

PROTECTING FARMLANDS AMID URBAN AND INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION: COMMUNITY MECHANISMS IN YOTHAKA AND KHAO DIN UNDER THAILAND'S EEC DEVELOPMENT

Jirayoot Seemung and Chainarong Krueanuan*

Faculty of Political Science and Law, Burapha University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author:**
Chainarong Krueanuan
chainarong@go.buu.ac.th

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This study analyzed the community mechanisms used to manage agricultural areas amid urban expansion and the conditions that support their success, focusing on the Yothaka and Khao Din communities in Chachoengsao province. This study adopted a qualitative research approach to understand social phenomena in all relevant contextual dimensions, using a holistic perspective to examine the economic, social, and political dimensions of the study areas, following the framework of local community studies in political economy. Data collection included documentary research (primary and secondary sources), in-depth interviews with key informants in urban development and local governance, and focus group interviews. The study found that both communities developed civil society mechanisms to form social movements. Yothaka formed the “Yothaka Rak Thin Group” to strengthen networks with non-governmental organizations and enhance its bargaining power through petitions, symbolic actions, and negotiations, while Khao Din mobilized through the “Rak Mae Phra Thoranee Network” and utilized specific mechanisms such as rejecting public hearings, seeking redress through the Land Bank Administration Institute, and leveraging national political mechanisms. Key conditions for successful agricultural land management include internal community cooperation, the nature of conflicts, social network building, effective communication, and post-election political context. This study contributes to the reconceptualization of rural civil society in Thailand as shifting from adaptive cooperation to networked, activist resistance under state-led capitalist development.

Keywords: Civil society mechanisms; Eastern Economic Corridor; farmland protection; industrial expansion; social movements

1. INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) is a macroeconomic development project that aims to enhance Thai industrial and investment capabilities by stimulating economic growth (Seemung, 2019). Development under the EEC framework has accelerated urbanization and structural changes in the agricultural sector (Department of Public Works and Town & Country Planning, Ministry of Interior, 2019; Eastern Economic Corridor Policy Committee Office & Department of Public Works and Town & Country Planning, 2020), particularly in Chachoengsao province, which is recognized for its agricultural potential (Kuaycharoen et al., 2021).

Following Order No. 47/2017 issued by the Head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a new land-use plan was introduced, merging areas across Chachoengsao, Chonburi, and Rayong provinces to facilitate urban and industrial expansion under the EEC project. This restructuring has substantially altered land ownership and usage patterns in agricultural zones, creating intensified pressures on farming communities regarding land rights, the loss of farmland, and the loss of residences (Eastern Friends Network & Agenda to Change the East, 2019).

The cases of Yothaka and Khao Din subdistricts in Chachoengsao province represent communities directly affected by urban expansion and industrial development of the EEC. In Yothaka, lease agreements on Treasury Department land were terminated to return the land to the Royal Thai Navy, reflecting broader land-use restructuring associated with EEC development. In Khao Din, the community was affected by land acquisition processes linked to large-scale industrial estate development under the EEC framework. These developments have posed significant challenges to maintaining agricultural production and preserving community identity. In response, both communities have employed a range of social and political mechanisms to protect their agricultural land amid ongoing urban and industrial expansion.

This study had two main objectives:

1. To analyze the mechanisms adopted by the Yothaka and Khao Din communities to protect agricultural land under pressure from urban and industrial expansion linked to the EEC, and
2. To analyze the economic, political, and social conditions that play a significant role in the success of community efforts to respond to and protect farmland from urban and industrial expansion.

This study specifically highlights community-driven mechanisms to safeguard agricultural areas, demonstrating how grassroots responses effectively challenge top-down development frameworks characteristic of the EEC.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research explored concepts, theories, and related studies as tools to understand social phenomena. The literature review encompassed theories on urbanization processes, civil society in communities, and knowledge relevant to the analysis of modern Thai rural communities. Previous research was investigated to construct a framework for analysis and discussion as outlined below.

Sampantharak (2021) focused on the impact of urban development in the suburban areas of Bangkok, specifically the Bang Rak Noi agricultural community in Nonthaburi province. This area traditionally practiced a unique form of agriculture, characterized by Orchard Culture and Rice Culture. Urban expansion reduced agricultural land and put pressure on farmers' livelihoods. The community adapted by forming civil society groups such as the "Bang Rak Noi Farmers Group" and the "Bang Rak Noi Agro-Tourism Center" to promote agro-tourism and attract the younger generation to farming. Cooperation with local administrative organizations was encouraged to develop infrastructure. These adaptations reflected mechanisms for managing agricultural areas amid urban expansion through the internal civil society model known as "Community-based collective action" or "cool action" initiatives.

