

Institutional and Cultural Conflict and the Governance Dilemma in the Southern Frontier: An Inquiry into the Structural Causes of Poverty in Rural

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Abstract

Although Thailand officially reported the eradication of extreme income poverty, multidimensional poverty index (MPI) evidence indicated that roughly 80 percent of the poor remained concentrated in rural areas, revealing pronounced spatial and structural patterns. This study investigated the underlying drivers of rural poverty in Thailand, with particular attention to borderland dynamics in the southern frontier. Methodologically, it synthesized existing scholarship and official data, employed structural-functional and political economy perspectives, and situated findings within a longitudinal and spatial-comparative framework to elucidate interlocking causal mechanisms.

The analysis showed that rural poverty was rooted in the interaction of institutional weaknesses, cultural path dependence, and religious/ethnic cleavages. This structural predicament crystallized along four interconnected dimensions: (1) a land-tenure paradox of "privatization–centralization–fragmentation" that undermined secure

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and equitable access; (2) urban-biased resource allocation reinforced by clientelism and patronage, which produced chronic rural deprivation; (3) governance discontinuities and frictions between traditional authority and modern bureaucratic modalities that eroded policy coherence and implementation; and (4) unintended consequences of nation-building and "unification" policies in border regions that exacerbated ethno-religious tensions and limited inclusive development. Together, these mechanisms entrenched a durable web of rural disadvantage.

The study therefore drew on structural-functional and political economy perspectives to explore how institutional and governance arrangements perpetuated rural poverty. It advanced an integrated framework for analyzing structural poverty in Thailand and comparable Southeast Asian contexts, and it informed the design of targeted, context-sensitive, and sustainable poverty reduction strategies. This study contributed to both theoretical and practical discourses on poverty by integrating institutional, cultural, and conflict dimensions into a cohesive analytical framework. Its findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to design context-sensitive and sustainable poverty alleviation strategies in Thailand and similar Southeast Asian contexts.

Keywords: Poverty, Institutions, Culture Thailand

Origins of the Problem (Introduction)

Poverty is commonly understood as severe deprivation of material resources, reflected in the inability to meet basic needs. Its definition is historically and socially contingent, permitting both quantitative (absolute) and qualitative (relative) approaches. Absolute poverty refers to an income or consumption level below a subsistence threshold necessary for survival. Relative poverty, by contrast, is defined within a given socioeconomic context—often as income below a specified proportion (such as 50 percent) of the median—capturing exclusion from standards of living deemed normative in that society.

Over the past three decades, Thailand has achieved substantial reductions in income poverty through targeted programs and policy reforms. The number of people classified as poor declined from 34.1 million in 1988 to 2.39 million in 2023¹, with the poverty rate falling from 65.17 percent to 3.41 percent. Nonetheless, multidimensional poverty persists. Thailand's multidimensional poverty index (MPI)² was 0.032 in 2023, implying that approximately 6.14 million people experience multiple, overlapping deprivations. The incidence of multidimensional poverty exceeds the monetary poverty rate, indicating that many individuals who live above the income-based poverty line³ still face deficits in areas such as health, education, housing, and access to services. These deprivations are disproportionately concentrated in rural areas⁴.

¹ The data in this study are derived from Thailand's National Committee for Economic and Social Development's "2023 Thailand Inequality and Poverty Research Report

² Thailand's multidimensional poverty index includes education, healthy lifestyle, quality of life and financial stability.

³ Poverty line: In 2023, the poverty line standard in Thailand is 3,043 baht/person/month.

⁴ The Thai Royal Academy Dictionary explains that rural areas (Khampot) refer to vast regions outside urban centers. These areas profoundly influence population distribution and lifestyles through their natural conditions and environmental characteristics. Each rural community exhibits diversity in economy, society, governance, and livelihoods. Typically, small in scale and relatively underdeveloped, these communities are often tightly knit, feature traditional social customs, and maintain an agricultural-based traditional society. They may also be described as underdeveloped societies.

