

## Citizen Participation in the Thailand-Myanmar Border Area Security Policy Process

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Received: January 23, 2026

Revised: March 21, 2026

Accepted: March 23, 2026

### Abstract

This research article examines the citizen participation in the Thailand-Myanmar border area security policy process. The qualitative research approach was employed. Data were collected using the techniques of documentary research and in-depth interview with key informants selected based on their expertise and direct experience in Thai-Myanmar border security policy. The informants were divided into four groups: public sector, business sector, civil society, and political science scholar, totaling 13 individuals. Data analysis was conducted using the techniques of content analysis. Findings are as follows: (1) The state of citizen participation in the security policy process is characterized by awareness and understanding to ensure the successful implementation of policies from the public sector. This participation is more about cooperation with the public sector in project implementation and information sharing than participation in policy decision-making, which results from the context of the border area, leading to incomplete implementation. The form of participation is characterized by awareness of information and cooperation, which is limited to providing information and consultation, with citizens not participating in decision-making. Thus, citizen participation is top-down. (2) Factors influencing citizen participation in the security policy process included factors that promote citizen participation, such as close kinship and cultural ties between communities on both sides of the border, and economic factors, especially trade and high-value exports. Factors that hinder citizen participation included the unrest in Myanmar, which creates security concerns for the public. This causes the public sector to prioritize control over participation. (3) Guidelines for developing citizen participation in the security policy process include: developing the security policy process; developing cooperation between different sectors; developing the capacity of citizens and officials; utilizing technology and innovation; and building regional and international cooperation, which will help to sustainably improve the effectiveness of solving and preventing problems.

**Keywords:** Citizen Participation; Border Security; Public Policy Process; Thailand-Myanmar Border Area

**Type of Article:** Research Article

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## Introduction

National security is a crucial issue for all countries in the era of globalization, which is characterized by constant change and challenges. Thailand, located in a highly dynamic region with borders shared by numerous countries and possessing diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures, faces various threats. These include traditional threats such as territorial conflicts and terrorism, and non-traditional threats such as transnational crime, human trafficking, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters (Buzan, Wver, & de Wilde, 1998; Office of the National Security Council, 2022). These threats have necessitated adaptations by relevant agencies, particularly the Thai military, to manage border security. Border management is therefore a key aspect of national security, as these areas are vulnerable to various problems such as illegal immigration, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and transnational crime—issues that Thailand has long faced, especially along the Thai-Myanmar border, which stretches over 2,400 kilometers and has a complex history of both cooperation and conflict (Brown & Zasloff, 1986; Office of the National Security Council, 2022; Patimapragorn, 2014; Pitipat, 2009).

The Thai government recognizes the importance of border security and has designated it a national agenda. It has implemented various policies and measures to strengthen security in border areas, such as increasing personnel, establishing task forces, developing infrastructure, and promoting cooperation with neighboring countries. However, government action alone cannot sustainably solve the problem. Cooperation from all sectors is necessary, especially citizen participation, which is a crucial mechanism for enhancing national security. Furthermore, the national security strategy, established under the concept of comprehensive security, aims to manage the country's environment to ensure stability, security, independence, sovereignty, and peace at all levels. It also emphasizes preparedness to respond to all forms of threats and disasters, while simultaneously preventing and resolving existing and potential future security issues (Office of the National Security Council, 2021).

It can be seen that national security development requires the integration of the military and security agencies, as well as the public sector and the civil society (Binibrahim, 2016). Citizen participation in border security issues can occur in many forms, such as surveillance, reporting, providing information, cooperating with officials, offering opinions, and participating in decision-making. This helps enhance the effectiveness of government policies and measures, reduce conflict, and build trust between the state and the people (Alkire, 2003). However, citizen participation in the Thai-Myanmar border area still faces several limitations and problems, such as a lack of knowledge and understanding, limited access to information, distrust of the state, fear, and a lack of opportunities to participate, which hinders the enhancement of security in the area. Furthermore, the concept of human security, which is widely accepted today, emphasizes the importance of citizen participation in building security, viewing true security as the security of all human beings, not just the security of the state, and that citizens have the right and duty to participate in determining policies and measures related to their own and their community's security (Bindenagel Šehović, 2018; Commission on Human Security, 2003; Jolly & Ray, 2006).

