

## **Confronting Drug Issues at Kelantan-Thailand Border: In-depth inquiry from internal and external stakeholders**

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### **Abstract**

Drug issues are a long-standing problem that has significantly impacted all countries in the world. The aim of this paper is to explore the drug issues involving the dyad stakeholders who deal with the drug issues in Kelantan-Thailand borders —enforcement agencies and community leaders. The findings indicate that drug issues in Kelantan-Thailand borders are serious. Among the internal challenges faced, including enforcement measures; lack of capacity; and integrity issues. The external challenges include geographical and cultural challenges; community awareness, participation, and engagement; and legal measures. Thus, to effectively combat the severity of drug issues in Kelantan and Malaysia, particularly, it is crucial to continually strengthen the roles and responsibilities of both enforcement agencies and the community.

**Keywords:** Drug issue; Kelantan-Thailand border; enforcement agency; community

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The global drug crisis continues to harm people around the world, with the number of drug users increasing by 23% over the last decade, from 240 million in 2011 to 296 million in 2021 (UNODC, 2023). This alarming growth coincides with an increase in drug-related crimes in a number of countries, including Malaysia. Despite concerted efforts by local and international authorities, the problem persists and grows in complexity. Drug-related challenges, such as use, abuse, addiction, production, trafficking, smuggling, and transit, have far-reaching consequences, particularly in Malaysia. The country's strategic location near the Golden Triangle, as well as its shared border with Thailand, have made it a key transit hub for drug smuggling, trafficking, and other illegal activities.

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This paper emphasises on the investigation of drug-related issues in Malaysia particularly focusing on the Kelantan-Thailand border. This location has become a major conduit for illegal activities such as drug trafficking and other transnational crimes, including human trafficking and smuggling in Malaysia. The paper argued that in addressing these issues a comprehensive approach that includes both internal and external stakeholders, such as law enforcement and local communities are required.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview of Drug Issue

Malaysia is appealing to drug smugglers because of its proximity to Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam (National Anti-Drug Agency, 2020). Thus, drug smugglers and traffickers employ a variety of strategies to avoid detection at checkpoints on all land, sea, and air borders into Malaysia, complicating the drug trade. Malaysia has open borders and drug trafficking routes, making it a regional drug hub. This led to organized crime, corruption, drug abuse, and addiction throughout the country. According to NADA statistics, the number of drug addicts in Malaysia is increasing. The NADA estimated that over 50,000 people would use drugs in 2020, with the majority being between the ages of 18 and 39. Mustapha et al. (2019) demonstrate that drug abuse leads to increased crime, family dysfunction, and mental illness.

### 2.2 Kelantan-Thailand Border

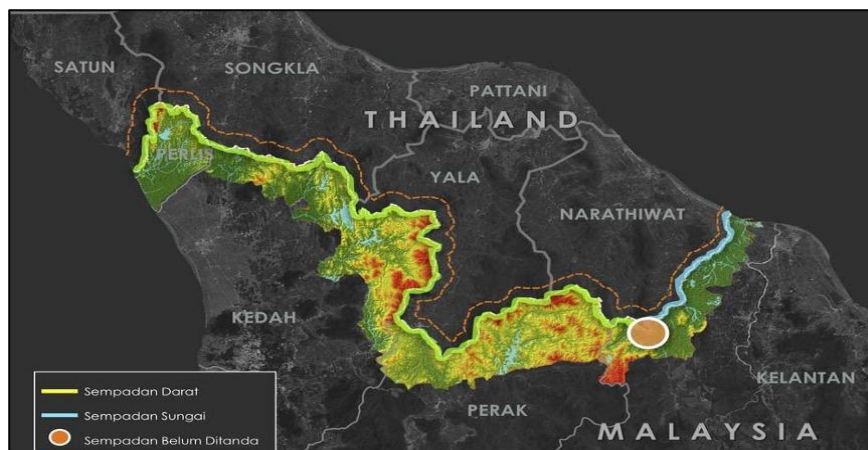


Fig. 1: Kelantan-Thailand Border  
(Malaysia – Thailand International Border Study, 2021)

Kelantan is located in northeastern Malaysia and is bordered by Thailand's Sungai Kolok Province to the north, Terengganu to the south-east, Perak to the west, and Pahang to the south, as well as the South China Sea to the northeast. Bukit Bunga, Rantau Panjang, and Pengkalan Kubur are some of the areas that border Narathiwatt-Thailand (Lord and Tangtrongita, 2016). The Kelantan-Thailand border has long been a hotspot for drug trafficking, with both countries struggling to stem the flow of illegal substances (Mohamad Yasid, 2017).

