

Fiscal Rebalancing and Peacebuilding: Budget Allocation Strategies in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

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Abstract

This study examines government budget allocation strategies for sustainable peacebuilding in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces. Employing a qualitative policy analysis based on secondary data—including government budget reports and conflict incident data from Deep South Watch (2004-2022)—the study integrates the analytical frameworks of Fiscal Policy for Development, Fiscal Federalism, and Positive Peace to assess the effectiveness of fiscal interventions in conflict-affected areas.

The findings indicate that, despite cumulative public expenditure exceeding 400 billion baht, budget allocation has remained predominantly concentrated on security operations, limiting its effectiveness in addressing the structural drivers of conflict. However, a significant shift since 2017 toward integrated and area-based budgeting—emphasizing cross-sectoral coordination and local participation—has been associated with a marked decline in violent incidents. This suggests that development-oriented and context-sensitive fiscal strategies are more effective in reducing conflict intensity.

The study further demonstrates that sustainable peacebuilding requires a rebalancing of fiscal priorities from security-centered expenditure toward investments in economic opportunities, social services, and inclusive development. In this regard, the concept of “Peace Budgeting” is proposed as a strategic framework for transforming public finance into a mechanism for reducing structural inequalities, strengthening state–society trust, and promoting long-term stability.

Comparative insights from the Mindanao case in the Philippines reinforce the importance of aligning fiscal decentralization, participatory governance, and structured peace processes. The study concludes that effective peacebuilding depends not on the scale of public spending, but on its structure, allocation logic, and inclusiveness. Accordingly, the transition toward Peace Budgeting represents a critical paradigm shift for achieving sustainable and inclusive peace in multicultural and conflict-affected societies, positioning fiscal policy as a central mechanism linking development and peacebuilding in such contexts.

Keywords: Conflict, Peace Budgeting, Southern Border Provinces, Sustainable, Violence

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Introduction

The conflict and unrest in Thailand's southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, as well as certain districts of Songkhla, are rooted in complex, longstanding historical, cultural, religious, and political foundations. The majority of the population in these areas adheres to Islam and speaks the Malay language. Historically, this region had autonomy before being incorporated into Siam (Thailand) during the Rattanakosin period. Subsequently, the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 marked a significant turning point, resulting in the formal division of Malay territories between the British colonial administration (present-day Malaysia) and Siam. This division engendered a sense of separation from ethnic and religious brethren.

Historically, the southern border provinces were once a prosperous ancient kingdom known as the "Malay Pattani Kingdom" (Oraphan et al., 2012). Particularly during the early Ayutthaya period, the region maintained self-governance under a sultanate system and possessed strategically significant port cities along the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula. This strategic importance prompted both the Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin kingdoms to extend their influence in attempts to control Pattani. Following the end of Raya Kuning's reign and Sultan Muhy al-Din's accession, Siamese forces defeated the armies of the Malay Pattani Kingdom and ultimately annexed the territory into the Kingdom of Siam. This loss of independence constituted a monumental loss in Pattani's history, as it resulted in Pattani remaining under Siamese rule to the present day" (Oraphan et al., 2012).

Following the Siamese military conquest of the Malay Pattani Kingdom, the once-mighty kingdom became part of the Kingdom of Siam, and administrative reforms were initiated, beginning with changes in leadership. Subsequently, resistance movements emerged, leading to the division of the original Malay Pattani Kingdom into seven principalities: Pattani, Yaring, Nong Chik, Yala, Saiburi, Raman, and Ra-ngae. Inevitably, such administrative restructuring diminished the sense of pride associated with the territory of the Malay Pattani Kingdom. In 1902, a major administrative reorganization consolidated all seven principalities into a single administrative unit called "Monthon Pattani." This reform abolished the authority of the seven local rulers and appointed Siamese commissioners as governors responsible for political affairs. Subsequently, in 1906, Monthon Pattani was subdivided into four provinces: Pattani, Yala, Saiburi, and Narathiwat, with Siamese commissioners appointed to govern each province. The aforementioned developments demonstrate that this territory of Pattani gradually transitioned from a state where Malay Pattani people exercised governing authority, possessed sovereign power, and wielded influence over other Malay territories to becoming an integral part of Siam (Oraphan et al., 2012).

The loss of the once-mighty Malay kingdom in this region caused profound suffering among the Malay population. Beyond the transformation of the Malay Pattani Kingdom into a subordinate territory of Thailand, there were accounts of Thai government actions whereby Thai officials who came to govern the Malay Pattani people acted unjustly and consistently sought personal gain. This treatment led the Malay population to feel they were being governed as a colonial dependency rather than as an integral part of the Kingdom of Siam. However, there were periods when the Malay Pattani people received adequate care and experienced prosperity under Siamese administrators. For instance, during the tenure of Prime Minister Pridi Banomyong, budgetary allocations were made to support and develop education and religious institutions for

the Malay Pattani community, which garnered considerable acceptance and appreciation from the Malay Pattani people (Oraphan et al., 2012).

Since the annexation of the Malay Pattani Kingdom, which had previously been an independent state, through administrative centralization during the reign of King Rama V, resistance and violence have persisted. Following the 1932 revolution that changed Thailand's governance system, the municipal administration system was abolished and replaced with regional provincial administration. The seven former Malay principalities were transformed into southern border provinces. Discontent among the former Malay rulers persisted until approximately 1947, when a concrete resistance movement emerged among the Malay population under the leadership of the traditional Malay elite. The Malay nationalist movement had a clear objective of achieving independence from Thai rule. Since then, the conflict and violence occurring in the southern border provinces have been perceived as a security problem (Pitakkumpol, 2017).