Urban and industrial expansion affecting agriculture has led to community-based civil society formations and, in some cases, to local civil movements. Praditsilp et al. (2021) examined land management and civil movement within the EEC. They found that land system management in the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) was driven by a quadripartite alliance among the state, national capitalists, local capitalists, and transnational capitalists, operating under a neoliberal ideology within a centralized, authoritarian bureaucracy. This prompted resistance from civil society, including small-scale farmers, tenant farmers, NGOs, local civil groups, and opposition political parties. These groups argued that EEC industrial development negatively affected agricultural lands, natural resources, and community rights. Civil society responded with mechanisms to protect resources and demand transparency in urban planning. Four key resistance strategies were observed as (1) Post-coup resistance: including petition submissions and symbolic protests during the

enforcement of Article 44, (2) Street politics as protests and marches to influence policy after Article 44 expired, (3) Parliamentary politics by raising issues in parliament and forming committees with opposition parties, and (4) Judicial politics by filing administrative lawsuits to revoke non-participatory city plans.

Similarly, Mansap (2014) and Patradhamkul (2022) found that large-scale development projects and urban and industrial expansion significantly affected residents' livelihoods, thereby triggering the formation of citizen networks—those affected by environmental issues formed loosely organized civic networks to pool resources and coordinate activities. Key strategies included using public spaces to raise awareness and pursuing legal action by filing lawsuits in administrative courts.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the literature review and the synthesis of relevant concepts, theories, and empirical studies, an analytical framework was developed to analyze the mechanisms and conditions underlying community responses to urban expansion in agricultural areas (as shown in Figure 1).

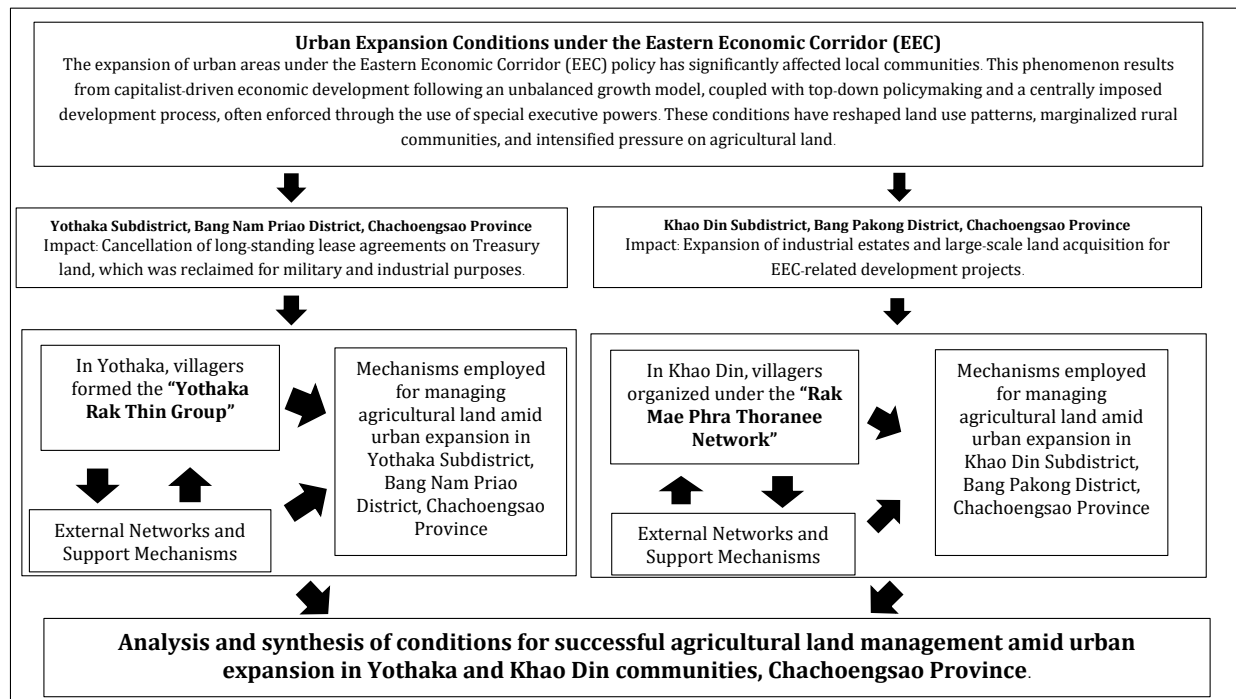


Figure 1: Analytical framework
Source: Developed by the authors (2024)

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to understand social phenomena in all relevant contextual dimensions, following the framework of local community studies in political economy (Nartsupha, 1986). Data were collected using two primary methods:

1. Documentary research, which involved both primary and secondary sources, and
2. In-depth interviews with key informants involved in urban development or community and local governance.

The key informants were selected using purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached—when no new themes emerged according to the study's objectives and thematic scope. The key informants were categorized into three groups, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of key informants involved in agricultural land management in Yothaka and Khao Din subdistricts, Chachoengsao province

Informant type	Yothaka community, Bang Nam Priao district (No. of persons)	Khao Din community, Bang Pakong district (No. of persons)
1. Local villagers or representatives of the public sector involved in agricultural land management	5	3
2. Representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private sector actors involved in agricultural land management	3	3
3. Representatives of government agencies involved in agricultural land management	2	2

Source: Authors (2024)

Focus group interviews were conducted on two occasions, guided by key issues aligned with the study objectives. A moderator facilitated the sessions to encourage dialogue, elicit joint proposals, and validate the collected information.