Therefore, the researcher sees the importance of studying citizen participation in the security policy process in the Thai-Myanmar border area, examining the current state of participation and the environmental factors affecting it, in order to propose guidelines for developing a security policy process that emphasizes citizen participation, which will benefit the maintenance of peace and order in the Thai-Myanmar border area and contribute to national security in the future.

## Research Objectives

To examines the citizen participation in the Thailand-Myanmar border area security policy process.

## Conceptual Framework

This research synthesizes concepts, theories, and literature related to citizen participation in the Thailand-Myanmar border area security policy process as follows:

1. **Public participation** refers to the distribution of opportunities for citizens to participate in political and administrative decision-making on various issues, including the allocation of community and national resources, which affect the lives and well-being of the people. This can be achieved through initiative, information sharing, expressing opinions, providing advice, consultation, joint planning, joint implementation, joint monitoring, joint sharing of results, and even direct control by the public. Therefore, public participation is a process in which citizens or stakeholders have the opportunity to express their views and participate in activities that affect their lives, and whose opinions are then incorporated into policy-making and government decision-making. This process involves stages ranging from informing the public, listening to the public, engaging in problem-solving, and developing agreements (Arnstein, 1969; Bureekul, 2022; Cohen & Uphoff, 1980; Creighton, 2005; Kokpol, 2009).

2. **Border security** refers to the management of sovereignty and the attainment of security. It involves managing various threats arising along borders, promoting border development, fostering interstate relations, sharing resources, and cooperating in a comprehensive security approach that encompasses military, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Security arises when national power is exercised to achieve national objectives, involving the establishment of certain conditions within the international system to guarantee and support a satisfactory level of national security. Border management can be categorized into three levels: supranational, national, and local, which are interconnected in various dimensions (Berg & Ehin, 2006; OSCE, 2006; Wolfers, 1952).

3. **Public policy process** refers to the activities undertaken by the government, consisting of a systematic series of decisions involving policymakers, implementers, and those affected by the policies, which may have both positive and negative impacts. The government's choices must have goals, strategic plans, and actions to achieve them. Decisions are made based on the best interests of the majority of society. The public policy process can be synthesized into five steps: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Anderson, 2003; Dye, 2017; Easton, 1953; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Sharkansky, 1978; Thamrongthanyawong, 2011).

The researchers synthesized the concepts of citizen participation, border security, and public policy processes to define the conceptual framework of the research. The context of the border area, including geographical, economic, social, and cultural conditions, the situation of unrest, and environmental factors such as security issues, cross-border cooperation, personal factors, and civic engagement, all influence citizen participation in the Thailand-Myanmar border area security policy process, as shown in Figure 1.

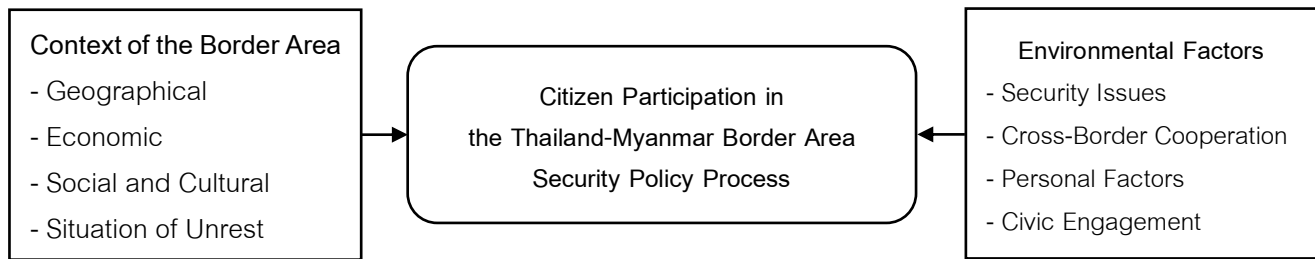


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

## Methodology

The qualitative research approach was employed. Data were collected using the techniques of documentary research and in-depth interview with key informants as follows:

1. Documentary Research: The researcher collected data on citizen participation in the Thailand-Myanmar border area security policy process from textbooks, general books, research reports, theses, articles, electronic media, and various related literature. This data was then used for analysis in the research.