Unrest in the southern border area has occurred periodically, but the violence that erupted in 2004 represents a notably different phenomenon from past incidents in several aspects, including the frequency of incidents, the methods of attack involving highly destructive explosive devices, and the operational areas. Whereas historical incidents occurred in mountainous regions, recent events have taken place in community areas and urban zones where civilians reside. Moreover, the violence has been perpetrated not by large-scale forces but by groups employing violence as a means of resistance against state authority. This new wave of violence began with the "arms heist" incident at the Narathiwat Task Force Development Unit camp in Cho Airong District, Narathiwat Province, followed by the "Krue Se Mosque" incident in Pattani Province and the dispersal of demonstrators in front of the "Tak Bai" District Police Station in Narathiwat Province. These incidents collectively led to sustained armed operations that continue to the present day. The insurgent groups comprise multiple separatist ideological factions (such as the BRN) seeking to declare the independence of "Pattani" through armed struggle or bombings aimed at destroying both lives and property. Furthermore, identity differences in religion (Islam versus Buddhism), language (Malay-Jawi versus Thai), and culture serve as critical insulating factors that significantly intensify the conflict's complexity (Pitakkumpol, 2017).

Moreover, structural social problems such as poverty, unemployment, and perceptions of injustice within the governance and economic structures serve as contributing factors that fuel unrest and violence in the southern border area. All of these issues constitute historical conflicts stemming from the integration of states with different ethnic and religious compositions, as well as identity-based conflicts accumulated from misunderstanding and wounds inflicted by past unjust treatment by the Thai state, combined with the ideological struggle of separatist groups. Consequently, the violence in Thailand's three southern border provinces represents an ongoing security and development challenge spanning more than two decades that affects the lives, economy, and trust of the local population. The Thai government has allocated substantial budgets to address these issues, predominantly for security measures such as military deployment, police forces, and intelligence operations. Despite continuous increases in security expenditures, the unrest persists, and at times, incidents have intensified. Additionally, the government has invested enormous sums through ministries and local agencies in both the security and development sectors, aiming to address the problems and de-escalate the situation.

Furthermore, successive governments have established various agencies to address problems in the southern border provinces, as follows:

1. The National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) was appointed to bring together personnel from various sectors of society to collaborate in seeking long-term solutions to the country's problems, to achieve genuine reconciliation, peace, and justice.

2. The Forward Command of the Internal Security Operations Command, Region 4 (ISOC Region 4 Forward Command) was established to oversee security operations and military activities in the five southern border provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun). It implements security plans to prevent, suppress, and reduce violent incidents, while coordinating with civilian agencies and the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (2020).

3. The Southern Border Provinces Police Operations Centre (SBPPOC) is responsible for law enforcement, investigation, and maintaining order in the area, as well as conducting joint operations with ISOC Region 4 Forward Command and supporting special case investigations and security-related cases.

4. The Joint Civilian-Police-Military Task Force functions in area-based operations such as patrols, village protection, public relations, and victim assistance.

5. The Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) is responsible for coordinating and implementing government policies in the three southern border provinces, fostering understanding and cooperation between the government and the people, and supporting economic, social, and educational development in the area.

6. The Advisory Council for Administration and Development of the Southern Border Provinces serves as a platform for local stakeholders (including religious leaders, civil society, and the private sector) to participate in policy formulation and development proposals, functioning as a mechanism for building understanding between the state and Muslim communities in the area.

The majority of the aforementioned government-established agencies have focused primarily on maintaining order and security rather than emphasizing area development to mitigate conflict. This indicates that each year the government allocates enormous budgets to security operations rather than to economic and social development or to promoting justice and equality for the local population. Consequently, it may be considered that the persistence of violence in Thailand to the present day stems from the government's failure to address the root causes that would sustainably resolve the conflict and violence.

Beyond the Thai context, conflict problems in border areas or regions with ethnic and religious diversity have persistently emerged in several ASEAN countries, stemming from the histories of nation-state formation, the centralization of state power, and economic and social imbalances. A significant example is the conflict in Mindanao, Philippines, which is rooted in colonial history and the sense of exclusion experienced by the Bangsamoro Muslims. The Philippine government has shifted its approach from military force to peace negotiation processes, decentralization, and the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which represents an important example of conflict resolution through political institutions and area-level public participation.

Similarly, ethnic conflicts in Myanmar's Kayah, Shan, and Kachin states reflect the limitations of centralized states that cannot effectively manage identity diversity. Despite periodic attempts to sign ceasefire agreements and engage in political negotiations, the lack of decentralization mechanisms and discontinuity in peace processes remain significant obstacles to sustainable conflict resolution. Meanwhile, the case of Papua Province in Indonesia demonstrates the state's efforts to employ "Special Autonomy" measures alongside investment in

development and infrastructure. Although such measures have helped reduce tensions at times, they continue to face criticism regarding equity in resource allocation and genuine community participation in the area.

These case studies from ASEAN countries demonstrate that conflict resolution cannot rely solely on security measures but must integrate structural development, political and fiscal decentralization, and respect for the cultural and religious identity of local populations. Such lessons are particularly significant for understanding and formulating approaches to resolving the conflict in Thailand's southern border provinces, which are multicultural and face structural challenges similar to those in several ASEAN countries.