After data collection, triangulation techniques were applied to ensure credibility in accordance with qualitative research standards. The data were then systematically analyzed using content analysis (Phothisita, 2011), enabling the interpretation of findings, identification of key components, and exploration of relationships. This process allowed for the development of conclusions and ensured the validity and relevance of the findings.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 The mechanisms adopted by the Yothaka and Khao Din communities

The findings revealed that the mechanisms adopted in both case studies to manage agricultural land amid urban expansion were driven by social movements in civil society. These mechanisms diverged from conventional community-based or “cool action” forms of civil society. They stemmed from the collective mobilization of grassroots networks—particularly affected villagers—who were impacted by the limitations of representative democracy and the exercise of state power without public participation or consensus.

This mobilization resulted in social movements characterized by contention, negotiation, and the strategic reconfiguration of relationships with other sectors of society, notably the state and private entities, to advance their own agendas.

Both case studies were set within the context of urban expansion driven by the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) development project. This capitalist economic initiative follows a model of unbalanced growth. This development was centrally planned and implemented through a top-down approach, with public policies designed and implemented through forced-development approaches. These processes were shaped by elite networks, including military leaders who assumed political power following the 2014 coup, economic elites, and technocrats. These groups utilized special powers granted under Article 44 of the 2014 (interim) Constitution of Thailand, enacted by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), to bypass standard legal and policy-making procedures.

Following the impacts of urban expansion, both case studies employed mechanisms to manage agricultural land, as detailed below:

5.1.1 The mechanisms adopted by Yothaka community, Bang Nam Priao district, Chachoengsao province

Yothaka subdistrict has experienced a long history of land ownership changes, beginning during the reign of King Rama V, when a private company was granted a concession to dig a canal, along with rights to claim land on both sides. This development transformed the area from acidic soil into arable land, encouraging population settlement. After the concession expired in 1915, the villagers first claimed the land and then cultivated it.

In 1948, the Royal Thai Navy purchased the area to produce food supplies for wartime use. The land was later transferred to the Treasury Department under the State Property Act of 1975 (B.E. 2518), and villagers continued to farm the land by paying rent to the Treasury.

In 2014, the government issued a notice terminating lease agreements for more than 4,000 rai of Treasury land, with the intention of returning it to the Navy. This action effectively stripped villagers of their land use rights, even though many had cultivated the land for generations. The termination was carried out without prior public notice or explanation, resulting in unresolved disputes. While villagers continued to farm the land, no lease renewals were granted, with parts of the area earmarked for development under the Eastern

Economic Corridor (EEC) project. Currently, the residents face legal uncertainty and unresolved land management issues with the state (Ariyaviriyant, 2009; Interviewee 8, personal communication, December 11, 2023; Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 23, 2023; Kamchamnarn, 2018).

The Chachoengsao Provincial Treasury Office began returning the land to the Navy in mid-2014 following the official notice to terminate leases and collect compensation for the use of state land. This decision affected several groups of residents, including:

- 131 people who lost only residential land
- 334 people who lost both residential and agricultural land
- 170 people who lost only agricultural land

In total, 635 people from four villages—Moo 2, Moo 10, Moo 11, and Moo 12—were affected, representing 169 households (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2: Affected groups

Affected groups	No. of households	Land area (Rai-Ngan-Square Wah)	No. of people
1. Those affected only in terms of residential property	43	22-0-79	131
2. Those affected in terms of both residence and farmland	71	1,821-0-33	334
3. Those affected only in terms of farmland	55	1,086-0-52	170
Total across four villages	169	3,358-3-67	635

Source: Eastern People's Strategy Forum (2020)

Those affected formed the “Yothaka Rak Thin Group,” coordinating with non-governmental networks to enhance their bargaining power with the state. These networks included EEC Watch (Eastern Economic Corridor Development Watch Group), Land Watch Thai, P-Move (People's Movement for a Just Society), the Eastern Friends Network, and the EnLAW THAI Foundation, as well as other groups affected by the Eastern Economic Corridor development. This coalition-building and network expansion led to the application of several mechanisms for managing agricultural land amid urban expansion, as follows:

1. Petition submissions: This was the first mechanism to emerge following the Navy's request to reclaim the land. The affected villagers of Yothaka began organizing and submitting letters to relevant government agencies through formal channels. After the first official notice from the authorities on September 19, 2017, the Navy issued another notice, prompting villagers to start mobilizing. Initially, they gathered informally at a community leader's home on Moo 11, where complaints were drafted and delivered to various agencies (Kamchamnarn, 2018). This is reflected in an interview excerpt:

“Back then, we gathered at the headman's house. He would call and tell us where to go, and we'd hop on the truck. Fifty to sixty people could gather in a flash. I went every time. The group wasn't formally organized—it was just villagers in this community. At first, when we went places, no one knew us.” (Interviewee 9, personal communication, December 11, 2023)

The villagers submitted petitions to various agencies including a letter to the Prime Minister and the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy, dated October 11, 2017, a letter to the Head of the Task Force for Lease Termination Resolution and the Deputy Chief of Staff, dated October 6, 2017, a letter to the National Human Rights Commission and the Ombudsman, dated 28 November 2017, and a letter to the Director-General of the Treasury Department, dated March 20, 2018.