### 2.3 Roles of Enforcement Agencies at the Border Entrance

In Malaysia, several agencies are in charge of managing Malaysian borders at 138 authorised checkpoints, including air, sea, and land. To manage the border's broad scope and complexities, different agencies have been assigned relevant roles based on jurisdiction (Zainol et al., 2019). For example, the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), the Royal Malaysian Customs Department (RMCD), and the Malaysian Immigration Department (IMI) were in charge of managing any illegal routes along Malaysia's border, particularly those via land, air, and sea.

### 2.4 Issues and Challenges in Enforcement

While efforts have been made to combat drug use in Malaysia, several challenges remain. According to Ross (2022), integrity issues among enforcement agencies, also known as 'enemy in blanket,' were widespread throughout the country, including Malaysia. Notably, corruption and bribery within law enforcement agencies have been identified as major barriers to integrity, allowing criminals to avoid capture and prosecution (Ross, 2022). Until today, many Malaysian law enforcement agencies have struggled with limited resources and assets, inadequate practises and training, and outdated technologies, limiting their effectiveness in combating modern-day crimes (Dollah et al., 2016). Notably, a lack of capacity and manpower among law enforcement agencies has resulted in increased ineffectiveness, particularly in combating the country's drug problem.

### 2.5 Roles of Community Leaders and Society

Local community involvement is an important yet often overlooked strategy for combating drug trafficking, distribution, abuse, and addiction. Cross-border communities may help to reduce drug-related crimes and societal challenges (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Individuals, families, communities, and society must recognise the risks of drug abuse, smuggling, and trafficking in order to effectively address drug-related issues. The bottom-up approach of communities to drug concerns is advantageous, creating a positive ripple effect across the country (Megat Ahmad, 2022; Isham & Yusof, 2020). Preventing and reporting drug-related activities can help families, community leaders, and law enforcement agencies reduce drug use in the country (Urus Setia Darul Aman, 2024; National Security Council, 2024).

## 3.0 Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. This method effectively addresses individual interpretations of informants' experiences (Ahmad et al., 2021), allowing informants to articulate their perspectives on drug-related issues, particularly along the Kelantan-Thailand border. Next is, a total of 15 samples representing dyads: internal (enforcement officers) and external (community leaders) stakeholders were involved in this study. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held among 12 enforcement officers at the land and sea border entrances between Kelantan and Thailand, involving the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP), Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), Malaysia Immigration Department (IMI), National Security Council (NSC), Malaysia Armed Forces (MAF), Malaysia Quarantine and Inspection Services (MAQIS), National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA), and other drug-related agencies. Besides, this study also included three community leaders from border areas. The informants were chosen based on their experience and knowledge dealing with drug problems and other crimes at border crossings. Finally, the data were analysed by using thematic analysis and managed by NVivo software.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 The Seriousness of Drug Issues

Most of the informants involved in this study, who were either enforcement officers or community leaders, agreed that Kelantan, like other Malaysian states, has a serious drug issue, especially in the rural areas.

*"When it comes to drugs, Kelantan had a serious problem. Many young people were involved with drugs." (M3, Community Leader)*

The main reason for the high prevalence of drug abuse in Kelantan is due to its geographical location, which is close to the Thailand border. According to the enforcement agency, the drug smuggling activities from Thailand to Malaysia are serious due to the high demands.

*"In Kelantan, the majority of drugs are imported from Thailand and sold throughout the country." (FGD2, MAQIS)*

### 4.2 Internal Challenges

In terms of internal challenges, three main aspects were highlighted by the informants who were involved in this study. The first challenge is in terms of enforcement measures undertaken by the relevant authorities. During the focused group discussions, the enforcement agencies shared almost the same feedback regarding the measures undertaken to address the drug issues. Among them are routine monitoring and surveillance at the entrance border, integrated operations, roadblock operations, and many others.