Therefore, this article proposes an approach to sustainable conflict resolution in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces by applying Peace Budgeting principles. This approach conceptualizes public budgets not merely as fiscal instruments for managing state expenditure, but as strategic mechanisms for shaping structural conditions that reduce violence, de-escalate conflict, and support long-term peacebuilding. It emphasizes rebalancing public expenditure from security-oriented spending toward investments in economic, social, educational, and quality-of-life development, with particular attention to local contexts and community participation. In doing so, Peace Budgeting advances Positive Peace by addressing structural inequalities, expanding livelihood and educational opportunities, and strengthening inclusive mechanisms for coexistence in culturally diverse societies.

Despite extensive studies on conflict and development in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces, limited attention has been given to the role of fiscal allocation as a strategic instrument for peacebuilding. Existing literature in the conflict–development nexus emphasizes that economic incentives and structural conditions play a decisive role in sustaining conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). However, the use of fiscal policy as a proactive mechanism to address these structural drivers remains underexplored.

This study also builds on the conflict–development nexus literature, which emphasizes the interdependence between security, institutional capacity, and socio-economic development in conflict-affected contexts. According to the World Bank (2011), sustainable peace requires strengthening legitimate institutions, improving governance, and expanding economic opportunities, as these factors are critical in breaking cycles of violence. However, the role of fiscal allocation as a strategic mechanism for operationalizing these conditions remains underexplored.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the role of government fiscal allocation as a strategic instrument for peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas, with particular focus on Thailand's Southern Border Provinces.

1) To analyze government budget allocation patterns in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces, with emphasis on the balance between security and development expenditures.

2) To examine the relationship between fiscal allocation strategies and conflict dynamics, particularly changes in violent incidents over time.

3) To evaluate the role of fiscal policy in peacebuilding and propose “Peace Budgeting” as a framework for achieving sustainable and inclusive peace.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Fiscal Policy for Development: Theory by Richard A. Musgrave explains the state's role in employing fiscal policy to achieve economic and social objectives, particularly reducing inequality, promoting equity, and fostering long-term economic stability (Musgrave, 1959; Stiglitz, 2000). This concept serves as the foundation of public economics, which views the state as responsible for allocating resources for public benefit, redistributing income for equality, and maintaining macroeconomic stability (Musgrave & Musgrave, 1989).

Musgrave (1959) proposed that the state has three primary fiscal functions: (1) the allocation function; (2) the distribution function; and (3) the stabilization function, all of which are directly related to sustainable development and the construction of structural peace (Tanzi, 2011).

Allocation Function

The state is responsible for allocating public resources to maximize benefits for the population, particularly when market mechanisms fail to allocate resources efficiently (Market Failure), such as in public goods, education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Stiglitz, 2000). Government investment in these sectors aims to reduce development gaps and enhance the population's long-term capacity.

In the context of the three southern border provinces, state budget allocation for developing economic and social infrastructure, creating new livelihoods, and promoting education that respects religious identity and local culture constitutes a critical mechanism for reducing spatial inequality and building the foundation for long-term peace.

Distribution Function

The state plays a crucial role in reducing economic and social inequality through taxation systems and budgetary mechanisms that promote equality and equity. Examples include progressive taxation, subsidies for vulnerable groups, and public expenditure to improve the quality of life for populations in disadvantaged areas.

In the context of the three southern border provinces, budget distribution to develop the grassroots economy, promote community enterprises, and support women, youth, and smallholder farmers exemplifies the use of fiscal mechanisms to reduce inequality and foster social justice. This aligns with Johan Galtung's concept of "Positive Peace," which posits that genuine peace must arise from structural justice and the reduction of social divides (Galtung, 1969).

Stabilization Function

The state is responsible for maintaining overall economic stability in terms of employment, price levels, and economic growth through fiscal policy, which stimulates the economy during recessions or moderates expansion during periods of overheating (Musgrave & Musgrave, 1989). In areas characterized by social and political fragility, such as the three southern border provinces, it is essential to support budget expenditure to stimulate the local economy, create short-term employment, or implement community development projects to alleviate economic pressures and reduce the likelihood of community-level violence.

Based on Musgrave's framework (Musgrave, 1959), its application to peacebuilding and development can be implemented concretely through peace budgeting. Specifically, equitable resource allocation (Allocation), fair income distribution (Distribution), and economic stabilization (Stabilization) serve as conditions conducive to achieving "Structural Peace"

and “Sustainable Peace.” This concept aligns with the sustainable development approach that seeks to balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Therefore, the application of fiscal policy for budget allocation in the southern border provinces is not merely government expenditure for economic development, but also constitutes a peace mechanism that builds trust, equality, and public participation in the development process, ultimately leading to long-term security and sustainable peace.

Decentralization Theory explains the processes and principles through which the state transfers authority, functions, and fiscal resources from central government to local governments to maximize resource management efficiency and align with the needs of populations in different areas (Rondinelli et al., 1983). This concept is rooted in the work of Oates (1972) in his book *Fiscal Federalism*, which is considered the foundational theory of Fiscal Decentralization Theory. Oates proposed that spending authority and taxation be decentralized to the governmental units closest to the people, as this enables resource allocation to respond more effectively to area-specific needs than centralized decision-making. Oates presented three key principles of fiscal decentralization:

(1) The Decentralization Theorem: States that local governments typically allocate public services more efficiently than the central government when such services affect only the population in one area without affecting other areas, because local governments possess superior knowledge of local information, needs, and environmental conditions compared to the central government.

(2) Assignment of Functions: Stipulates that functions and revenues should be appropriately divided, with the central government responsible for national-level public services while local governments oversee area-level public services such as education, healthcare, or small-scale infrastructure development.