The enduring and spatially uneven nature of poverty in Thailand raises a central question for this study: What factors have produced persistent and entrenched rural poverty despite aggregate gains? The analysis that follows investigates the structural origins of rural deprivation and the institutional, cultural, and governance mechanisms that reproduce it. This study therefore drew on structural-functional and political economy perspectives to explore how institutional and governance arrangements perpetuate rural poverty.

Purpose and significance of the study

1) Objectives of the study

- To systematically elucidate the interlocking mechanisms through which institutional deficiencies, cultural path dependence, and religious/ethnic conflict generate rural poverty in Thailand, and to clarify the causal pathways by which governance dilemmas in the southern borderlands contribute to regional development imbalances.
- To construct a three-dimensional analytical framework—institutions, culture, and conflict—that provides theoretical guidance and empirical evidence for designing targeted poverty-reduction policies in Southeast Asian developing countries.

2) Significance of the study

- Theoretical significance: By advancing an integrated framework centered on institutions, culture, and conflict, the study moves beyond single-factor determinism in traditional poverty research and offers a new lens for understanding the complexity and persistence of rural poverty in developing-country contexts.
- Practical significance: By identifying the specific mechanisms of governance dilemmas in the southern border regions, the study supplies an empirical basis for Thailand's regionally differentiated poverty-reduction strategies and an actionable model for Southeast Asian countries addressing poverty governance in multicultural settings.

Literature Review

Main theoretical perspectives From a political economy standpoint, poverty is understood as an outcome of asymmetric power relations and skewed distributions of resources and rents. Dependency theory posits a core–periphery dynamic in which urban

industrial centers extract surplus from rural peripheries through mechanisms such as price scissors, market monopsony/monopoly, and unequal exchange, a pattern readily observable in semi-industrial economies like Thailand. Complementing this is the notion of the state's relative autonomy, which holds that while states may promulgate pro-poor policies, implementation can be largely symbolic or partial when bureaucratic patronage networks and influential business constituencies constrain policy execution and reorient benefits toward entrenched interests. Together, these perspectives illuminate how formal policy commitments can coexist with persistent rural deprivation when structural incentives and power asymmetries remain unaltered.

Prior empirical studies Empirical research on poverty in Thailand has expanded but remains fragmented. A large strand emphasizes individual and household characteristics. For example, Niyomyhat and Kerajit (2022) identify intergenerational transmission of poverty among large households, limited social capital and external linkages, weak work habits, present-oriented values, low skills, and gambling as proximate drivers. Ju and Shao (2015) highlights deficits in infrastructure, technology, and education. Chettha (2023) attributes rural and urban poverty to the diffusion of capitalism and warns that neoliberal policy misalignment with social and political institutions can generate adverse outcomes. stress resource scarcity constrained educational opportunities, and power deprivation in the Northeast, while also underscoring dignity violations—humiliation, class discrimination, and occupational stigma—as poverty correlates. Settawat (2022) examines social conflict in Nakhon Ratchasima and its poverty-inducing effects.

On policy and governance, several studies evaluate sectoral levers and institutional arrangements. Chotikhamjorn awnd Supitcha (2021) argue that educational management—by widening access and strengthening state stewardship—reduces poverty and inequality. Sukkaphat (2021) advocates deeper state–IO collaboration to meet the 2030 SDGs. Chayanant (2022) foregrounds broad-based economic development as the principal antidote to rural poverty. Wu and Li (2024) find that outward investment and trade cooperation can lower poverty in host economies. Warayut (2023) emphasizes the

roles of public agencies, community groups, and local governments. Attasuda and Thitima (2023) show that financial development alleviates poverty in the North and Northeast but has limited effects elsewhere, recommending place-sensitive financial planning. Li (2020) documents the multidimensionality of Thailand's poverty and argues that national development strategies must prioritize equity. Kitima (2024) [demonstrates how inequitable mining policies disproportionately harm poor and vulnerable households. Suksom and Sungsit (2023) underscore multi-actor collaboration and recommend decentralizing decision-making and resources while valuing indigenous knowledge and providing modern technical support. Chantima and Ajirapas (2021) report that integrated, cross-agency approaches achieved targeted poverty reduction in a Kongjing case study.

