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Performative Sovereignty in the Borderland: Infrastructure Modernization, State Developmentalism, and Symbolic Participation in Aruk, Indonesia

Ida Rochmawati

ida.rachmawati@fisip.untan.ac.id

Tanjungpura University

Arifin Arifin

Tanjungpura University

Iving Arisdiyoto

Tanjungpura University

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Abstract

This article discusses the intersection between the modernisation of infrastructure and the presence of the state in the borderlands, through the case study of the Aruk State Border Crossing Post (PLBN) in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Placing the study in contemporary borderland debates, it engages with the persistent analytical fragmentation between border governance and frontier developmentalism. Through an interpretive qualitative approach that includes field observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, this research argues that border infrastructure is not just a technical or economic project, but a profound practice of performative sovereignty. The empirical findings suggest that while the state is able to create visual and symbolic visibility through architectural and spatial interventions this modernisation does not necessarily lead to substantive socio-economic change. Instead, the development creates a "symbolic surplus without distributive depth," in which local communities remain asymmetrically economically dependent on neighbouring Malaysia. Furthermore, the study indicates that community participation mechanisms are predominantly procedural and tokenistic, functioning to legitimise recentralized, top-down power structures rather than to empower local agency. Ultimately, this article contributes conceptually by demonstrating how the state is actively staged and performed in frontier regions, and highlighting the need to assess border development beyond physical representation to address equitable welfare distribution.

Introduction

The opening of Aruk State Border Crossing Post (Pos Lintas Batas Negara/PLBN) by President Joko Widodo in 2016 was not just the inauguration of an administrative facility. Yet, it was a show of something more fundamental, the existence of a modern and sovereign state in the most remote corner of West Kalimantan. This event encapsulates an analytical question rarely addressed in depth: does such a visually robust state presence also produce substantive transformation for the governed society? This question situates the present study within contemporary discussions in borderland studies, where borders are no longer seen simply as lines of territorial demarcation but as socio-political spaces where sovereignty is produced, contested and performed (Berquist et al., 2024; Moreno-Lax, 2024). This shift has large analytical implications. It argues that sovereignty is no longer a static condition but a continuous process that is produced through material, institutional and symbolic practices (Chuengsatiansup & Limsawart, 2019; Kim, 2025).

These conceptual developments raise the need to pay more attention to the way that the state enacts its presence in the borderlands through different instruments that range from direct coercion to infrastructure development, developmental narrative production and mobility management (Jatkar, 2024; Turner, 2010). In this context, the language of sovereignty is used not only to justify practices of control but also to articulate the legitimacy of the state in the face of ever more complex dynamics of politics, law and cross-border mobility (Honusková & Zaimović, 2025). Thus, the state presence in border areas can be explained by three interrelated dimensions: administrative, security and representational.

In this context, infrastructure becomes an increasingly central medium in the production of sovereignty. Critical studies show that infrastructure is not just a neutral technical object but a political technology that shapes power relations, regulates mobility and produces effects of state visibility (Harvey, 2019; Larkin, 2013; Turner, 2010). Furthermore, infrastructure has symbolic and affective aspects that enable the state to be materially present, but also to be experienced, felt and interpreted by the public (Anand et al., 2018). Infrastructure is therefore a means by which the state becomes legible and legitimised by those it governs (Scott-Villiers, 2025).

The literature on borderlands has grown considerably, yet an analytical fragmentation persists between two relatively insular domains. On the one hand, many studies focus strongly on governance, security and control of mobility (Idler, 2018; Prokkola, 2013; Scott-Villiers, 2025). On the other hand, frontier development studies focus on modernisation, economic integration and the reduction of regional inequalities (Castanho, 2019; Nadalutti, 2020; Perkmann, 2007). What remains underexplored is the conjunction of these two domains, especially how infrastructure development operates as a medium of sovereignty production that mediates the logic of governance and the logic of developmentalism in a single spatial practice.

Furthermore, the performative dimension of sovereignty in border regions is seldom directly addressed in the context of state-building projects. Many studies suggest that borders can be understood as representational spaces, wherein the state produces and negotiates its presence through political and institutional practices (Idler, 2019; Prokkola, 2008). Yet, this approach has not been extensively employed to analyse infrastructure projects specifically, particularly in the Global South, where development is often used as a strategy of state legitimation in territories that have historically been perceived as the periphery of the national project.