(3) Intergovernmental Transfers: Constitute a mechanism for budget transfers between government levels to reduce income disparities between areas, particularly in areas with low revenue bases.

All of these principles aim to achieve efficiency and equity in budget allocation, representing critical elements of decentralized public administration (Oates, 1972).

According to Dennis Rondinelli’s framework, decentralization can be classified into four types (Rondinelli et al., 1983):

(1) Administrative Decentralization: The transfer of administrative authority and decision-making power to local agencies, such as local government organizations (subdistrict administrative organizations, municipalities, or provincial administrative organizations).

(2) Fiscal Decentralization: The transfer of revenue collection authority, budget expenditure, and budget planning to local governments to enhance flexibility and accountability (Oates, 1972).

(3) Political Decentralization: The granting of citizens’ rights to participate in local-level politics, such as the direct election of local executives or local councils.

(4) Market/Social Decentralization: The promotion of private sector and community organization participation in public service delivery or area-level economic development.

Thailand has applied the aforementioned decentralization concepts since the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan and the Decentralization Plan and Process Act of 1999, emphasizing local governments’ capacity to formulate development plans and manage budgets independently. In the southern border provinces, this concept is particularly

significant due to the region's distinctive cultural, religious, and economic characteristics. Empowering local authorities to plan budgets and development projects aligned with local contexts enhances public trust and participation. Furthermore, this approach aligns with the concept of "Peace Budgeting," which emphasizes budgeting that enables communities and local organizations to determine their primary needs.

The concept of Peace Budgeting, proposed by Eichner (1984), has been debated internationally since the 1980s, demonstrating that state budgets should be viewed not merely as fiscal instruments but also as strategic tools for peacebuilding and sustainable economic growth. Reducing excessive military and security budgets and reallocating resources toward investment in infrastructure, education, research and development, and public services can generate what is termed the "Peace Dividend"—the social and economic benefits of peace that exceed those derived from allocating budgets to arms accumulation.

Eichner's (1984) article "Budgeting for Peace and Growth" emphasizes defense spending cuts, stating that "even with reduced defense budgets, security capacity can be maintained." Reducing new weapons procurement and adjusting military policy can save tens of billions of dollars annually. Regarding the reallocation of budgets toward investment for peace and growth, governments should invest the savings from defense budget reductions in economic infrastructure, research and development, energy, and social development, aiming to build a competitive economic base rather than relying on arms sales or military activities. Therefore, viewing budgets as tools for peacebuilding and development transforms them from mere fiscal instruments into crucial strategic tools for creating peace. When appropriately allocated, budgets can reduce political and military pressures and foster societal peace.

The concept of Positive Peace by Johan Galtung, a Norwegian social scientist recognized as the "Father of Peace Studies," was proposed in his classic article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." In this article, Galtung (1969) distinguished peace into two concepts: Positive Peace and Negative Peace.

Positive Peace refers to the absence of both direct and structural violence, representing a state in which society can coexist justly, with respect for human dignity and mutually supportive social mechanisms. Furthermore, Positive Peace is more than merely ending conflict; it is the process of building a just and equitable society (the integration of human society), which requires structural development such as reducing economic and social inequality, creating participatory and transparent political systems, promoting education, understanding, and cultural tolerance, as well as respecting human rights and social justice (Galtung, 1969).

Negative Peace, on the other hand, refers to the absence of war or direct violence (absence of direct violence), representing a state in which physical conflicts such as combat, killing, or assault are suspended or controlled. Yet, structural violence or cultural violence remains embedded within the social system, such as inequality, discrimination, lack of economic opportunities, or cultural oppression. In other words, peace at this level is merely a "temporary ceasefire" that fails to address the root causes of conflict (Galtung, 1969).

Consequently, in subsequent years, peace researchers (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019) have expanded Galtung's concept within the framework of "sustainable development," asserting that "Positive Peace" is a critical prerequisite for long-term development. Without social structures, any development remains fragile and may generate new forms of violence. In the context of the three southern border provinces, for instance, building Positive Peace entails shifting from a military security approach to a development security paradigm by allocating

budgets to improve quality of life, create economic opportunities, and restore trust between the state and its citizens, thereby aligning with the principles of Peace Budgeting. Therefore, Galtung's concept of Positive Peace signifies not merely "ending violence" but "building a just and equitable social system" through structural development and inclusive participation across all sectors. When linked to public budget allocation, this transforms security budgets into sustainable, effective peace budgets over the long term.

The concept of Sustainable Development was formally introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland Commission, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway. The commission published the report "Our Common Future" in 1987 under the auspices of the United Nations. This report marked a significant milestone in the paradigm shift in development thinking, as it was the first time the global community formally defined "sustainable development" as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The key principles of sustainable development, according to the Brundtland Commission report, propose that "sustainability" comprises three main dimensions that must be pursued simultaneously in balance:

(1) Economic Dimension: Economic growth should be based on efficiency and optimal resource utilization without undermining future productive capacity. The state should promote an economic system that creates equal opportunities and reduces income inequality (Stiglitz, 2000).

(2) Social Dimension: Development should foster justice, gender equality, social security, and inclusive participation across all sectors, particularly vulnerable groups, to create a society of peace and equality.

(3) Environmental Dimension: Emphasizes the conservation of natural resources and ecosystems to ensure that the environment can continue to sustain the lives of both present and future generations.