Synthesis and research gap The literature reflects a clear shift from narrow economic determinism toward more structurally attuned explanations that consider institutions, power, and social relations. However, important gaps persist. First, many studies treat causal factors in isolation, underplaying the historical coupling of institutional design and cultural path dependence. Second, the roles of religious/ethnic cleavage and borderland governance dilemmas—especially salient in Thailand's southern frontier—are insufficiently integrated into explanatory models. Third, longitudinal and spatial-comparative analyses remain limited.

To address these gaps, this study employs structural-functional and political economy approaches within a time-space comparative framework. It probes the structural roots of rural poverty in Thailand by tracing how institutional arrangements interact with cultural inertia and ethno-religious conflict, thereby offering a more comprehensive theoretical account and empirically grounded evidence to inform context-sensitive poverty reduction.

Theoretical framework

This study integrates structuralist theory and political economy to develop a three-dimensional explanatory model of institutional-cultural-conflict. Structuralism emphasizes the interdependence of elements within social systems and interprets poverty as a structural outcome of institutional arrangements, power relations, and cultural norms.

Following Claude Lévi-Strauss’s methodological injunction to probe beneath surface phenomena, the analysis focuses on the deep structures underlying rural poverty in Thailand: imbalances in land regimes (tensions between privatization and fragmentation), mechanisms of resource allocation that reproduce urban–rural disparities, and governance architectures marked by friction between traditional patronage-based “shelter” systems and modern bureaucratic governance.

A political economy lens situates these structures within broader processes of state policy, market integration, and class formation, highlighting how capital accumulation and elite interests shape distributional outcomes and generate conflict. Taken together, the two approaches explain rural poverty as the product of mutually reinforcing institutional constraints, cultural logics, and conflict dynamics, rather than as a purely individual or technical problem.

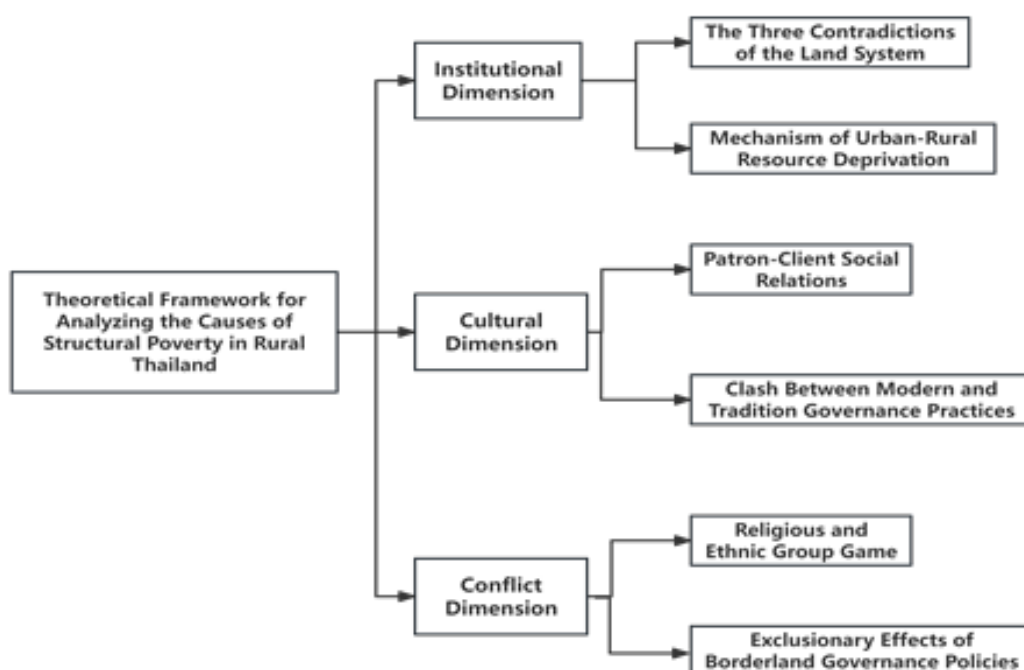


Figure 1. Theoretical analytical framework for the causes of structural poverty in rural areas of Thailand