2. Symbolic expression: After organizing, the Yothaka Rak Thin Group initiated various symbolic actions. Villagers pooled funds to create custom shirts bearing a purple Yothaka flower motif on the front. The back carried the slogan: “Land must belong to those who till it.” They issued public statements and held signs expressing opposition to the government's termination of the lease (Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

On September 19, 2018, the Yothaka Rak Thin Group gathered to publicly declare their legitimate rights as pioneers who transformed the forest into fertile rice fields. They pledged to protect their ancestral land, refusing to evacuate or relocate, and declared Yothaka a “No-EEC Zone” (see Figure 2) (Matichon Weekly, 2018). Further symbolic actions followed, such as submitting petitions to the Eastern Economic Corridor Policy Committee (EEPC) and the Government House Complaint Center on July 23, 2019 (see Figure 3).



Figure 2: Statement declaration by the Yothaka Rak Thin Group
Source: Matichon Weekly (2018)



Figure 3: The Yothaka Rak Thin Group submits a petition to the Eastern Economic Corridor Policy Committee Office (EEPCO) and the Government House Complaint Center.
Source: Ecological Alert and Recovery – Thailand (EARTH, 2019)

3. Negotiation with relevant government agencies: The government initially adopted a firm stance toward negotiations. However, once the Yothaka Rak Thin Group had formally organized, engaged in social activism, and built networks with NGOs, this collective action increased their bargaining power, and the government adopted a more conciliatory approach. Negotiations took place through both formal and informal channels to reduce conflict and prevent escalation into violence. Officials from provincial and district agencies, the Treasury Department, and security forces entered the area to listen to the villagers' concerns and engage in dialogue with the Yothaka residents, as reflected in the following interview:

"At first, the Navy wouldn't compromise. I went to speak with them at the center and asked, 'If I leave, where will I go?' They said, 'That's your problem.' They had no support measures—just left us to fend for ourselves. Later, the governor tried to negotiate and requested 300 rai for the villagers but nothing came of it, just silence—no offer." (Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 18, 2023)

4. Mobilization as a network of affected groups: By building ties with NGOs, the Yothaka group expanded its network and formed alliances with other communities affected by the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) development project. This coalition engaged in joint petition submissions, issued public statements, and initiated legal action, including a lawsuit filed by the Eastern Friends Network in the administrative court (Interviewee 9, personal communication, December 11, 2023; Interviewee 5, personal communication, October 18, 2023; Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 18, 2023). The group expanded alliances with other affected communities across the EEC region.

5. Petitioning parliamentary committees: This new mechanism was employed by the Yothaka Rak Thin Group in 2024. The group submitted a petition to the House of Representatives' Committee on Land, Natural Resources, and Environment requesting a formal investigation and the exploration of viable solutions. On March 27, 2024, representatives from the group formally submitted a petition to the committee requesting an examination of the dispute over Treasury land under the Navy's jurisdiction in the Yothaka area. The representative of the 7th Vice Chairman of the Committee on Land, Natural Resources, and Environment received the petition and submitted the matter for committee review. The petition called for an investigation into land-use disputes involving plots 612, 613, and 614 and proposed that ownership rights be allocated to residents based on actual land use (Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 18, 2023; Secretariat of the House of Representatives, 2024).

6. Communication with the public: This mechanism played a critical role in protecting the agricultural land of the Yothaka community. The group's communication strategy can be divided into three key mechanisms:

1) Collaboration with partner networks and organizing academic forums: The Yothaka villagers worked with NGOs and social networks to organize academic seminars and related public activities. Notable examples included the “Land is Life: Overcoming Thailand's Land Crisis” conference and the Eastern People's Strategic Assembly, where affected residents and community representatives were invited to participate in policy dialogues. These events elevated land issues into academic and public discourse, increasing national awareness.

2) Presenting issues through mass media: The Yothaka Rak Thin Group collaborated with media outlets to raise awareness of the land conflict. They worked with Thai PBS to air news segments and documentaries, including the 2018 Noon Report entitled “Yothaka Land Expropriation in Chachoengsao—Navy Requests Use for Special Economic Zone.” These broadcasts attracted national attention to the Yothaka case and encouraged further media coverage by Matichon Weekly and Prachatai.

3) Communication via social media: The group actively used social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to share information about the land dispute and propose possible solutions. Their efforts were supported by Land Watch Thai, which amplified these messages. The group produced a documentary entitled “Yothaka in a Vacuum,” which significantly contributed to public understanding and awareness of the ongoing land conflict.

Through these communication channels—academic forums, mass media, and social media—the Yothaka villagers succeeded in raising public awareness and encouraging cross-sector engagement. This strategy became a vital tool in strengthening the community's negotiating position and reinforcing its capacity to interact with other societal actors.

5.1.2 The mechanisms adopted by Khao Din community, Bang Pakong district, Chachoengsao province

Khao Din subdistrict is among the most fertile areas in Chachoengsao province and is home to some of the richest mangrove forests, making it highly suitable for agriculture. Most villagers engage in rice farming and aquaculture under the Na Khao Wang system—a mixed-use method in which rice and aquatic animals are cultivated on the same plot. Popularized in the late 1990s, this system reflects local ecological wisdom in water management and relies on natural tidal flows. Rice is grown during the rainy season, while during the dry season, saltwater is allowed to flow into the fields to raise shrimp and fish (Strategic and Information Group, Chachoengsao Provincial Agricultural Office, 2022).