From the three dimensions above, it is evident that they are interconnected in complex ways. Specifically, if economic growth destroys the environment or creates social inequality, it cannot truly be called "sustainable development." Following the publication of the Brundtland Report, the concept of sustainable development has been extended to the notion of "Development for Peace" by international organizations, which assert that "peace" is both a prerequisite and an outcome of sustainable development. In other words, without economic and social sustainability, lasting peace cannot emerge, and conversely, without peace, sustainability cannot be achieved.

Therefore, regarding the application of sustainable development concepts in the Thai context, Thailand has adopted the Brundtland Report's framework as a foundation for formulating the 20-Year National Strategy (2018-2037), emphasizing development in three main areas: "Security, Prosperity, and Sustainability," integrated with the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, which stresses moderation, reasonableness, and resilience (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021). In the context of the three southern border provinces, the sustainable development concept can be appropriately applied to guide Peace Budgeting by emphasizing: (1) the economic dimension through livelihood creation and equitable distribution of economic opportunities; (2) the social dimension through fostering participation, equality, and trust; and (3) the environmental dimension through natural resource restoration and sustainable agriculture. All of these constitute the foundation for building Positive Peace

(Galtung, 1969), arising from structural justice and balanced development across all dimensions.

Furthermore, fiscal policy for peace can be conceptually linked to Musgrave's framework of the state's fiscal functions: resource allocation (Allocation) to support social and environmental investment; income distribution (Distribution) to reduce inequality and disparities among population groups; and stabilization (Stabilization) to strengthen grassroots economic resilience. In this regard, sustainable development serves as an overarching framework that integrates economic, fiscal, and peace dimensions.

Accordingly, the Thai government must restructure budget allocation from a predominantly military and security-oriented approach toward peace-oriented investment, including the expansion of economic opportunities, education, healthcare, and social cohesion, with community participation as a central principle. Such reallocation not only contributes to reducing violence but also establishes the structural foundations for long-term sustainable peace.

This study integrates fiscal policy, decentralization, and peace theory into a unified analytical framework, wherein fiscal allocation (Musgrave) shapes resource distribution, decentralization (Oates) enhances local responsiveness, and Positive Peace (Galtung) provides the normative basis for evaluating long-term outcomes. Together, these perspectives enable a multidimensional assessment of peacebuilding through public finance.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using policy analysis to examine government budget allocation strategies in conflict-affected areas. The research focuses on analyzing policy evolution and budget structures related to peacebuilding in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces.

Data Sources

Government Budget Reports

Government budget reports constitute a primary empirical source for analyzing fiscal allocation patterns in conflict-affected areas. In this study, official budget data were obtained from the Bureau of the Budget of Thailand and related governmental agencies responsible for the Integrated Plan for Resolving Problems in the Southern Border Provinces. These reports provide detailed annual expenditure data, including allocations for security operations, economic development, social services, and community-based initiatives.

Such budgetary data are essential for examining the structure and evolution of public spending over time, particularly in assessing the balance between security-oriented and development-oriented expenditures. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of public financial data in understanding state priorities and policy effectiveness in fragile and conflict-affected settings (Addison et al., 2002; World Bank, 2011).

Policy Documents

Policy documents serve as a critical source for understanding the strategic direction, institutional frameworks, and governance approaches in addressing conflict. This study draws upon key national policy documents, including the Policy on Administration and Development of the Southern Border Provinces (National Security Council, 2017) and official reports from the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (Southern Border Provinces Administrative [SBPAC], 2020).

These documents provide insights into the government's integrated approach, combining security, development, and peacebuilding strategies. Policy analysis enables the identification of shifts in governance paradigms, such as the transition from centralized, security-focused approaches to more decentralized and participatory models. According to Hill and Hupe (2009), policy documents are essential for analyzing implementation processes and state intentions, particularly in complex governance environments.

Academic Literature

Academic literature is used to establish the theoretical and analytical foundation of the study. This includes literature on fiscal policy, decentralization, peacebuilding, and the conflict–development nexus. Key theoretical frameworks employed in this study are drawn from Musgrave (1959) on fiscal policy, Oates (1972) on fiscal federalism, and Galtung (1969) on Positive Peace. In addition, the study is informed by the conflict–development nexus literature, particularly the works of Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2004) on the economic causes of conflict, Stewart (2010) on horizontal inequalities, and Nafziger and Auvinen (2002) on the relationship between inequality and conflict, as well as broader perspectives on peacebuilding and development integration (Tschirgi, 2003; Walton et al., 2024).

Furthermore, regional studies on ASEAN conflict contexts, particularly the case of Mindanao, Philippines, provide comparative insights into how decentralization, participatory governance, and development-oriented budgeting can contribute to conflict resolution (World Bank, 2005; Sonsri, 2020).

Analytical Framework

The study employs an integrated analytical framework combining three key theoretical perspectives. First, the concept of Fiscal Policy for Development (Musgrave, 1959) is used to analyze the role of government budget allocation in terms of resource allocation, income distribution, and economic stabilization. Second, Fiscal Federalism (Oates, 1972) is applied to examine the role of decentralization in improving the efficiency and responsiveness of public expenditure at the local level. Third, the concept of Positive Peace (Galtung, 1969) is used to evaluate how budget allocation contributes to reducing structural violence and fostering long-term peace.

In addition, the concept of Peace Budgeting is incorporated as a practical analytical lens to assess how fiscal restructuring can shift state priorities from security-oriented expenditure toward social, economic, and participatory development that supports sustainable peacebuilding.