Thailand's poverty status and characteristics

Poverty in Thailand Since the early 1960s, Thailand has implemented successive National Economic and Social Development Plans (NESDPs). The first plan prioritized expanding basic public services to rural areas. Policymakers differentiated rural regions into: (1) economically underdeveloped but largely self-sustaining areas addressed through conventional development measures, and (2) severely lagging areas with weak infrastructure requiring targeted assistance. Subsequent plans have consistently embedded rural development, combining diversified sectoral policies, dedicated development funds, and grassroots economic empowerment programs to narrow urban–rural disparities and promote balanced growth. According to data released by the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) in late 2023, supported by analysis from the National Statistical Office (NSO), Thailand has made substantial gains in reducing income poverty, yet structural poverty and inequality remain pronounced.

1. Significant reduction in absolute poverty

- NESDC estimates place the poverty rate at 3.14% in 2023 (about 2.39 million people), returning to pre-pandemic levels.
- The 2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) reports Thailand's MPI at 0.0002, the best performance in Southeast Asia, underscoring progress against extreme deprivation.

2. Persistent structural inequality, despite overall gains, the recovery has been uneven, with the benefits of growth shared unequally across regions and groups:

(1) Large urban–rural divide

- The rural poverty rate (7.4%) is roughly three times the urban rate (2.5%).
- Under a unified standard, average annual income for rural residents is 128,000 baht, compared with 580,000 baht for urban residents—a ratio of about 1:4.5.
- Persistent gaps in infrastructure, productivity, and economic opportunities in rural areas are core drivers of this disparity.

(2) Spatial concentration of poverty

- In 2023, the poor were concentrated in the northeastern, northern, and

southern regions, accounting for 34.53%, 32.32%, and 20.56% of the national poor, respectively—approximately 88% in total.

- The northern and northeastern regions together host over 70% of Thailand's agricultural workforce. Although farmers constitute about 30% of the labor force, agriculture contributes only around 8.8% of GDP, and low farm incomes continue to underpin widespread rural poverty.

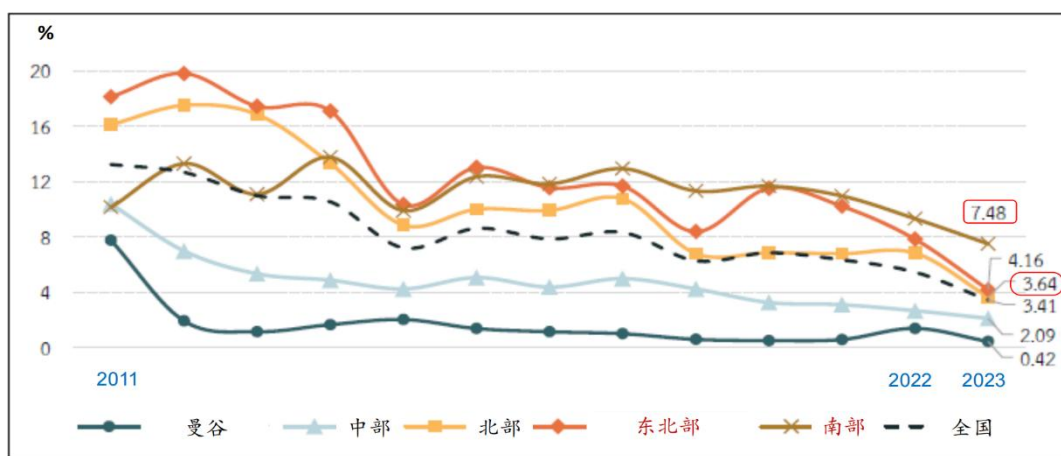


Figure 2: Proportion of poor population in Thailand by region (2011-2023)

Source: National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDC), Thailand

(3) Persistent income inequality Thailand's Gini coefficient stood at 0.434 in 2022, a marginal improvement from 0.435 in 2021 and 0.436 in 2019. Nonetheless, the income of the richest 10% remains more than 20 times that of the poorest 10%, indicating entrenched disparities. In regions with relatively underdeveloped economies, 70.5% of people living in poverty lack pension coverage—significantly above the national average—leaving households more exposed to shocks.