The construction of the motorway disrupted the water systems essential for agriculture, reducing the area available for rice farming. Villagers also lost land due to mortgage defaults, land confiscation, and economic inequality, with many families forced into leasing land for agricultural use (Kuaycharoen et al., 2021).

By late 2017, private companies began acquiring land in Khao Din to support the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) policy. Land-use zoning was changed from green (agricultural) to purple (industrial) to accommodate the expansion of the BlueTech City Industrial Estate (Thansettakij, 2019; Thai PBS, 2020). These changes raised serious concerns over environmental impacts and food security, as Khao Din is a key food-producing region known for rice, rice seeds, shrimp, and mud crabs. Some villagers had to relocate and subsequently lost access to their agricultural land (PPTV Online, 2018).

However, one group of residents remained and instigated mechanisms to protect agricultural land. As land acquisition progressed, the expansion of the industrial sector displaced some residents and tenant farmers. After acquiring the land, the company hired a legal consultancy firm to notify the tenant farmers to dismantle their structures and vacate the land in preparation for the development of the industrial estate.

The farmers were offered compensation for dismantling their homes and provided with 12 rai of alternative land, subdivided into 50 plots, each 50 square wah, and a rent-to-own scheme at zero interest with monthly installments of 3,000 baht over a period of ten years (Matichon Online, 2019).

This arrangement was perceived as unjust by the opposing civil society network. Farmers were required to vacate the land before their lease agreements had expired. The land transaction between the company and the original landowners was also questioned on legal grounds for failing to provide prior notice to the tenant farmers, as required by law. As a result, farmers were adversely affected by the development process (Interviewee 1, personal communication, February 8, 2024; Krueanuan & Sanitwong na Ayutthaya, 2021).

Due to these issues, over 57 families from four villages were pressured to vacate their homes and farmlands (Pinprateep, 2020), categorized into the following groups:

- Group 1: Families without housing, evicted and forced off their farmlands – 57 families
- Group 2: Families with housing but no access to farmland – 34 households
- Group 3: Residents of neighboring subdistricts concerned about becoming future targets of industrial

estate expansion, due to a lack of legal protection and environmental safeguards.

Some of the affected individuals accepted the compensation. They agreed to relocate—including those who participated in the company's rent-to-own scheme—but 20 to 25 individuals rejected the compensation terms offered and refused to vacate the land. These remaining opponents allied with the Rak Mae Phra Thoranee Network (Interviewee 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024). Similar to the Yothaka case, the Rak Mae Phra Thoranee Network established relationships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to strengthen its bargaining position. These included key NGOs in the previously identified network that provided knowledge, legal support, and coordination. The network also formed alliances with other communities affected by the Eastern Economic Corridor development project.

The Khao Din Community expanded its network to include connections with government bodies, including national opposition political parties and the Land Bank Administration Institute (a public organization). The mechanisms used to manage agricultural land amid urban expansion included:

1. Petition submissions: This began when large-scale land acquisition for industrial estate development commenced, driven by major private investors. In the early stages, villagers held community meetings and submitted formal complaints to government agencies. On September 13, 2018, they filed a complaint with the Governor of Chachoengsao through the Damrongtham Center, citing the impacts of land acquisition of approximately 1,000 rai in Khao Din subdistrict. The land was subsequently filled and prepared for development, while villagers living on leased agricultural land reported facing eviction and being forced to dismantle their homes (Transborder News, 2018).

2. Refusal to cooperate and opposition to public hearings: On February 8, 2019, the villagers protested during a public hearing on the EEC development plan, organized by the Eastern Economic Corridor Policy Committee at Sunthara Wellness Resort & Hotel in Chachoengsao province. The hearing was attended by both state and private-sector representatives, including Deputy Secretaries-General of the EEC Policy Committee, the Governor of Chachoengsao, and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Thai Industries.

The villagers held up symbolic signs at the meeting. They submitted a petition along with a public statement opposing three major development projects: Khao Din, Nong Teen Nok, and Phan Thong. This led to direct negotiations between the protest group and the Deputy Secretary-General of the EEC Policy Committee. The protesters' key concerns reflected dissatisfaction with the EEC development process, which they believed lacked adequate community input and threatened the environment, natural resources, and local land rights. They viewed the project as failing to consider local voices and disrupting their way of life and local economy.

3. Use of legal mechanisms: After the land was sold, the company issued eviction notices requiring residents to dismantle their homes and vacate the land. In response, the villagers invoked legal mechanisms, including the Civil and Commercial Code. The most significant legal instrument was the Agricultural Land Lease Act, which allowed residents to retain access to farmland for an additional 6 years. This is reflected in the interview below:

"The NCPO repealed many laws to centralize power, but they didn't repeal the Agricultural Land Lease Act. That gave us a legal opening to fight back." (Interviewee 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

Lawsuits were filed with the Supreme Administrative Court. On September 11, 2020, Srisuwan Janya from the Stop Global Warming Association and 15 local villagers filed a case against the Cabinet, Prime Minister, and related agencies. A prior suit filed on January 24, 2019 sought to revoke or suspend the permit granted to Double P Land Co., Ltd. for soil excavation and landfilling in Khao Din, within the EEC zone. The lawsuit claimed violations of the Constitution and relevant laws, including the failure to conduct an Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA).