Methods of Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and trend analysis. Budget allocation patterns were examined alongside the number of violent incidents to identify relationships between fiscal strategies and conflict dynamics over time.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted between Thailand's southern border provinces and Mindanao, Philippines, to identify similarities, differences, and transferable policy lessons. The analysis focuses on how budget allocation, decentralization, and participatory processes contribute to conflict reduction and sustainable peacebuilding.

Research Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and does not include primary data collection, such as field interviews or surveys. As a result, the analysis may not fully capture

local perceptions or micro-level dynamics of conflict. However, the use of multiple data sources and comparative analysis helps strengthen the robustness of the findings.

Results

Budget Allocation Patterns in the Three Southern Border Provinces

Thailand's southern border provinces have experienced protracted violence for over two decades, prompting the Thai government to allocate public budgets in a structured manner to address both security concerns and socio-economic development. Budget allocation under the Integrated Plan for Resolving Problems in the Southern Border Provinces can be broadly categorized into two phases, reflecting shifts in policy orientation and governance approach.

Phase 1: Special Budget Allocation and Revival of SBPAC (2004-2016).

Following the resurgence of violence in 2004, the Thai government initiated targeted budget allocations aimed primarily at restoring security and stabilizing the situation. This period was characterized by a security-dominant approach, including the establishment of key institutions such as the Internal Security Operations Command Region 4 Forward Command and the Southern Border Provinces Police Operations Centre (SBPPOC). The introduction of a special-purpose budget in 2005 further institutionalized state intervention through centralized fiscal mechanisms.

From an analytical perspective, this phase reflects a state-centric-fiscal strategy, in which budget allocation was primarily directed toward controlling violence rather than addressing its underlying causes. In terms of Musgrave's allocation function, public resources were concentrated on immediate security needs, with limited emphasis on long-term socio-economic investment. As a result, despite increasing budget expenditure, structural drivers of conflict—such as inequality, marginalization, and limited economic opportunities—remained largely unaddressed.

Phase 2: Integrated Budgeting Approach (2017-2022).

Since 2017, the Thai government has restructured its approach toward an integrated budgeting model under the Integrated Plan for Development and Security Enhancement in the Southern Border Provinces. This approach involves coordination across more than 20 ministries and integrates three key dimensions: security, economic and social development, and the promotion of understanding and peace.

This transition reflects a shift toward a more holistic governance model, aligning with the principles of Fiscal Federalism (Oates, 1972), which emphasize responsiveness to local needs and multi-level coordination. The integration of development and peacebuilding components into budget allocation suggests an increasing recognition that sustainable conflict resolution requires more than security measures alone.

From the above analysis, it is evident that successive governments have consistently prioritized conflict resolution through budget allocation, personnel deployment, and policy interventions. Despite these efforts, the persistence and periodic escalation of violent incidents indicate that these strategies have not been sufficient to achieve sustainable peace.

This limitation can be understood through the lens of Positive Peace (Galtung, 1969), which highlights that the absence of direct violence is insufficient without addressing structural inequalities and social injustices. The continued occurrence of violence suggests that earlier budget allocation strategies were more effective in managing symptoms of conflict rather than resolving its root causes.

Table Comparison of “Budget for Resolving Problems in the Southern Border Provinces” and “Number of Violent Incidents” (2004-2022)

Fiscal Year	Expenditure Budget for Resolving Problems in the Southern Border Provinces	Number of Violent Incidents
2004	13,451 Million Baht	1,472 Incidents
2005	13,675 Million Baht	2,084 Incidents
2006	14,208 Million Baht	1,966 Incidents
2007	17,527 Million Baht	2,396 Incidents
2008	22,989 Million Baht	1,053 Incidents
2009	27,145 Million Baht	970 Incidents
2010	15,902 Million Baht	1,092 Incidents
2011	19,388 Million Baht	1,161 Incidents
2012	16,534 Million Baht	1,850 Incidents
2013	21,125 Million Baht	1,791 Incidents
2014	24,152 Million Baht	1,354 Incidents
2015	25,687 Million Baht	942 Incidents
2016	30,177 Million Baht	815 Incidents
2017	37,794 Million Baht	580 Incidents
2018	40,623 Million Baht	544 Incidents
2019	37,589 Million Baht	411 Incidents
2020	38,652 Million Baht	335 Incidents
2021	36,040 Million Baht	481 Incidents
2022	31,479 Million Baht	488 Incidents

Source: Deep South Watch Database, 2004-2022

Based on the data presented in the table, the trend in government budget allocation for addressing problems in the southern border provinces shows a consistent increase over time, while the number of violent incidents has remained relatively high. Although certain periods saw declines in incidents, these reductions were modest relative to the scale of budget expansion.

However, since 2017, when the government adopted an integrated, area-based budgeting approach, the number of violent incidents has declined by more than half compared with the

initial phase of the conflict. This suggests that a shift from reactive, security-oriented spending toward development-oriented and area-based interventions may help reduce conflict intensity. This observation is consistent with empirical evidence indicating that improvements in socio-economic conditions—such as poverty reduction, increased educational attainment, and rising income levels—are associated with lower levels of violence (Boonyamanond & Chaiwat, 2020; Collier et al., 2004).

This finding aligns with the conflict–development nexus literature, which highlights the critical role of economic conditions in shaping conflict dynamics. In particular, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) argue that economic incentives strongly influence the feasibility of rebellion. This perspective is further reinforced by Nafziger and Auvinen (2002), who emphasize that inequality and social exclusion constitute key structural drivers of conflict. Moreover, Addison, Le Billon, and Murshed highlight that the relationship between economic structures and conflict is shaped not only by deprivation, but also by the distribution and control of resources, which can create both incentives for violence and opportunities for peaceful development.