Indonesia offers a highly relevant empirical context to study these dynamics. Since 2015, the state has actively rebranded its border regions from zones of vulnerability into the “front yard of the nation” (halaman depan bangsa), a framing that explicitly entwines the logics of sovereignty and development (Alunaza & Sudagung, 2020). This development was further intensified by Presidential Instruction No. 6 of 2015 which mandated the construction of seven Integrated PLBN as cross-border administrative facilities and spatial statements of modernity and state presence. Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 2021 further solidifies the commitment, with the specific purpose of accelerating economic development in the border areas of Aruk, Motaain and Skouw (Sani, 2023).

One of the most prominent manifestations of this policy is the Aruk PLBN in Sambas Regency, West Kalimantan, which shares a direct border with Sarawak, Malaysia (Sani, 2023). Besides being a cross-border facility, the PLBN incorporates architectural elements that refer to local Dayak identity, and has tourist markets, public spaces, and supporting infrastructure that provides an image of modernity and order. In practice this area has become a focus for cross-border mobility and informal economic activities. However, as shown in prior studies, the impact of such development on the welfare of the local community is not always consistent with the progress narratives built by the state (Firdaus, 2019; Hani, 2025).

The conditions point to the fact that border development should not be understood as a technical-economic process, but as a political practice full of the production of meaning, legitimacy and power (Moreno-Lax, 2024; Turner, 2010). In this context the participatory process must be critically examined as much as a signifier of inclusiveness or as a means for reproducing existing power relations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Community participation in border areas can thus function as both a substantive practice and a tokenistic participation, lending legitimacy to inherently top-down decisions.

This article fills this analytical gap and proposes that infrastructure modernisation in border regions, in particular in Aruk, is not just a development project but a practice of performative sovereignty (Moreno-Lax, 2024). Within this framework, the state produces and performs itself through a mixture of infrastructural materiality, developmentalist narratives and participatory mechanisms. The infrastructure is not just a means of connectivity, but also a medium through which the state becomes visible, legible and legitimised in the border space.

This article specifically addresses three research questions. First, how does the infrastructure modernisation at PLBN Aruk serve as a medium of performative sovereignty? Second, how do the developmentalist narratives of the

state produce the border region as a site of progress and national integration and what tensions arise between such narratives and the socio-economic realities of the community? Third, how is community participation organised and conceptualised within border development and to what extent is it substantive versus symbolic?

The article offers three theoretical contributions. First, it develops the concept of performative sovereignty as an analytical tool to analyse infrastructure development projects in the borderlands of the Global South. Second, it links the literature on border governance with critiques of developmentalism, two literatures that have developed largely in isolation. Third, this article also contributes to borderland literature with an empirical perspective of Southeast Asia through the case study of PLBN Aruk, a relatively under-represented context in the global discourses on frontier governance.

Theoretical Background

Borderland, State, and the Production of Space

In the last twenty years, the approaches to borders have moved from static conceptions of borders (Paasi, 2012) to more dynamic and relational approaches to borders. Borders are now seen as socio-political spaces that are continuously produced through the interactions of the state, local actors and cross-border mobilities. Therefore, the state is not present in a fixed and homogeneous manner (Bruns, 2021), but situationally and in layers, through governance practices, mobility control and spatial regulation (Idler, 2019a; Prokkola, 2008; Scott, 2009).

This approach stresses that the outcomes of the social and political processes of border construction involve various forms of state intervention. The state not only governs the border as a line of territorial demarcation, but as a space that is organized, governed and made meaningful through quotidian policies and practices. Many studies have also pointed to the fact that these dynamics do not only take place within formal state frameworks but also through complex inter-actor interactions, including local institutions and cross-border networks (Prokkola, 2008; Scott, 2009). The borderland is thus a key space for the expression of power, where sovereignty is not only exercised but negotiated in practice (Idler, 2019a; Nadalutti, 2020).

Developmentalism and the Making of Frontier Regions

Borders are not only spaces of control but also spaces of development increasingly within the framework of state developmentalism. Thus, border regions are not seen as separate peripheries but as frontiers that should be integrated into national development projects through economic, infrastructural and regional policy interventions (Castanho, 2019b; Perkmann, 2007b; Turner, 2010).