On September 11, 2020, the affected villagers filed another lawsuit with the Supreme Administrative Court against the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and relevant authorities. The petition sought to revoke the EEC zoning plan (2019), arguing that it violated the procedures and standards set out in the Town Planning Act, particularly due to the absence of public participation.

4. Mobilization through civil society networks: The creation of partnerships between community groups and the previously identified NGO network. These networks contributed by collecting academic data, offering resource support, and helping the communities articulate their issues to the broader public. These collaborations also extended to other communities affected by the EEC, leading to joint petitions, public statements, and shared lawsuits filed in administrative courts, with support from the Eastern Friends Network.

5. Utilization of national politics and parliamentary committees: After the 2019 Thai general election, the affected villagers reached out to political parties to advocate for their concerns before the EEC zoning plan was submitted to the Eastern Economic Corridor Policy Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, on August 5, 2019.

On July 24, 2019, about 100 representatives from the affected areas in Chachoengsao, Chonburi, and Rayong visited the Temporary Parliament to submit a letter through the opposition whip, specifically the Future Forward Party. The party assigned a representative responsible for agricultural policy to visit Khao Din with local MPs. Upon learning that Khao Din was a vital agricultural area, the Future Forward Party requested that the committee postpone the approval of the EEC zoning plan.

This engagement led to the matter being raised in parliamentary debates and submitted to the Parliamentary Committee on Land, Natural Resources, and Environment, resulting in the formation of a subcommittee to study land and environmental issues stemming from the special and economic development zones in the East. A coordinator from EEC Watch was also involved as a subcommittee member (Interviewee 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024; Thai PBS, 2019; Workpoint TODAY, 2019).

6. Land remedy mechanism via the Land Bank Administration Institute (Public Organization): The Land Bank Administration Institute (LBAI) played a key role in resolving the land issues by acting as an intermediary in land acquisition efforts to compensate and support the affected villagers. The process was driven by local advocacy and coordination from an advisor to P-Move and an expert member of the Land Bank board (Interviewee 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024; Land Bank Management Institute (Public Organization), 2024).

On April 30, 2020, the Institute initiated a land purchase negotiation in Bang Phueng subdistrict, Bang Pakong district, Chachoengsao. The land acquisition team conducted field negotiations with landowners. This initiative was made possible through collaboration among the community, stakeholders, and the Bang Phueng Agricultural-Fishery Community Enterprise, which comprises 13 households that primarily work in fishing and agriculture (Land Bank Management Institute (Public Organization), 2020).

In June 2020, the Institute completed the purchase of 9 rai in Bang Phueng to support the affected farmers (torzkrub, 2020). However, despite the land purchase agreement, the community enterprise could not distribute the land among its members due to unresolved decisions regarding the final allocation.

7. Public communication mechanism: The social communication strategy was divided into three key mechanisms:

1) Organizing academic forums and building collaborative networks: Networks in Khao Din subdistrict used academic forums as a critical tool for advancing land-related issues. These events were held in collaboration with external organizations, including the Federation of Thai Farmers and Land Watch Thai. Examples included the “Land is Life: Overcoming Thailand’s Land Crisis” forum in 2018 and the Eastern People’s Strategic Conference in 2020, which focused on discussing the impacts of the EEC and land management. Another significant platform was the “Third Parliament” forum in 2019, which brought together representatives from various affected communities—including Khao Din—to deliberate on environmental impacts and public land use associated with the EEC development.

2) Presenting issues through mass media: The mass media played a significant role in bringing the land issues in Khao Din to public attention. Thai PBS broadcast news and documentaries such as “The Way of Na Khao Wang: Bang Pakong River Basin” and the “Citizen Reporter” series, which highlighted the community’s way of life and the significance of Khao Din amid urban zoning changes. Other media outlets, such as The Standard, Way Magazine, and Decode, also published in-depth investigative reports on the impacts of industrial development policies in the EEC and the loss of villagers’ land (Interviewee 13, personal communication, December 1, 2023).

3) Using social media: Social media became a vital communication tool for addressing local issues and sharing updates from Khao Din. Land Watch Thai supported the dissemination of information across platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. One notable example was the documentary series “Ordinary People in a Special Economic Zone,” particularly the episode entitled “Khao Din: The Declining Life of Na Khao Wang Farmers.” Other activities included livestreams of academic forums and the online program “My Home, Your Dream,” which discussed the adverse effects of EEC development.

The use of academic forums, mass media, and social media collectively played a crucial role in propelling the land rights issue in Khao Din. These communication mechanisms helped raise widespread awareness and stimulated support from various sectors to address land issues and the impacts of EEC development.