*"The authorities carry out a variety of operations in addition to border enforcement and national border monitoring. Additionally, the authorities have established roadblocks (SJR) throughout Kelantan, including Gua Musang, Pasir Puteh, Kuala Krai, Jeli, and other locations. When these roadblocks are implemented, we can effectively combat ketum smuggling. Ketum-related arrests occur roughly twice a month." (FGD1, RMP)*

Despite the various efforts made by the relevant authorities, drug issues remain a challenge for the country. This is due to the rapidly evolving global challenges such as advanced tactics used by the criminals, the usage of technological tools to facilitate criminal activities, easy access and communication, and syndicates that have local people and enforcement officers as masterminds.

*"In my opinion, enforcement at the Kelantan-Thailand border was carried out as effectively as possible. However, leaks continue to occur, and cross-border crime continues to increase." (M1, Community Leader)*

The second internal challenge is related to a lack of capacity. Based on the feedback from the enforcement agencies, Malaysia's defences assets are still lacking in comparison to those of its neighbouring countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore. Almost all enforcement agencies that deal with drug issues in Malaysia emphasised this aspect. For instance, the closed-circuit television

(CCTV) surveillance system at the Kelantan-Thailand border is more advanced than Malaysia's CCTV system. The enforcement officer also highlighted other assets, such as scanners used at the border entrance and other facilities (transportation, vehicles, and others).

*"In my opinion, national security assets must be compatible with the country's development. Many foreign countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore, priorities the development of their own defence assets. However, Malaysia continues to lag behind in terms of national defence assets." (FGD1, MMEA)*

Finally, the third internal challenge discovered in this study is related to the integrity issues. Corruption is the most common integrity issue encountered when dealing with drug issues. Community leaders agreed that many corruption activities happened at the border entrance.

*"Corruption exists. Corruption can jeopardise national security. In the context of enforcement officer corruption, it is like the proverb 'fencing erected to protect the rice field turns around and devours the rice'." (M1, Community Leader)*

The misuse of power is another integrity issue highlighted by community leaders. This was particularly noticeable at the Rantau Panjang border. There are many people from Thailand who are using small boats to cross the border. This situation is considered common in that area. In fact, it is argued that the enforcement officers in that area are aware of the smuggling activities.

*"At the Kelantan border, it is easy to enter and exit using just a boat, and a lot of smuggling occurs because there are 'connections'." (M2, Community Leader)*

The community leaders also highlighted a lack of integrity among the enforcement officers during the monitoring and surveillance at the border entrance. For example, the enforcement officers' familiarity with the local vehicles prevents them from conducting thorough checks. Due to this situation, any smuggling activities carried out by the local people will remain undetected. This is also another integrity issue that is related to a lack of responsibilities during performing their tasks.

*"Drug smuggling at the country's border may occur in various forms. For example, the border performs vehicle inspections only on vehicles that infrequently enter the area but rarely on vehicles that frequently use that route. Typically, smuggling involves local vehicles that frequently enter and exit the area. Furthermore, drug smuggling becomes easier when smugglers are familiar with the authorities and law enforcement officers along the route." (M2, Community Leader)*

Nevertheless, the community leaders agreed that the integrity issues associated with the enforcement officers only represent themselves, not the agencies.

#### 4.3 External Challenges

In terms of external challenges, three main themes emerged from this study's findings. Geographical and cultural aspects are the first external challenges. Kelantan state shares a land border with Thailand. In addition, the Rantau Panjang and Thailand border is only separated by a river called "Sungai Golok." This geographical location posed a major challenge for the enforcement authorities to address any smuggling and border crime issues. According to the community leaders, people from Thailand continued to cross the border with a small boat during the pandemic COVID-19, even while the Movement Control Order (MCO) was in effect. They did not use the engine boat to avoid being discovered by the enforcement officers. This shows how easy it is for the people in Thailand to cross to Rantau Panjang.

In addition, people at the Kelantan-Thailand border shared almost the same culture. Given that many of them have familial ties to each other, this can be attributed to their shared historical background. Many people who live along the border with Kelantan are married to Siamese people in Thailand. As a result, some of their children attended school in Kelantan, and vice versa. They can easily transport any goods from Malaysia into Thailand, as well as outside of Thailand.