This developmentalist approach stresses the importance of development as a mechanism for reducing regional inequalities, improving connectivity and fostering cross-border economic integration. Borderland development is sometimes characterized as an attempt to bring modernism and progress to traditionally excluded regions. Studies of cross-border cooperation and regional integration demonstrate that development is not just an economic strategy, but also a catalyst for the development of new political and institutional frameworks (Böhm et al., 2026; Nadalutti, 2020; Perkmann, 2007c).

Nevertheless, several studies highlight that such processes are rarely neutral, but highly infused with political interests and state agendas about the construction of space and regional identity (Castanho, 2019b; Scott-Villiers,

2025a). Thus, developmentalism in border areas is not only about economic change, but also about the making of stories about progress and integration, which are part of the state's efforts to define its presence.

Performativity of Sovereignty and the Role of Infrastructure

While governance and developmentalism have become major areas of study, the intersection of governance and developmentalism in the production of sovereignty remains understudied. This article deploys the notion of performative sovereignty as an analytical lens to understand how the state is not only a power-wielding entity but also a performing and producing one through particular practices.

Performative sovereignty is the way the state becomes real through a mix of materiality, representation and social practices that make its existence visible and legible. This performativity is important in the case of borders because state presence often has to be asserted in forms that are directly observable, especially when state authority is limited or contested by other actors (Idler, 2019; Scott-Villiers, 2025b).

Here, infrastructure is understood not merely as a technical device but as a medium central to the production and articulation of sovereignty. The literature on infrastructure is largely framed within the context of development and economic integration (Castanho, 2019b; Turner, 2010). This article argues that infrastructure has a representational aspect that allows the state to materialize its presence in the borderlands.

Infrastructure thereby serves not just as a channel of connectivity, but as a device that connects developmental practices to the production of state meaning and legitimacy. The state, through infrastructure development, not only stimulates economic activity, but also generates a visibility from which its presence can be recognized and interpreted by the public. In combining the perspectives of borderlands, developmentalism and performativity, this article aims to provide an analytical framework that can explain how infrastructure development in borderlands is not only an economic project but also a political practice that produces and performs state sovereignty.

Conceptualizing Performative Sovereignty at the Border

The development of border studies shows that sovereignty is no longer perceived as a constant feature but as a practice repeatedly produced through diverse social, political and spatial practices. In this sense, the border is a space where the state actively presents and negotiates its existence through governance practices, mobility control, and spatial regulation (Idler, 2019b; Prokkola, 2013; Scott, 1999b). From this standpoint, this article introduces the notion of performative sovereignty to understand how the state not only exerts power, but performs and produces it in observable forms, such that its presence becomes visible, legible and meaningful in highly contested border spaces.

In this framework, infrastructure is conceptualized as the primary medium that facilitates this performativity. While the existing literature tends to frame infrastructure in terms of development and economic integration (Castanho, 2019b; Perkmann, 2003; Turner, 2010), this article highlights its important representational aspects. Through infrastructure development, the state does more than improve connectivity; it produces a visibility that confirms its material presence while also framing the border region as a space of progress within the developmentalist paradigm of the state.

By contrast, community participation, which is often posited as a marker of inclusive development, deserves critical scrutiny. As illustrated by Cooke & Kothari (2001), participation does not necessarily lead to a more equitable redistribution of power, it can also serve as a legitimizing mechanism that consolidates existing power relations. Through the confluence of infrastructural materiality, developmentalist narratives, and participatory mechanisms, this article therefore locates sovereignty as a practice that is both produced and performed in the borderlands, allowing for the state to be simultaneously present and “made present” through developmental projects.

Methodological Approach

This study follows an interpretive qualitative approach, premised on the idea that sovereignty and development practices in border regions cannot be fully grasped through formal policy analysis alone, but must rather be traced through institutional practices, infrastructural materiality and their concomitant social experiences. Within this paradigm, this research employs an interpretive approach (Yanow, 2017) to explore the linkages between governance (Sabam et al., 2026), infrastructure, and state activities in order to understand how the state presence is materialized and attributed meaning in the borderlands.

In public administration, the interpretive approach highlights that government policies and practices are not just the result of rational design (Yanow, 1999), but rather co-produced through social interactions, actor interpretations, and distinctive local settings. Hence this study is not only concerned with what the state implements in and through infrastructure development, but also with how such practices are seen, negotiated and lived by the different actors involved. Empirically, this research is located in the Aruk border area, Sambas Regency, West Kalimantan as the place of development of the PLBN carried out under Presidential Instruction No. 6 of 2015. This site was selected for its degree of infrastructural transformation and its status as a manifestation of governmental presence at the Indonesia–Malaysia border.