2. In-Depth Interviews: To obtain in-depth guidelines for developing citizen participation in shaping security policies in the Thai-Myanmar border area from the perspectives and experiences of various sectors in the area, the researcher selected 13 key informants, based on their expertise and direct experience in Thai-Myanmar border security policy. These informants were divided into four groups as follows:

2.1 Public Sector: Security and Administrative Divisions, 4 representatives, comprising:

(1) Representative of the Security Division and the Internal Security Operations Command of Tak Province

(2) Deputy District Chief, Security Division, Mae Sot District, Tak Province

(3) Deputy District Chief, Security Division, Phop Phra District, Tak Province

(4) Director of the Strategy Division, Mae Sot Municipality, Tak Province

2.2 Business Sector: Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Thai Industries, 2 representatives, comprising:

(1) Honorary Chairman of the Advisory Board, Tak Chamber of Commerce

(2) Chairman of the Federation of Thai Industries, Tak Province

2.3 Civil Society: Community Leaders and NGOs in the area, 6 representatives, comprising:

(1) Headman of Mae Tao Subdistrict, Mae Sot District, Tak Province

(2) Head of the Peace Rights Foundation

(3) Vice President of Help Without Frontiers

(4) Representative of World Vision Thailand Mae Sot Coordination Center (WVFT Maesot)

(5) Representative of Right To Play Thailand Foundation

(6) Representative of Hsa Thoo Lei Foundation

2.4 Political Science Scholars: 1 person, consisting of:

(1) Lecturer in Political Science, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

3. Data Analysis: A content analysis will be conducted by systematically organizing the collected data, identifying components, and establishing relationships between the data. The content will then be analyzed according to the research objectives.

## Results

The research findings on citizen participation in the security policy process in the Thai-Myanmar border area revealed that:

### 1. The State of Citizen Participation in the Security Policy Process

Citizen participation in the security policy process is characterized by awareness and understanding to ensure the successful implementation of policies originating from the public sector. This participation is more in the form of cooperating with the public sector in project implementation and providing information rather than participating in policy decision-making. This stems from several factors, including the context of border areas, the diversity of ethnic groups, the similarity of lifestyles among ethnic groups on both the Thai and Myanmar borders, the unrest in Myanmar, issues related to migrant workers, and the problem of uncontrolled border crossings that hinder comprehensive implementation. The form of participation is characterized by information sharing and cooperation, primarily involving information provision and consultation, with citizens not directly involved in decision-making. The diverse ethnic and cultural context of border areas, the unrest in Myanmar and migrant worker issues impacting citizen participation, limitations in access to information and communication channels, and distrust of the public sector hindering participation. Therefore, it can be said that citizen participation in the security policy process is top-down.

### 2. Factors Affecting Citizen Participation in the Security Policy Process

2.1 Factors promoting citizen participation include close kinship and cultural ties between communities on both sides of the border, which constitute social capital conducive to cooperation; the similarity in the lifestyles of ethnic groups on both the Thai and Myanmar borders; and economic factors, particularly trade and high-value exports, which make citizens prioritize participation with the public sector.

2.2 Factors hindering citizen participation include the unrest in Myanmar, which creates safety concerns for the public, leading the public sector to prioritize control over participation. Myanmar citizens are increasingly likely to cross the border illegally, hindering the effectiveness of public sector operations. Even with intensified security measures, obstacles along the Thai-Myanmar border, such as the continuously receding water level of the Moei River, allow for more illegal border crossings. Therefore, it is necessary to reinforce the deployment of civilian volunteers at vulnerable points.

### 3. Guidelines for Developing Citizen Participation in the Security Policy Process

3.1 Development of the security policy process includes:

(1) Improving laws related to border area management as a crucial foundation for clarity and fairness in operations, providing genuine opportunities for citizen participation. These legal revisions should consider changing contexts and situations, including soliciting feedback from citizens and stakeholders.

(2) Decentralizing power to the local and community levels, which will help solve problems and respond to the needs of the people more quickly and efficiently, as local and community levels have a better understanding of the context and problems of their areas.

(3) Creating formal participation mechanisms, such as establishing committees or advisory councils with representatives from citizen participation, holding public hearings, and opening online communication channels. These will provide citizens with clear and easily accessible ways to participate in the security policy process.

