, conceptual design, environmental impact assessment and business development model analysis for transport infrastructure development under Southern Economic Corridor development for transport connectivity between the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea project (Progress Report 2) (Modified by the researcher)

Figure 4 Tourism map and the location of Ao Ang Deep-Sea Port



Source: Plathong, S. (2022). The Proposal to Nominate the Andaman Sea Conservation Area as a Natural World Heritage Site. Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (Modified by the researcher)

Contestation between Local Livelihoods and Strategic Landbridge Development

Ranong Province possesses two interlinked spatial advantages that have long served as both the foundation of its economic structure and the historical driving force behind the city's development: (1) **its natural resources**, which simultaneously support ecological balance and economic activity; and (2) **its geographical location**, which facilitates the flow of people, commerce, and trade (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023). Historically, during the tin mining era, Ranong flourished due to its rich tin deposits and its role as a key port in regional trade routes. This was followed by the timber economy and subsequently the commercial fishing boom, which were later complemented by cross-border trade, further sustaining the province's economy (Navickmool & Likhitpornsawan, 2015; Nopparat, 1980; Kaoian, 1986).

As of 2025, Ranong has transitioned into a tourism and service-based economy, with natural resources now playing a central role in the province's highest-value economic sector. The region's rich natural assets—including forests, mangroves, mountains, coastal ecosystems, and high-quality, sulfur-free hot springs (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023)—constitute the foundation for wellness tourism and environmentally oriented recreation. Its coastal location also enables maritime connectivity to Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago, enhancing its appeal as a transboundary tourism destination (International Institute for Trade and Development, 2022). This transition—from extractive, resource-intensive industries to service- and tourism-led development—marks a significant economic restructuring, emphasizing sustainable management and value-added use of local resource endowments.

Ranong's tourism development is not only rooted in its geography and natural resources but also driven by cultural value creation. The province exemplifies creative tourism (Richards, 2011), that is grounded in local contexts and cultural capital. It has historically served as a center of human mobility, particularly among migrant laborers who fueled different phases of economic expansion. This long-standing in-migration has shaped Ranong into a multicultural city—reflected in its architecture, languages, cuisine, and everyday life—home to communities of Chinese, Burmese nationality, Thais (Southern, Central, and

Northeastern), Indian, and Malay heritage.

This local identity and cultural plurality have become key assets, attracting not only nature- and wellness-oriented tourists but also those seeking lifestyle- and culture-based experiences. Activities such as walking tours of the old town, local food tasting, and community-based tourism—including visits to traditional fishing villages—have gained increasing interest among both domestic and international travelers (Ranong Provincial Office, 2023; NESDC, 2019).

Ranong Province is also distinguished by its abundant natural resources—particularly its mangrove forests, which are among the most biodiverse in Thailand and the broader Asia-Pacific region—it has also been officially recognized through multiple conservation designations. These include its designation as the Ranong Biosphere Reserve, recognition as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance, and its inclusion within the proposed Andaman Marine Conservation Area currently under nomination for UNESCO World Natural Heritage status (Plathong, 2022). These resources are not only ecologically valuable but also serve as the economic foundation for the province's key production sectors, particularly agriculture, fisheries, services, and tourism. The connection between local resource use, employment, and consumption forms a deeply integrated and spatially grounded economic structure.

In this context, the Landbridge project—designed as an integrated multimodal transport corridor combining a deep-sea port, motorway, railway, and energy pipeline within a single route, alongside the planned development of commercial zones and industrial estates and the enactment of special legislation to promote targeted industries (Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning [OTP], 2023b)—stands in clear contradiction to the specific territorial context of Ranong. The province's socio-economic structure is deeply intertwined with its natural resource base, reflecting long-standing ecological dependencies and localized livelihood systems.

As of 2025, tourism and services constitute the most valuable production sector in Ranong, with strong prospects for continued expansion. This aligns with the 2023–2027 Provincial Development Plan, which positions Ranong as a high-quality tourism destination focused on health, nature, and local lifestyles. In contrast, commercial fisheries are in economic decline (Ranong

Provincial Office, 2023; NESDC, 2019). Small-scale fisheries, however, remain vital as a traditional livelihood for residents in coastal, island, canal-side, or river mouth communities.