5.2 The economic, political, and social conditions that play a significant role in the success of community efforts

Both these case studies are ongoing, and assessments of success are based on current observations. Success in managing agricultural areas can be seen by the empowerment of local civil society within the affected communities, enabling them to negotiate land management with external actors—namely, the state and the private sector. One key measure of success has been the responsive adaptation of these external actors, who now acknowledge the affected communities and have proposed various compensatory and remedial measures.

These outcomes stemmed largely from the use of civil society mechanisms, particularly social movements. Based on the analysis and data synthesis, the following conditions were identified as key contributors to success:

1. Entrepreneurial nature of the agricultural society: Both case study areas are semi-urban communities with entrepreneurial-style agricultural societies. This form of community organizing and activism requires resource mobilization, which is more feasible when communities possess sufficient capital. The villagers in Yothaka and Khao Din are not subsistence-level farmers but mid-scale agricultural entrepreneurs, engaged in rice farming and aquaculture. Their resource base enabled them to support movement activities (Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 18, 2023), as reflected in the following statement:

“Those who fight back aren’t rich, but they’re not poor either. If a community has enough energy and resources to support a movement, it has power. People in Community A (pseudonym) pooled their funds, organized rallies, provided food, and even got fuel for trips to Bangkok. Chanthaburi is the same. Having some financial resources doesn’t mean you’re guaranteed to win, but it definitely helps.” (Interviewee 13, personal communication, December 1, 2023).

2. Nature of the conflict parties: The two cases involved different types of opponents, which impacted the strategies available. In Yothaka, the conflict was with the state. Because the land was classified as state property, it was perceived as public land, making it more accessible for civil society to intervene. By contrast, Khao Din involved privately owned land, where land rights had already been transferred to private companies, thus reducing available legal and political avenues and diminishing the chances of success (Interviewee 13, personal communication, December 1, 2023).

3. Collective awareness and shared objectives: A strong sense of awareness and shared purpose among the affected villagers proved critical. When civil society movements are unified and collectively goal-oriented, with high levels of participation from community members, they have stronger bargaining power (Interviewee 13, personal communication, December 1, 2023).

4. Network-building capacity: Both case studies demonstrated the importance of building networks with non-governmental organizations, which acted as connectors between the communities and broader national or regional civil society networks. The network collaborated with national civil society organizations to strengthen its position. Similarly, connections were formed with state organizations, as seen in Khao Din’s case, where networks were built with national opposition parties and parliamentary subcommittees, as well as with the Land Bank Administration Institute, enhancing access to land-related remedies.

5. Internal and external communication: Effective internal communication was essential for resource mobilization and organizational unity. The Yothaka Group exhibited greater cohesion than Khao Din, partly due to stronger communication practices. External communication also played a vital role in building civil society’s bargaining power, enabling affected communities to publicly voice their struggles through forums, mass media, and social media platforms. These channels helped bring their land issues into broader public and policy conversations (Interviewee 13, personal communication, December 1, 2023; Interviewee 7, personal communication, October 18, 2023).

6. Political context after democratization: The post-election democratic context of 2019 provided a political opportunity structure. Between 2016 and 2018, Thailand was governed under authoritarian rule following the 2014 military coup. The return to democratic elections in 2019 enabled civil society groups to utilize a wider range of mechanisms, such as working with political parties, engaging in parliamentary processes, and accessing institutionalized legal channels (Interviewee 12, personal communication, December 10, 2023).

6. DISCUSSION

Urban expansion driven by the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a capitalist development project based on an unbalanced growth model, has been highly centralized and top-down. Public policies have been formulated and implemented through state-driven development approaches, shaped by elite networks comprising military leaders who assumed power following the 2014 coup, economic elites, and technocrats. These actors exercised special powers under Article 44 of the 2014 (interim) Constitution, issued by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), to bypass standard legal and policymaking procedures. This phenomenon reflects the emergence of the “politics of exception” (Agamben, 2005), which highlights the mechanisms through which the state can suspend or relax normal legal frameworks to advance specific policy agendas. In the case of the EEC, the development zone should be understood as an “exceptional space” in which the state exercises special powers to accelerate investment and economic expansion (Krueanuan & Sanitwong na Ayutthaya, 2021).

Under such conditions, the marginalization of local participation and the erosion of land rights are not merely byproducts of development but are embedded within the broader structure of state power. In this context, community resistance in both case studies reflects efforts to contest and negotiate with state authority under these exceptional conditions, particularly to assert claims to participation and control over local land resources. These dynamics can thus be understood as forms of grassroots social movements within civil society.

Both case studies reflect the mobilization of community-based civil society through social movement mechanisms to change development trajectories and demand greater stakeholder participation. These grassroots environmental movements originate from structural issues inherent in capitalist economic development, particularly the unbalanced growth model and top-down policymaking devoid of meaningful civil society involvement, often exacerbated by the use of special powers under Thailand’s political system.

To interpret these dynamics, it is essential to integrate insights from modern community studies. Both communities have moved beyond traditional subsistence farming, exhibiting characteristics of entrepreneurial rural societies. Farming practices have evolved significantly, replacing traditional self-labor with hired labor and mechanization, driven by cost-benefit considerations. This shift, combined with regional and macroeconomic development in Thailand’s eastern region, has blurred conventional distinctions between rural and urban spaces. These communities have transformed into hybrid spaces that merge global and local, urban and rural elements and now function as nodes within the capitalist food production network, empowering villagers to mobilize resources and negotiate with other sectors of society.