3.2 Developing cooperation among various sectors, which will build understanding and trust between the public sector, business sector, and civil society, leading to effective collaboration. Regular meetings for exchanging ideas and working together will help create a more systematic and efficient collaborative effort.

3.3 Developing the capacity of citizens and officials by raising public awareness of the importance of their roles and responsibilities in ensuring security, and developing the capacity of officials to understand citizen participation. This will help bridge the gap between the public sector and the people, thereby promoting collaboration.

3.4 Utilizing technology and innovation: Developing diverse and easily accessible communication channels so that citizens can easily access information, express opinions, and follow the progress of various policies and measures. This will increase opportunities for civil society participation, improve the efficiency of officials' work, and enable them to respond to various situations quickly and promptly.

3.5 Building regional and international cooperation: Exchanging knowledge and experiences with neighboring countries and international organizations will help develop approaches and measures to promote civil society participation that are appropriate to the context of border areas in addressing cross-border problems such as illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. This will help increase the efficiency of solving and preventing these problems sustainably.

## Discussion

Research on citizen participation in the Thailand-Myanmar border area security policy process found that citizen participation in the security policy process is characterized by awareness and understanding to ensure the successful implementation of policies originating from the public sector. This participation involves collaboration with the government in project implementation and information sharing, rather than involvement in policy decision-making. The public sector plays a significant role in the security policy process, encompassing both traditional threats (war and aggression) and holistic security (combining traditional and new threats). This results in the military playing a major role as the primary force in national defense and as an integral part of the security system alongside other agencies. This aligns with the views of Berg and Ehin (2006), OSCE (2006), and Wolfers (1952), who define border security as the management of sovereignty and security, the management of various threats along the border, and the promotion of border development, interstate relations, resource sharing, and cooperation in a comprehensive security approach that covers military, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

While citizens participate in the security policy process in a manner that involves cooperating with the state in implementing projects and providing information, they do not participate in policy decision-making. Their participation is limited to supporting state missions such as training, surveillance, and providing warnings, and

cooperating with the public sector when requested. This contradicts the views of Anderson (2003), Dye (2017), Easton (1953), Pressman and Wildavsky (1984), Sharkansky (1978), and Thamrongthanyawong (2011), who defined the public policy process as a five-stage activity: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. This study found that citizens only participate in the policy implementation stage. This does not include other steps that truly represent decentralization, as defined by Arnstein (1969), Bureekul (2022), Cohen and Uphoff (1980), Creighton (2005), and Kokpol (2009), who described public participation as the distribution of opportunities for citizens to participate in politics and administration in decision-making on various issues, including the allocation of community and national resources, which will affect the lives and well-being of the people. This can be achieved through initiative, providing information, expressing opinions, giving advice, consultation, joint planning, joint implementation, joint monitoring, joint sharing of results, and even direct control by the people.

## Recommendations

### 1. Policy Recommendations

1.1 Developing a participatory border management policy: The public sector should shift its paradigm from top-down policy-making to creating mechanisms for citizens, civil society, and the private sector to participate in designing security strategies in border areas. This will ensure that the direction and approaches determined truly align with the context and needs of the local people.

1.2 Promoting decentralization to local authorities: The public sector should amend relevant laws to decentralize power and budgets to local administrative organizations (LAOs), enabling them to manage security issues in non-military dimensions, such as disaster management, social problems, and environmental issues.

1.3 Fostering international cooperation at the local level: The public sector should promote policies that support cooperation between provinces, civil society, and the private sector of both countries to resolve disputes and build mutual understanding.

1.4 Developing an integrated security database system: The public sector should create a unified and interconnected database on security, migrant workers, and undocumented population data across various agencies. This will allow for effective access and utilization of information for planning and decision-making.

### 2. Operational Recommendations

2.1 Establishing a “Provincial Border Security Council” with a committee or council mechanism at the local level, comprising representatives from all sectors, to meet regularly. To serve as a central platform for discussion and problem-solving.

2.2 The capacity of civil society should be developed by providing training on security policies and citizens’ rights and responsibilities to build confidence and motivation for participation, and by training government officials in skills for working with civil society, shifting the perspective from being a “controller” to a “partner” in development.

2.3 Easily accessible two-way communication channels should be created by developing diverse communication channels, such as applications or information service centers, to disclose information and listen to public opinion quickly and comprehensively, which will help reduce mistrust and build trust.

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