Characteristics of poverty in Thailand

Beyond income poverty: capability and multidimensional deprivation 2024 MPI data indicate that multidimensional poverty exceeds monetary poverty by about 0.5 percentage points, suggesting that some households meet income thresholds yet remain deprived in basic services such as education and health. In education, enrollment and

quality gaps persist: rural primary schools have a net enrollment rate of 95.2% versus 98.7% in urban areas, and remote regions face an estimated 12% teacher shortfall. With high-quality educational resources concentrated in megacities like Bangkok, rural students lag behind their urban peers. In health, although the Universal Coverage Scheme (the “30-baht” program) offers broad financial protection, access and quality gaps persist in remote areas. In terms of living standards, deficits in clean drinking water, sanitation, housing quality, and internet connectivity continue to affect the most remote communities despite significant improvements in electricity and roads.

Financial insecurity as the primary driver financial insecurity has become the most important factor contributing to poverty, followed by living conditions and education. Limited access to affordable credit, low and volatile returns from smallholder agriculture and informal work, and thin savings buffers restrict participation in productive economic activities and heighten vulnerability to shocks.

Salient gaps in old-age protection Despite efforts to improve financial literacy and expand retirement programs, inadequate pension security remains a major challenge—especially in rural areas—raising the risk of poverty among older adults.

Evolving poverty monitoring: opportunities and challenges Traditional poverty monitoring relies on the Household Socio-Economic Survey (HSES). While it produces reliable national and provincial estimates, it often lacks precision at smaller geographic scales due to sample-size limitations and technical hurdles in sub-provincial estimation. To address this, researchers are integrating geospatial data—such as nighttime lights, road density, and vegetation indices—with machine-learning methods (e.g., random forests) and small-area estimation to produce higher-resolution poverty maps and more precisely identify pockets of deprivation.

Research Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, aligning them with the core research objectives. It demonstrates how the identified structural mechanisms—

rooted in institutional weaknesses, cultural path dependencies, and conflict dynamics—collectively sustain rural poverty in Thailand.

Over more than three decades, Thailand has achieved notable success in reducing absolute poverty. Yet a multidimensional perspective shows that severe deprivation persists. Across income, resource distribution, and spatial dimensions, structural poverty remains most acute in rural areas. This study identifies the structural roots of enduring rural poverty and examines the cultural mechanisms through which these structures perpetuate deprivation.

The structural roots of rural poverty in Thailand

Land institutions that constrain the agrarian economy Thailand's land regime faces a threefold challenge: accelerated privatization, growing consolidation, and intensifying fragmentation of farmland. From a structuralist perspective, this institutional imbalance constitutes a deep structural driver of poverty. In agrarian settings, distorted land distribution severs the link between production systems and secure livelihoods.

Since reforms initiated under King Rama IV (1851), Thailand has progressively dismantled feudal allocation and promoted land privatization, supporting the rise of an agricultural commodity economy. As modernization advanced, however, land scarcity, the expansion of tenancy, and concentration of ownership intensified. Prime farmland increasingly accrued to large (often absentee) owners, pushing formerly independent farmers into tenancy and exposing them to high rents.

Policy efforts in the 1980s to regulate rents and formalize tenancy did not reverse these dynamics. Rapid population growth and the exhaustion of new arable land since the 1970s limited scope for area expansion, while partible inheritance further fragmented holdings. The share of households with very small plots (under 10 rai—about 1.6 hectares) has risen to roughly a third, and about 80% of farmers cultivate under 20 rai (about 3.2 hectares).