Data were collected through field observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Border landscape was examined through observations of the infrastructural materiality and visual aspects. Government officials, area managers and local communities were interviewed to get their views on the development and their lived experiences of the transformations underway. Meanwhile, the document analysis looked at official policies and state narratives that portray border developments as sites of progress and sovereignty.

The data were processed iteratively through an interpretive thematic approach (Yanow, 2017). The analysis began with several readings of the data to discover preliminary patterns. This was followed by an open coding to outline units of meaning connected to the presence of the state, developmental consequences, cross-border relations and community participation. Using an axial coding procedure, the codes were then grouped into analytical categories, which generated key themes such as state visibility, limited economic impacts, cross-border inequities, tokenistic involvement, and a tendency toward recentralization in border governance. Subsequently, these themes were understood conceptually by triangulating them with the theoretical framework of the study, specifically with performative sovereignty, developmentalism, and governance practices (Sabam et al., 2026; Yanow, 2017). This process of analysis was continued iteratively until a coherent understanding was established of how state presence is materialized, represented and attributed meaning in the local context.

Result And Discussion

Infrastructure and Production of State Visibility in Border Areas

Research results indicate that the construction of the Aruk State Border Crossing Post (PLBN) (Fig. 1) is a central element in changing the state representation in the border region. Field observations reveal that the modern architectural design of the PLBN, its structured spatial layout and the presence of national symbols (e.g. flags and state visual elements) are not only for administrative functions, but also construct a profound visual and symbolic experience of state presence. In this sense, infrastructure cannot be read only as a technical facility, but as an apparatus that produces the visibility of the state in a space that has been historically read as the periphery.

In borderland studies this condition implies the idea that the state is present not only in formal control mechanisms, but also in the production of space that makes its presence visible and tangible (Prokkola, 2013; Scott-Villiers, 2025b). Infrastructure is thus a medium through which the material and symbolic dimensions of sovereignty are connected. The state becomes “visible” not only due to its administrative existence but because it is materialized in the form of spaces, buildings and visual governance that project order and modernity.

But empirical evidence shows an ongoing tension between the visibility of the state and the substantive consequences of development. Interviews with local communities show that the PLBN has raised the image of progress in the region, but changes have not been accompanied by significant improvements in local welfare:

“This PLBN is indeed magnificent; it looks advanced. But for the local economy, we haven't felt many changes. We still sell our goods as usual. Now the state is visibly present here, and the buildings are grand. But our daily lives remain the same” (Interview, Bernadus, 2025).

This is reinforced by the economic reality at the grassroots level. According to a local UMKM operator in the area, Pak Uda, the community’s economic access has not improved significantly after the development. Small-scale informal trading practices that function on the periphery of this modern landscape continue to underpin economic activities.

“As small traders, our sales remain just like this. The buildings are massive, but the buyers who frequently stop by our stalls haven't increased. Our income remains as before, selling to cross-border passersby” (Interview, Pak Uda, UMKM Operator, 2025).

These statements indicate that the state visibility produced by infrastructure does not automatically lead to economic transformation. In this framework, development acts more as a practice of producing representation rather than initiating structural change. This finding adds to the argument that borderland development often takes place at a symbolic and representational level (Castanho, 2019) resulting in what this article conceptualizes as visible development without transformation.

Developmentalism as a Narrative and Spatial Practice

In Aruk, development is not merely a medium of visibility, but also shows how state developmentalism functions as a narrative that makes the border region a space of modernization and national integration. The state, based on the analysis of policy documents, always constructs the border region as the “front yard of the nation” (halaman depan negara), a place to control the territory and a symbol of national progress. This narrative is then materialized in the development of infrastructure that conveys an image of modernity, order and integration.

In terms of frontier development theory, this reflects the argument that the state uses development to incorporate peripheral territories into the national project (Perkmann, 2003; Turner, 2010). However, field data indicates that this narrative is not fully represented in the socio-economic realities of the community. Interviews with local residents and business actors show that although the new infrastructure has been built, dependence on neighbouring Malaysia is still very strong:

“Compared to Malaysia, goods over there are cheaper and more complete. Many residents still go there to shop. Even though it has been built here, we remain dependent on Malaysia” (Interview, Misniati, cross-border trader, 2025).