The development orientation articulated in the provincial plan remains grounded in a vision of ‘balancing resource utilization with sustainable development.’ This stands in sharp contrast to the large-scale industrial and international logistics agenda embedded in the Landbridge project. Moreover, this top-down approach has marginalized the role of local stakeholders and grassroots participation in determining the province’s development future.

Understanding the structural policy processes underpinning the Landbridge project alongside an analysis of Ranong Province’s specific potential clearly reveals a disjunction between discourse and practice. Although the project is framed as part of Thailand’s policy to decentralize development to the regions, and despite the country’s formal endorsement of sustainable development principles since the 1990s, development trajectories continue to be shaped by a state-centric framework that centralizes power and prioritizes industrial expansion. Within this context, although the state’s master plans employ language such as ‘sustainable development of the Southern Economic Corridor’ to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

Mega infrastructure projects like Landbridge would present both opportunities and challenges requiring substantial investment and systemic adaptation. These concerns resonate with the World Bank (2020), which highlighted the vulnerability of local entrepreneurs when confronted with large-scale capital, particularly due to their limitations in access to finance, technology, and competitive capacity—factors that often place them at a disadvantage compared to better-equipped external investors. This issue also reflects broader lessons from the development of special economic zones in various countries. In line with observations by UNCTAD (2019), efforts to attract foreign direct investment through large-scale infrastructure and state-backed incentives frequently result in an uneven playing field, wherein local businesses struggle to compete due to disparities in capital, technological capabilities, and market networks.

Power Dynamics, Symbolic Silence, and Localized Resistance in Ranong

The Landbridge project is a centrally pre-determined policy. The relocation of the project site to Ranong Province was not based on the area's actual potential or specific local context but rather reflects the state's attempt to circumvent resistance from other regions. As a result, the public hearing process and the preparation of the EHIA report have taken the form of ritualistic procedures, merely to demonstrate the state's compliance with legal requirements. A clear example is the determination of the environmental impact assessment area within only a 3-5 kilometer radius of the deep-sea port construction site, despite the fact that Phase 1 of the project will involve dredging and land reclamation of approximately 10,371.98 rai in the Ao Ang area (OTP, 2024a).

Local knowledge concerning the relationship between communities and the sea, as well as sacred spaces, has been significantly devalued when compared to technical knowledge produced by state-contracted consulting firms. For example, the mosque on Ko Son was referred to in the minutes of the first public hearing (Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning [OTP], 2023b) as an “unnamed mosque,” and there was no mention of the Moken as indigenous people who have lived in the coastal areas designated for the project. In the second EHIA public hearing, local residents attempted to present information about the value of Ao Ang in terms of natural resources, fisheries, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. However, such information was included only in the annex of the report under the category of ‘concerns and recommendations.’

The Phase 2 EHIA report (OTP, 2024a) describes the marine richness of the Ao Ang area merely by noting the presence of ‘benthic animals residing directly in the dredging area, mostly polychaetes such as Capitellidae, Nephtyidae, and Spionidae,’ and refers to the impact in terms of the loss of benthic biomass that may affect the food chain of marine species that consume these organisms during the dredging period. This not only diminishes the ecological value specific to the area, but also reflects an impact assessment that lacks a holistic understanding of the community's way of life, which is deeply intertwined with the marine environment.

Although Ranong Province is structurally vulnerable to the Ao Ang-Laem Rio Landbridge project in all dimensions—economic, social, environmental, and cultural

—the policy process has proceeded with a significant disregard for public participation. Local knowledge has been devalued in comparison to technical expertise produced by state-contracted consulting firms. This is especially evident considering that the Landbridge project is part of the 20-Year National Strategy, which is constitutionally mandated under Article 65, requiring all state agencies to align their plans and budgets with the national strategy (NESDC, 2023). This further reflects the structural constraints that prevent Ranong from genuinely determining its own development trajectory in the long term.