Under these conditions, many farmers cannot sustain livelihoods from their own or rented plots and fall into debt. Distress sales convert owner-cultivators into tenants; rising rents then compress margins, discouraging soil improvement and productivity-

enhancing investment. The resulting cycle—rent compression, constrained on-farm investment, and debt accumulation—suppresses agricultural growth and locks households into an institutional poverty trap that is difficult to escape.

Social resource deprivation and class entrenchment From a political-economy angle, rural deprivation is embedded in a center–periphery structure. Dependency and center–periphery frameworks (e.g., Baran 1957) suggest that urban cores extract resources from peripheral regions through institutional and policy mechanisms. In Thailand, urban bias in public and private investment is evident across education, health, and capital:

- Education: Although teacher and facility allocations consider regional distribution and enrollment, quality remains strongly associated with school size, affiliation, and family resources. High-performing, STEM-oriented large schools disproportionately enroll students from affluent households. Estimates also show that top-income deciles dominate spending on fee-based education, while low-income families face barriers in access and progression, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage.

- Health: Near-universal coverage under the Universal Coverage Scheme (the “30-baht” program) has expanded access to care, yet significant quality gaps persist due to uneven distribution of personnel and facilities. Advanced services cluster in major cities, and remote rural areas often face shortages of equipment and specialists.

- Capital and land: Wealth concentration remains high (e.g., estimates suggest the top 10% control around 85.7% of wealth, while the bottom half holds about 1.7%). Smallholder landownership is declining relative to large-scale operators, and affluent households enjoy better access to formal credit and diversified assets. Fertile land and high-return opportunities are disproportionately controlled by elite actors, while regions such as the Northeast contend with poorer soils and greater climate risk.

This compound mechanism of educational isolation, medical exclusion, and capital monopoly constrains social mobility for rural households and heightens the risk of persistent poverty.

Political dynamics amplify these structural constraints. Frequent government turnover and coalition politics encourage short-term, highly visible interventions over

sustained, coordinated strategies. Policy discontinuity weakens implementation, deters long-horizon investment, and slows infrastructure and industrial development in rural areas, widening urban–rural gaps. Moreover, large rural electorates can be mobilized as political constituencies, but organizational fragmentation and weak collective representation limit their ability to secure durable policy gains. Patronage-oriented competition and the expansion of public authority create insiders’ groups, misallocate resources, and decouple reform intent from development outcomes.

Regional imbalances and conflict dynamics Poverty and conflict are mutually reinforcing. Structural conflict perspectives view ethnic violence as a manifestation of systemic imbalance, with poverty both a driver and consequence. Cross-national research finds that poorer countries often lack the capacity to suppress insurgency (Fearon & Laitin, 2003), low incomes reduce the opportunity cost of rebellion (Collier & Hoeffler, 2001), and higher poverty incidence correlates with greater conflict intensity (Sawarai & Papusson, 2020).

Thailand’s southern border provinces—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla—illustrate this nexus. The predominantly Malay Muslim population has had a protracted confrontation with state security forces, with violence since 2004 claiming more than 7,000 lives. The prolonged insecurity has degraded the investment climate, impeded external capital inflows, and disrupted schooling, service delivery, and market access. As a result, the southern border provinces carry a disproportionate share of the region’s poor, and poverty rates have risen in several districts in recent years.

Historically, state-building and security-centered approaches—including coercive measures during earlier unification drives—undermined local autonomy and disrupted social and economic structures, leaving enduring development scars in affected regions. In the absence of sustained, well-targeted economic support, diversification has lagged; livelihoods remain concentrated in low-return primary activities, leaving households highly exposed to shocks.

The cumulative effect is structural poverty that encompasses not only monetary deprivation but also social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Addressing it requires

coordinated, long-term measures that simultaneously improve security, expand equitable access to education and health, reform land and credit institutions, and strengthen inclusive local governance.