This study highlights how social networks operate horizontally within affected communities and vertically with NGOs and external allies. Digital communication platforms have enabled communities to sustain networks, collaborate strategically with NGOs, and widely disseminate their issues, particularly through social media.

The findings indicate a shift in civic consciousness among villagers—from passive acceptance of inequality toward a recognition of themselves as citizens entitled to state services and protection, thereby demanding greater state accountability.

Significant similarities and differences are evident compared with previous research. This study contrasts with Sampantharak’s (2021) findings in Bang Rak Noi, where urban expansion led to the formation of state-supported farmers’ and agro-tourism groups, representing a “community-based” or “cool action” civil society model. Conversely, the two cases in this study have evolved into activist-oriented civil societies that engage in both negotiation and political confrontation with state and private actors.

The findings align with research by Praditsilp et al. (2021) and Patradhamkul (2022) in illustrating local civil society mobilization. Strategies to protect land rights vary according to political opportunity. In this study, two distinct political contexts affecting mobilization strategies were identified as (1) Authoritarian rule (2016–2018), characterized by constrained movement activities, resulting in strategies focused on petitions and regional alliance-building, and (2) Post-election democratization (from 2019 onward), characterized by expanded mobilization opportunities including public rallies, media campaigns, and leveraging parliamentary and judicial mechanisms by forming alliances with opposition parties, submitting parliamentary motions, and filing administrative lawsuits.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed mechanisms for managing agricultural land amid urban expansion through the case studies of Yothaka and Khao Din subdistricts in Chachoengsao province. The findings revealed that local

civil society movements emerged as primary mechanisms for defending agricultural spaces. Specific strategies varied by context: In Yothaka, symbolic protests, negotiations with state actors, and alliances with external organizations were essential for enhancing bargaining power, while in Khao Din, a broader approach was employed, including legal actions, resistance through public hearings, and alliances with state institutions such as the Land Bank and political parties. Both cases demonstrate that the success of civil society movements in defending agricultural areas depends on (1) the entrepreneurial characteristics of agricultural communities, (2) the characteristics of opposing parties (e.g., state or private sector), (3) shared consciousness, common objectives, and active participation among the affected groups, (4) the ability to build and sustain social networks, (5) effective internal coordination and external communication strategies, and (6) a democratic political context following elections.

The findings suggest that local civil society organizations in both areas have the capacity to negotiate with and resist development policies that threaten community livelihoods by adjusting their strategies to changing contexts. These experiences provide valuable policy implications for designing urban development mechanisms that balance industrial growth with agricultural sustainability and underscore the necessity of promoting citizen participation in policy decision-making to achieve equitable and sustainable development. The identified community mechanisms are pivotal in balancing urban-industrial expansion with sustainable agricultural land management, particularly under intensive state-driven development policies such as Thailand's EEC.

The lessons drawn from these case studies can also be applied to other regions of Thailand that are facing similar development pressures. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how community-led mechanisms can serve as effective responses to state-driven urban and industrial expansion.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, several key policy measures emerge as essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable development within the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), with particular attention to agricultural land management challenges:

1. Establish equitable benefit-sharing and fair compensation frameworks: Development initiatives must tackle existing structural inequalities through concrete actions that ensure fair compensation reaches all stakeholders, tenant farmers included. The government needs to bridge economic gaps and deliver real benefits to communities affected by development projects.

2. Embed environmental sustainability in land-use planning processes: Urban and industrial expansion in the EEC requires Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) guidance and should support an economic structure that balances industrial growth with agricultural preservation. Effective long-term spatial planning must protect environmental integrity and public safety while maintaining economic diversity and the flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.

3. Transfer greater power and resources to local government levels: The central government should create pathways for more balanced fiscal resource distribution and give local administrative bodies expanded authority over decisions, especially regarding land-use planning and infrastructure projects. This shift would improve both responsiveness and accountability.

4. Create meaningful opportunities for public participation: Communities must have genuine involvement throughout all development phases, particularly during urban and regional planning processes. Public hearings should serve as truly inclusive forums where residents can shape decisions, voice local concerns, and participate in the fair distribution of benefits.

5. Maintain strong agricultural sector support during industrial expansion: National development strategies should incorporate specific financial, technical, and institutional assistance for EEC agriculture. This approach prevents industrial growth from sidelining agricultural livelihoods and promotes development that remains balanced, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable.

DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to support language refinement and improve the manuscript's clarity. The tool was used solely to edit and enhance the grammatical structure of pre-written text. The

use of this tool was limited to language polishing and did not involve content generation, data analysis, or interpretation. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions of this work.

3. Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Additional data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

4. Ethics statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Burapha University (Reference No. HU021/2566; IRB No. IRB2-024/2566). The approval was granted on March 9, 2023. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they participated in the study.

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6. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)

Jirayoot Seemung: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Chainarong Krueanuan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

ORCID

Jirayoot Seemung: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9969-8781>

Chainarong Krueanuan: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4461-8475>

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