Nevertheless, only a small number of people in Ranong Province have come forward to question or oppose the project—particularly among urban communities, civil servants, local politicians, and those with elevated social status. A superficial observation might easily lead to the conclusion that the majority of Ranong’s residents support the project. However, a deeper analysis of the province’s social and political structure reveals that the lack of public expression stems from hierarchical power relations and deeply rooted patron-client networks between national and local political groups. These relationships are not limited to the personal level but have expanded into political networks that permeate multiple domains, including resource management, policy communication, and the systematic control of the political space available to citizens.

“*Ban Yai*” [literally ‘big house’] is the term used by local residents to refer to the leader of a national political party who has played a key role in promoting the Landbridge project from the beginning. Although this individual is not originally from Ranong, he is socially connected to the province—referred to by some as a “*Khuey Ranong*” [literally ‘Ranong son-in-law’]. In contrast, “*Ban Lek*” [literally ‘small house’] refers to a local figure affiliated with the same political party who has been elected to hold a national political position.

For over a decade, Ban Yai and Ban Lek have extended their network of influence to the grassroots level through various mechanisms of local politics and administration. In this context, Ban Lek has played a pivotal role as an intermediary, channeling policies from Ban Yai to the political base in the local area. Within the context of the Landbridge project, Ban Lek has relied on his positive public image and the trust he has earned from the local community as a foundation for policy

communication. He frames his support by stating, ‘if the project were not beneficial, there would be no reason for me to advocate for its implementation in my hometown.’

Within this context, the Landbridge project is not merely presented as a public policy but can also be seen as a ‘political gift’ intended to elevate Ranong—once perceived as a remote town—into a center of development. Consequently, expressions that do not align with those in power may result in restricted access to resources, lack of state support, or even being labeled as ‘anti-development.’ Questioning or opposing the project thus becomes a sensitive matter. Many people choose to remain silent or express themselves with caution—not because they agree with the project, but as a strategy for everyday survival.

As described above, those who disagree with the project but choose to remain silent often justify their stance by referring to the local social context—for example, “*Ranong is a small town; we have to manage relationships,*” Another stated, “*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.*” This sociopolitical dynamic in Ranong aligns with the concepts of institutional uncertainty (Walker, 2012) and everyday politics (Scott, 1985), which suggest that silence can be a form of resistance undetectable by the state but symbolically powerful. Such resistance can undermine the legitimacy of public policy and erode long-term trust in political representatives, as reflected in local rumors such as: ‘Word has it that a politician bought up land in that area a long time ago.’

Moreover, amid this overarching silence, a small group of civic actors in Ranong emerged to take proactive roles in facilitating learning processes, creating spaces for dialogue, and linking local communities with external sources of information concerning the Landbridge project and community rights to participate in policymaking. These efforts led to critical questioning and a widespread exchange of information. Despite structural constraints, the first public protest in the history of the Ao Ang-Laem Rio Landbridge initiative was driven by residents of Ranong, who collaborated with external academics and lawyers to organize discussion forums with villagers across various communities. This culminated in the formation of an ad hoc group named the ‘Network of People

Affected by the Chumphon–Ranong Landbridge,’ which submitted a formal letter of opposition and displayed symbolic placards during the first EHIA public hearing for the Ao Ang deep-sea port project on 16 August 2023, in order to express their rejection of the policy process and to voice concerns about the project’s impact on local ways of life.

Following the public demonstration, villagers from various areas gradually dispersed into several smaller groups. Nevertheless, this group of ordinary citizens in Ranong has continued to play an active role in sustaining knowledge spaces within the community. Simultaneously, they have worked to foster a social atmosphere in which no individual expressing critical views feels isolated. One simple yet meaningful approach involves group members publicly declaring, in public, that they are among those concerned about the direction of the policy. This gesture helps others who share similar concerns recognize that there are safe spaces for dialogue. Another strategy entails producing media that critically engages with the project and local ways of life through creative and non-confrontational language that avoids personal attacks or direct references to individuals. This enables broader public engagement—such as liking and sharing—to occur more easily. For instance, the Facebook page Loma Ao Ranong [“ໂລມາອ່າງຮະນອງ” literally “Ranong Bay Dolphin”) has played a key role in disseminating such content. These actions have significantly contributed to expanding alliances and increasing the number of people who feel empowered to speak out in various public arenas, including official hearings.