*"Kelantan has three designated routes: Bukit Bunga, Rantau Panjang, and Pengkalan Kubor. However, breaches can occur in numerous areas. For example, in Rantau Panjang, many students cross over to attend school. Some students travel to Siam (Thailand) to attend schools there. Perhaps we need to build a fence or barrier to stop this entry." (FGD1, RMP)*

The second external challenge is related to community awareness, participation, and engagement. While acknowledging the prevalence of drug issues in Kelantan, community leaders asserted that addressing this issue is challenging due to a lack of cooperation

within society. Many members of society have not taken action to report the drug abuse issue. However, they will notify the authorities right away if they encounter any criminal activities committed by drug addicts in their community.

*"Drug issues are difficult to control. This is due to the local community's refusal to cooperate and slowness in reporting drug addiction. Residents only take action when other crimes occur, such as theft (of gas cylinders and others) committed by drug addicts." (M2, Community Leader)*

Notably, the findings of this study uncovered that almost all community leaders stated that addressing the drug issues is the responsibility of the enforcement agencies. This finding clearly shows that there is a lack of community participation and engagement to address the drug-related issues in their areas.

*"If we talk about the issue of drugs in Kelantan, it can be said to be serious. However, we have no control over the drug issue; it is controlled by law and police enforcement." (M3, Community Leader)*

Finally, the third external challenge is in terms of the legal measures, particularly in dealing with the ketum leaves issue. In Malaysia, ketum leaves are allowed to be harvested but not allowed to be sold. However, previously, Thailand prohibited the harvesting of ketum leaves, despite their widespread use. Recently, the Thai government has permitted the harvesting of ketum leaves for medicinal purposes. Despite this, Thailand's high demand for Ketum leaves led to the purchase of Malaysian-harvested leaves.

*"The issue of ketum leaves has still to be resolved. This is because, in Malaysia, ketum leaves can be grown but not sold. In contrast, Thailand permits the cultivation and sale of ketum leaves. This legal difference complicates enforcement." (M2, Chinese, Community Leader)*

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed the seriousness of drug issues (abuse, smuggling, trafficking, and others) near the Kelantan-Thailand border, particularly in rural areas. This issue, particularly related to drug abuse among younger generations, has resulted in high unemployment and an increase in crime cases involving drug addicts as criminals. One of the main factors contributing to high rates of drug abuse, smuggling, and trafficking is its geographical location, which allows people from Thailand to easily enter and vice versa. Kelantan is now known as a "hub" for drug trafficking and distribution. Nearly every Kelantan community has reported drug abuse cases (Berta Harian, 2019).

While agreeing that relevant agencies have taken necessary actions to address drug issues in Kelantan, it is argued that the current measures are ineffective (Mohamad Isa, 2022). This situation is influenced by limited capacity and resources, such as defence assets, manpower, facilities, and officer skill gaps (Dollah et al., 2016). Furthermore, integrity issues were one of the most significant barriers to addressing the drug problem in Kelantan. Corruption and abuse of power are among the most common integrity issues involving law enforcement agencies (Ross, 2022). Furthermore, corruption within enforcement agencies endangers national security (Saad, 2013). Community awareness, participation, and engagement continue to be major challenges in addressing the drug problem holistically. Notably, all community leaders who participated in this study stated that addressing the drug problem is the responsibility of law enforcement agencies, particularly the Royal Malaysia Police. Relying solely on government agencies will not help solve the drug problem. The community must play a role in assisting the agencies by filing reports on drug abuse issues, conducting programs and activities to raise community awareness, and encouraging further participation in the "war against drugs." This is critical because community empowerment helps members understand and accept the messages conveyed by programs and initiatives, particularly those aimed at drug prevention (Nwagu et al., 2020).

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that drugs continue to pose a significant threat, and a thorough understanding of the underlying causes at the local, national, and international levels is required. It is critical to recognise that drug problems stem from flaws in various systems, ranging from the individual to the global level. Further study involving other perspectives and focusing on other locations is required to understand the trend and root cause of the issues in Malaysia.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to a better understanding of drug issues (abuse, trafficking, and smuggling) in Kelantan state, as well as the internal and external challenges of addressing the issue holistically.

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