This finding suggests that the economic integration that has resulted is highly asymmetric; domestic development has not yet managed to counterbalance the economic gravity of the territory beyond the border. So developmentalism in the border region is not only an economic strategy, but a discursive mechanism that generates narratives of progress not necessarily aligned with the lived experiences of the community (Nadalutti, 2020). In this context, border development can be understood as a practice that changes space not only physically, but also how that space is understood and represented. The state’s constructed narrative of modernization is a way to project its own presence and thus generate legitimacy for its interventions.

Participation, Legitimacy, and the Production of Sovereignty

The dimension of community participation in border development is complex and ambiguous in pattern. Formally, they have participatory mechanisms through various consultation forums and community meetings. However, the field findings strongly suggest that this is a procedural, rather than substantive, participation.

"We are indeed invited to meetings, but usually, the decisions have already been made from above. We are merely asked to attend, not to determine the outcome." (Interview, Atus, Village Head of Kaliau, 2025).

Village officials and cultural representatives feel this top-down reality, and marginalized groups also validate it. The traditional leaders (Rusdin) and women representatives (Wati) said their access to the decision-making process is very limited and their participation is often only accommodated after the program designs have been finalized.

“As a women's group, we are often invited to gather when there is socialization. But it's only in the nature of an announcement, not asking what we actually need at this border” (Interview, Wati, Women's Representative, 2025).

This statement reveals that participation is a legitimizing mechanism instead of a deliberative space where the community can influence the policy. From a critical perspective this is in line with the argument that participation is often used as a tool to reinforce existing power relations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Thus, participation in the border region can be interpreted as an integral part of performative sovereignty, where community participation is not a true sign of inclusion, but a mechanism of pseudo-participation (token participation) that reinforces state legitimacy.

Power Structures and the Dynamics of Recentralization

The findings of the research also indicate that the development of the border in Aruk takes place in the frame of a highly centralised structure of power. Interviews with regional government actors indicate that the local role is

mainly implementational, while planning and decision-making continue to be dominated by the central government.

"These programs emanate from the central government. We at the regional level are merely tasked with executing them" (Interview, Head of the Border Management Division, Sambas Regency, 2025).

This phenomenon is also experienced beyond the level of regent. The field data shows that collaborative governance mechanisms do not work well. The Provincial National Border Management Agency (BNPP) also confirmed the withdrawal of authority in the provincial level, causing the region to lose its substantive autonomy in cross-border governance.

"Collaboration exists on paper, but strategic policy directions are absolutely pulled back to Jakarta. The region has practically no discretionary space to adapt programs to the local context" (Interview, Provincial BNPP Official, 2025).

This is an expression of a certain tendency toward recentralization in the management of border areas. From a governance perspective, this underscores a hierarchical power structure where local actors have little agency to shape policy (Idler, 2019; Scott, 2009). In principle, there are collaborative mechanisms, but in reality, power relations are monopolized by the central state.

This dynamic suggests a severe limitation of local agency in the development process. Not only are communities and regional governments made into policy recipients, they are also subject to strong limitations in articulating their interests. This shows that the exercise of sovereignty is mediated not only by symbols and infrastructure but also by the structuring of power relations that reproduce state dominance.

Table 1

presents the thematic coding results that connect field data, analytical categories and theoretical interpretations, in order to systematically synthesize these empirical patterns. This table is not merely a recapitulation of data, but an analytical device that shows how various aspects of the findings are connected to form the practice of sovereignty in the borderlands. **Tabel 1. Thematic Coding of Empirical Findings**