Cultural traditions and historical continuities

Rural poverty in Thailand persists not only because of land constraints, resource deprivation, and protracted conflict in the southern border provinces, but also due to historically embedded cultural and governance patterns. Three deep-seated mechanisms are especially salient: the patronage-based “shelter” system, path-dependent rural governance practices, and homogenizing nation-building policies that misalign with borderland realities. Together, these mechanisms create systemic barriers that limit rural households’ capacity to escape poverty.

Patronage and the erosion of agency Structuralist accounts of power highlight patron–client relations as a core mechanism sustaining hierarchy in agrarian societies. In Thailand’s rural context—where the moral economy of *bunkhun* (debt of gratitude) and hierarchical *phu yai*–*phu noi* relations are deeply ingrained—patrons provide protection, connections, and selective access to resources, while clients reciprocate with loyalty, labor, and political support.

These networks shape electoral dynamics. Thai politics is often candidate-centered, with mobilization channeled through local brokers or canvassers (vote brokers) rather than programmatic party competition alone. Even reformist or programmatic parties have leveraged these relational infrastructures, pairing policy promises with brokered mobilization to secure rural support.

While patronage can provide short-term security, its structural effects are constraining. Access to public programs, credit, land documents, or emergency aid is frequently mediated by patrons, reinforcing dependence and discouraging autonomous initiative, collective bargaining, and risk-taking. Production and livelihood choices become aligned with the interests and directives of local power-holders, dampening innovation and locking households into low-return strategies. Over time, these dynamics reproduce

a structural poverty cycle in which resources and opportunities are filtered through asymmetric relationships rather than universal, rule-based entitlements.

Path-dependent governance practices that slow modernization On the eve of the 20th century, Thailand remained organized under the sakdina order. Late-19th- and early-20th-century thesaphiban reforms under King Chulalongkorn centralized the administrative apparatus and extended the reach of the Ministry of Interior. Yet effective state penetration often tapered at the district and subdistrict levels, with village governance mediated by headmen (phu yai ban), subdistrict leaders (kamnan), and influential local notables.

These local figures historically acted as community guardians, maintaining order, mediating disputes, and shielding villagers from predatory actors. However, the enduring reliance on personal authority and informal norms—rather than impersonal, rule-based institutions—has unintended consequences. Discretionary allocation of resources can create scope for favoritism and rent-seeking; weak horizontal oversight and fragmented accountability undermine consistent policy implementation; and development priorities can reflect private networks more than public need. The result is a hybrid governance regime—part bureaucratic, part personalized—that delivers some stability but constrains the scaling of transparent, performance-based rural development and limits equitable access to state services.

Nation-building, border governance, and development mismatches From a political economy perspective, homogenizing “unity” policies in nation-building can overlook local structural realities. As theories of the state’s relative autonomy suggest, central projects of modernization and identity formation may impose uniform standards that clash with diverse local institutions, languages, and livelihoods—especially in borderlands—producing resistance and unintended developmental setbacks.

- Northeast (Isan): Environmentally constrained and historically marginalized, the Northeast experienced tight security oversight during the mid-20th century and persistent underinvestment. While large-scale migration has linked the region

to national growth, local industrial diversification and infrastructure have lagged, reinforcing income and service gaps.

- Southern border provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla): Assimilationist language and religious policies, regulation of Islamic schools, and a heavy security footprint have strained state–society relations. The resurgence of violence since 2004 has depressed investment, disrupted schooling and service delivery, and raised the costs of doing business—entrenching poverty and limiting upward mobility.

- Northern highlands: Mid- to late-20th-century policies on forest conservation, nationality/citizenship registration, opium eradication, and village relocation altered livelihood systems for ethnic minority communities. Combined with difficult terrain and weaker connectivity, these measures impeded market access and constrained education and health service delivery, perpetuating multidimensional deprivation.

A cross-sectional synthesis of the findings reveals that institutional fragmentation, cultural resistance, and conflict dynamics are mutually reinforcing. Land tenure inequities and urban-biased policies exacerbate cultural marginalization, while ethno-religious tensions in the Deep South of Thailand are compounded by governance gaps. This interplay underscores the necessity of an integrated approach to poverty alleviation that simultaneously addresses institutional reform, cultural recognition, and conflict resolution.