Discussion

From this perspective, development-oriented fiscal policies that expand economic opportunities, reduce inequality, and promote equitable resource distribution can simultaneously weaken the economic incentives for conflict and address the structural conditions that sustain it. This reinforces the argument that reallocating public expenditure toward inclusive and development-oriented policies is essential for achieving sustainable peace.

These findings underscore the importance of reallocating public resources toward inclusive and development-oriented policies as a key mechanism for long-term peacebuilding. This is consistent with broader evidence from the World Bank (2011), which emphasizes that sustainable peace requires integrated approaches that simultaneously address security, governance, and socio-economic development. In response, the Thai government has increasingly combined security measures with development-oriented initiatives, including development projects, local cooperation, educational programs, and trust-building efforts at the community level. Although these measures have contributed to a gradual reduction in violence, their effectiveness remains constrained by the absence of substantive political solutions, particularly from the perspective of key factors such as BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional–Koordinasi), who continue to demand clearer commitments regarding amnesty, self-governance, and legal protections (Burke et al., 2013).

To further contextualize these findings, comparative evidence from other conflict-affected regions is instructive. The Mindanao case in the Philippines illustrates a transition from a military-centered approach toward a negotiated peace process, culminating in the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). This process reflects a structured peacebuilding model characterized by formal negotiations, active participation by civil society, and support from international actors. Moreover, initiatives such as the PAMANA Program demonstrate how public budgets can be strategically deployed to integrate security and development in fragile contexts (Sonsri, 2020).

In contrast to Thailand, where fiscal allocation remains relatively centralized and security-oriented, the Mindanao experience demonstrates that decentralization and participatory governance can significantly enhance the effectiveness of development-oriented budgeting in

reducing conflict intensity. This comparison suggests that institutional design and governance structures play a critical role in mediating the impact of fiscal policy on peace outcomes.

From the perspective of conflict duration theory, the Mindanao case further indicates that reducing the feasibility of sustained conflict—through economic development, institutional reform, and inclusive governance—is essential for shortening conflict duration (Collier et al., 2004). More importantly, it underscores that effective peacebuilding depends on the alignment of fiscal decentralization, participatory governance, and development-oriented budgeting. Without such alignment, public expenditure risks remaining fragmented and insufficient to address the structural drivers of conflict and achieve sustainable peace.

This perspective can be further reinforced by insights from peace economics, which conceptualizes public finance as a strategic instrument for promoting peace rather than merely sustaining security operations. As Brauer (2009) argues, government spending plays a critical role in shaping the economic incentives that either sustain or reduce conflict. Excessive allocation toward military and security sectors may inadvertently reinforce conflict dynamics, whereas reallocating resources toward productive sectors—such as education, infrastructure, and employment generation—can contribute to long-term peace by improving welfare and reducing structural inequalities.

Furthermore, this argument is consistent with the concept of Positive Peace as operationalized by the Institute for Economics and Peace (2019), which highlights that sustainable peace depends on the presence of inclusive institutions, equitable resource distribution, and strong human capital. From this perspective, the concept of Peace Budgeting aligns closely with both peace economics and Positive Peace, as it emphasizes the transformation of public expenditure into a tool for addressing the root causes of conflict. By prioritizing inclusive development and human security, fiscal policy can shift the underlying incentive structure away from violence and toward cooperation and stability, thereby reinforcing the structural foundations of sustainable peace.

Drawing on the empirical findings and comparative analysis, three key policy implications can be identified for Thailand:

(1) Applying Peace Budgeting for Sustainable Positive Peace Development

The application of the Peace Budgeting concept represents a fundamental shift in state budget allocation—from short-term, security-oriented responses toward long-term structural investment aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict. In line with Musgrave's fiscal functions, this approach emphasizes rebalancing public expenditure toward allocation and distribution functions that promote social equity and economic inclusion. Specifically, redirecting resources toward basic public services, education, healthcare, employment generation, and grassroots economic development can reduce structural inequalities, which are key drivers of conflict. Enhancing equality of opportunity and ensuring access to public services can mitigate perceptions of exclusion and injustice, while equitable income distribution and support for community-based enterprises strengthen local economic resilience.

This argument is supported by insights from peace and conflict literature. When aligned with the concept of Positive Peace (Galtung, 1969), such budget allocation functions as a mechanism for reducing structural violence and fostering inclusive, participatory social systems. In this sense, Peace Budgeting operates not only as a fiscal instrument but also as a strategic framework for transforming the state's role from a controller of violence into a facilitator of sustainable peace through inclusive development.

This perspective is further reinforced by the institutional peacebuilding literature. In particular, Paris (2004), in *At War's End*, emphasizes that sustainable peace depends on the establishment of effective institutions capable of managing political competition, fostering participation, and ensuring long-term stability. From this viewpoint, peacebuilding extends beyond the cessation of violence to the construction of institutional frameworks that support inclusive governance and socio-economic development.

Moreover, reallocating public resources toward marginalized communities can reduce horizontal inequalities between social groups—especially along ethnic and religious lines—which are widely recognized as key drivers of conflict in multi-ethnic societies (Stewart, 2010). This is particularly relevant in Thailand's southern border provinces, where such disparities have historically contributed to tensions and instability.

Furthermore, consistent with Collier et al. (2004), expanding economic opportunities and livelihood options reduces the feasibility of sustained conflict by lowering incentives for participation in violence. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that effective peacebuilding requires both reducing structural inequalities and transforming the economic and institutional conditions that enable conflict persistence. This underscores the role of fiscal policy not merely as a technical instrument of public finance, but as a strategic mechanism for long-term peacebuilding and conflict transformation.