Conclusion: Rethinking Development Below through a Structural Political Economy and Everyday Politics Perspective

The conception of Thailand’s Landbridge rests on the assumption that ‘geography is capital’, a notion operationalized through state-led infrastructure development. However, the Ao Ang–Laem Rio Landbridge clearly exemplifies a fundamental disjuncture between centralized planning and the situated potential of localities. Rather than adhering to the principles of place-based development—which prioritize local social capital, ecological integrity, and endogenous economic potential—the state has designated the area as a logistics and industrial hub, thereby privileging national economic connectivity over socio-ecological

appropriateness at the local level.

Over the past three decades, the Landbridge project has undergone several relocations, reflecting not only the failure of development planning that lacks comprehensive assessments in engineering, economic, social, and environmental dimensions, but also the persistence of a top-down, reactive approach to strategic infrastructure investment. The project exemplifies how centralized planning—driven by elite technocratic institutions and political-capital networks—continues to marginalize local voices, depoliticize participation, and entrench institutional dependencies. These dynamics are further codified in Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy, which constitutionalizes top-down development priorities and forestalls alternative, community-defined pathways.

From a structural political economy perspective, the Landbridge initiative illustrates deep-seated power asymmetries: centralized decision-making, technocratic dominance, and elite capture converge to define development trajectories. However, insights from everyday politics complicate the narrative of passive compliance. In Ranong, local actors have engaged in subtle, tactical forms of resistance—including strategic silence, indirect dissent, and selective participation—within constrained spaces of state–society interaction. These actions, though often invisible to formal political arenas, constitute meaningful expressions of dissent and pragmatic negotiation, rooted in local knowledge and lived experience. These dynamics complicate policy implementation, as deeply embedded resistance continues to challenge not only top-down agendas but also entrenched local alliances that sustain them.

Drawing from these insights, the recommendations below aim to guide the transition toward more equitable, participatory, and place-sensitive models of development and knowledge production.

At the National Policy level: territorial planning must be reframed through Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), enabling the appraisal of local potential and cumulative impacts at the level of policies, plans, and programs—prior to the formulation of specific projects. Crucially, SEA must go beyond technical exercises by institutionalizing meaningful and inclusive participation, wherein both expert and local knowledge are co-constituted to reflect the specificities of place.

At the Community Engagement level: Local people should play an active role in building a database of their own territorial assets through tools such as community resource maps and eco-cultural inventories. These tools can serve as a basis for negotiation with state and private actors over decisions related to resource use. This should go hand in hand with enhancing the capacity of community representatives and local organizations through training in development planning, impact assessment, and spatial rights. Additionally, efforts should be made to support the creation of collaborative networks among villages, across provinces, regional or national levels, and even international alliances, to strengthen and sustain the bargaining power of civil society.

Academic Implications: This study demonstrates the analytical value of integrating structural political economy with everyday politics and place-based development frameworks. It foregrounds the interplay between macro-structural forces and micro-level agency in shaping development outcomes. Methodologically, it highlights the importance of multi-sited, participatory, and qualitative approaches for capturing the layered, contested, and situated dynamics of infrastructure-led development processes.

Conceptually, the study contributes to reframing place-based development as more than a conceptual framework for academic study—it is a political tool aimed at redistributing power, voice, and epistemic authority. The Ranong case demonstrates that local knowledge—though fragmented and often informal—possesses deep economic, ecological, and social relevance, and should not be treated as peripheral to policy but rather as central to envisioning sustainable alternatives.

Ultimately, the democratization of development requires a paradigmatic shift toward co-produced planning, where state actors, civil society, and communities engage as equal partners. This transformation is vital not only for ensuring equitable outcomes in Ranong and similar provinces, but also for reimagining Thailand's development model in ways that are just, inclusive, and responsive to the socio-ecological textures of place.

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