Across these regions, uniform approaches to “unity” and modernization have sometimes eroded local capabilities without building effective substitutes. Security-led interventions, inconsistent development support, and limited local participation have compounded distrust and slowed inclusive growth. Addressing these mismatches requires differentiated, participatory border governance that respects cultural and institutional diversity while expanding equitable access to land, credit, education, health, and markets.

Epilogue

This study applies an integrated framework drawing on structuralism and political economy to illuminate the mechanisms and evolutionary logic of rural poverty in Thailand. It identifies three interlocking structural challenges: (1) institutional

deficiencies—embodied in the privatization–centralization–fragmentation paradox in land governance, urban-biased resource allocation, and policy implementation gaps; (2) cultural path dependence—rooted in patronage-based social networks and tensions between traditional local authority and modern bureaucratic governance; and (3) religious/ethnic conflict—centered on governance dilemmas in the Muslim-majority southern border provinces and resistance among northern highland minorities. Together, this institutional–cultural–conflict dynamic not only produces marked regional clustering of poverty (with incidence rates around 12.3% in parts of the southern border and northeastern agricultural regions) but also sustains intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. The findings reinforce the judgment that multidimensional poverty traps cannot be resolved by economic growth or short, stand-alone policy initiatives alone.

Policy and academic recommendations

- Institutional reforms
 - Pilot mixed tenure models that combine private and collective land rights where appropriate, alongside land banks to facilitate consolidation, leasing, and access for smallholders.
 - Rebalance fiscal transfers in favor of rural jurisdictions (e.g., targeting an urban–rural subsidy ratio of 1:1.2) to address service gaps and underinvestment.
 - Strengthen policy continuity and execution through medium-term rural development compacts and performance-based intergovernmental transfers.
- Cultural and governance reforms
 - Curb dependence on patronage by expanding digital government platforms that deliver benefits via transparent, rules-based entitlements; support farmer cooperatives and producer organizations to enhance bargaining power and market access.
 - Professionalize local administration with clearer role definitions, stronger oversight, and citizen feedback mechanisms to reduce discretionary gatekeeping and favoritism.

- Conflict-sensitive development

- Institutionalize tripartite consultations among religious leaders, local elites, and central authorities; adopt participatory planning and culturally responsive service delivery in the southern border provinces.

- Consider a Cultural Autonomy Pilot Zone in the Deep South (e.g., Pattani), with safeguards for language, religious education, and local dispute resolution, coupled with targeted investment and accountability frameworks.

- Academic agenda

- Build a dynamic, complex-systems model capturing interactions among institutions, culture, and conflict to quantify feedbacks and thresholds.

- Develop a “policy elasticity index” that integrates qualitative coding (e.g., NVivo) with statistical analysis (e.g., SPSS) to assess the responsiveness of poverty outcomes to different interventions.

- Establish a comparative Southeast Asian conflict–poverty database, focusing initially on Thailand’s southern border provinces and the Philippines’ Mindanao, to enable cross-case learning.

Future research directions

- Methodological: Enhance tools for modeling interactions among institutional arrangements, cultural contexts, and conflict dynamics, and design cross-regional poverty early-warning systems that integrate administrative, survey, and geospatial data.

- Practical: Examine how digital technologies reshape traditional social structures, including the use of blockchain for secure land registries and transparent resource allocation.

- Theoretical: Probe the structure–agency nexus in rural transformation, with particular attention to farmers’ collective and individual agency in escaping poverty traps.

By articulating the institutional–cultural–conflict nexus and outlining actionable pathways, this study offers both a conceptual lens and practical guidance for poverty reduction in Thailand and, more broadly, for Southeast Asian and other developing

contexts seeking context-sensitive strategies to break persistent poverty traps. This study contributes to both theoretical and practical discourses on poverty by integrating institutional, cultural, and conflict dimensions into a cohesive analytical framework. Its findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to design context-sensitive and sustainable poverty alleviation strategies in Thailand and similar Southeast Asian contexts.

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