(2) Continuous Negotiations to Address Structural Violence

Implementing a continuous, systematic, and good-faith negotiation process is a critical mechanism for building trust between the state and Malay Muslim communities in the southern border provinces. However, such negotiations must extend beyond reducing violent incidents and instead focus on addressing structural violence, which underpins long-term conflict dynamics.

From an analytical perspective, this requires integrating both security and structural dimensions of conflict resolution. While security measures may stabilize the situation in the short term, sustainable peace depends on institutional reforms that address economic inequality, unequal access to resources, and the marginalization of cultural and religious identities. In particular, reducing horizontal inequalities between social groups—especially along ethnic and religious lines—is critical for mitigating long-term conflict dynamics, as such disparities often generate persistent grievances and fuel conflict escalation (Stewart, 2010).

This approach aligns with the principles of Positive Peace (Galtung, 1969), which emphasize justice, inclusion, and institutional legitimacy as foundational conditions for sustainable peace. Effective negotiation processes must therefore be participatory and inclusive, enabling communities to engage in shaping policy outcomes. Such engagement builds social capital and trust, which are essential for long-term peacebuilding.

Furthermore, consistent with Collier et al. (2003), sustained and credible negotiation processes can reduce incentives for continued conflict by altering the strategic and economic conditions that enable armed groups to persist. Accordingly, negotiations should be understood not merely as political dialogue, but as a structural mechanism for transforming conflict dynamics. This underscores the importance of embedding negotiation processes within broader socio-economic and institutional reforms to achieve durable and inclusive peace.

(3) Empowering Civil Society and Local Governance in Peace Processes

Sustainable peacebuilding requires the active participation of civil society and local governance institutions, extending beyond state-led or elite-driven approaches. In line with Fiscal

Federalism (Oates, 1972), decentralization plays a critical role in enhancing the responsiveness and effectiveness of public policy by enabling local actors to participate in decision-making and resource allocation.

Civil society actors, including community organizations, religious leaders, youth groups, and non-governmental organizations, serve as key intermediaries between the state and local populations. Empowering these actors can enhance policy legitimacy, reduce state–society gaps, and promote transparency and accountability. In particular, strengthening local participation can help address horizontal inequalities between social groups—especially along ethnic and religious lines—which are recognized as key drivers of conflict in multi-ethnic societies (Stewart, 2010).

At the community level, participatory mechanisms such as public forums and local mediation processes can strengthen social cohesion and facilitate peaceful conflict resolution. However, such empowerment must be supported by institutional capacity building and adequate resource allocation to ensure meaningful and sustained participation. From an economic perspective, enhancing local governance and participation can also reduce the feasibility of sustained conflict by limiting the conditions that enable armed groups to operate and mobilize support (Collier et al., 2003).

From an analytical perspective, this reflects a shift from centralized governance toward more inclusive and participatory institutional arrangements, which are essential for addressing the structural drivers of conflict. Therefore, integrating civil society and local governance into peace processes represents a key mechanism for fostering inclusive and sustainable peace in conflict-affected areas, positioning decentralization and community participation as foundational elements in transforming governance structures for long-term peace.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing Peace Budgeting as a bridge between fiscal policy and peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts. It demonstrates that conflict in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, religious, and structural inequalities, and therefore cannot be effectively addressed through security-oriented measures alone. Instead, sustainable peace requires an integrated approach that combines fiscal policy, decentralization, and the concept of Positive Peace to tackle both direct and structural drivers of conflict.

Empirical findings from budget allocation trends (2004-2022) indicate that, despite significant increases in public expenditure, peace outcomes have remained limited when spending is heavily concentrated on security operations. In contrast, the shift toward integrated and area-based budgeting since 2017 has been associated with a notable decline in violent incidents, suggesting that development-oriented and locally responsive fiscal strategies are more effective in reducing conflict intensity.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms that Musgrave’s fiscal functions, Oates’s fiscal decentralization framework, and Galtung’s concept of Positive Peace collectively provide a robust foundation for understanding how public budgeting can function as a strategic instrument for peacebuilding. Effective Peace Budgeting must therefore: (1) prioritize resource allocation toward public services, education, and livelihoods; (2) ensure equitable distribution to reduce horizontal inequalities; and (3) stabilize local economies to mitigate conditions that

enable conflict persistence. These functions must be implemented through decentralized and participatory governance structures to enhance policy responsiveness and legitimacy.

Comparative insights from the Mindanao case further highlight that sustainable peace emerges from the alignment of fiscal decentralization, participatory governance, and structured peace processes. This underscores that budget allocation should not merely support security operations but must actively facilitate inclusion, trust-building, and socio-economic transformation in conflict-affected areas.

Based on these findings, the study argues that transforming public budgeting into a Peace Budgeting framework represents a critical paradigm shift—from short-term conflict management toward long-term structural peacebuilding. This entails rebalancing expenditures toward development sectors, strengthening local governance capacity, institutionalizing participatory mechanisms, and adopting multidimensional indicators of peace beyond conventional security metrics.

In conclusion, sustainable peace in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces depends not on the scale of public expenditure, but on its structure, allocation logic, and governance. When fiscal policy is strategically reoriented to promote equity, participation, and local empowerment, it can serve as a powerful mechanism for reducing structural violence and fostering long-term, inclusive, and sustainable peace.

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