Theme	Initial Codes	Analytical Category	Sub-Category	Theoretical Interpretation	References
Infrastructure	Grand buildings, state symbols, local cultural architectural design	State Visibility & Performativity	Material space as a medium of representation	The state is performed through spatial materiality; sovereignty is produced, not merely executed.	(Cooper & Perkins, 2012; Scott-Villiers, 2025a)
Economy	Stagnant income, reliance on informal sector, minimal multiplier effect	Limited Substantive Impact	Gap between symbolism and benefit distribution	Development generates a symbolic surplus without distributive depth for local communities.	(Harvey, 2019; Turner, 2010)
Cross-Border Disparity	Malaysia perceived as more advanced, competitive pricing, consumption oriented across the border	Asymmetric Integration	Asymmetric integration within cross-border regimes	Domestic developmentalism has not yet been able to counterbalance the economic gravity of the neighboring region.	(Nadalutti, 2020; Perkmann, 2007)
Participation	Attending meetings without an agenda, top-down decisions, procedural tokenism	Symbolic Inclusion / Tokenism	Participation as legitimation, not deliberation	Consultation mechanisms serve to legitimize pre-existing decisions rather than opening deliberative spaces.	(Arnstein, 1969; Cooke & Kothari, 2001)
Governance	Central government dominance, implementational local role, absence of substantive autonomy	Recentralization of Power	Recentralization in border area management	Formal decentralization is not accompanied by substantive decentralization; power remains centralized.	(Idler, 2019b; Scott, 2009)
Identity & Culture	Dayak ethnic architecture, national symbols, border branding	Cultural Performativity	Local culture as an ornament of national legitimation	Local identities are incorporated into the nationalist project without transferring cultural power.	(Castanho, 2019b; Prokkola, 2013)
Overall Outcome	High visibility, low distribution, performative sovereignty	Symbolic Surplus Without Distributive Depth	Gap between representation and transformation	Border development functions as a performative	Synthesis of theoretical frameworks

Theme	Initial Codes	Analytical Category	Sub-Category	Theoretical Interpretation	References
				practice that produces the state, rather than prospering the citizens.	

Source: Author's construct based on field data, 2026

The empirical results presented in Table 1 also cluster around three main patterns: the production of state visibility through infrastructure, the limited substantive economic impacts, and the mostly symbolic nature of participation. The intersection of state visibility and symbolic surplus categories suggests that border development in Aruk is far more successful in producing state representation than in generating equitable socio-economic transformation.

Moreover, the link between recentralization and limited agency suggests that development practices are mediated not only by infrastructure and narratives, but also by power structures that reproduce the central state's dominance. This finding supports the argument in the literature that borderlands governance is often hierarchical and centralised, even when it formally embraces participatory principles (Idler, 2019b; Scott, 2009). Thus, the table shows that the material, discursive and institutional dimensions are not independent of one another, but rather they are intrinsically connected in the production of sovereignty as a performative practice.

Synthesis: Performative Sovereignty and Substantive Disparities

Drawing on the full range of empirical findings, this study shows that border development in Aruk produces a kind of sovereignty that is essentially performative. Infrastructure makes the state visible and material, developmentalism makes state interventions progress and participation makes the policies implemented legitimate. However, these three dimensions do not automatically translate into substantive socio-economic transformation. On the other hand, the research results show a big gap between symbolic production and distribution of benefits, which is described in this article as "*symbolic surplus without distributive depth*".

In this framework, sovereignty is not only exercised through administrative control, but also produced through practices that enable the state to appear and to be legible in the border space. The borderlands are therefore not only spaces of control, but also sites where the state is actively "staged" and performed through the interplay of materiality, narrative and legitimacy. This study contributes to the borderland literature by showing that infrastructure development is not only an economic project, but a political practice that simultaneously produces state visibility, meaning and legitimacy. To clarify the gap between ideal development models and empirical realities in Aruk, Table 2 presents an analytical typology of expressive and performative forms of sovereignty.

Tabel 2. Analytical Typology: Expressive vs. Performative Sovereignty

Dimension	Expressive Sovereignty (Ideal)	Performative Sovereignty (Aruk)
Basis of Legitimacy	Policy effectiveness and citizen welfare	Infrastructural visibility and symbolic state presence
Function of Infrastructure	Enabler of economic and social transformation	Medium of representation and the performance of sovereignty
Community Participation	Deliberative, substantive, policy-influencing	Formalistic, ceremonial, legitimizing pre-existing decisions
Center-Local Relations	Substantive decentralization with local agency	Recentralization with implementational local roles
Development Outcomes	Equitable distribution of economic benefits	Symbolic surplus without distributive depth
Cross-Border Relations	Equal partnership and symmetric integration	Asymmetric dependency on the Malaysian economy

Source: Author's analytical construct based on field findings, 2025

Table 2 shows a basic shift from expressive sovereignty, which is ideally based on policy effectiveness and welfare distribution, to performative sovereignty, which emphasises visibility, symbolism and state representation. In the case of Aruk, infrastructure does not serve merely as an instrument of economic transformation but as a medium that materially stages the presence of the state.

This comparison also shows that community participation has moved from a deliberation type to a symbolic type of participation, where public participation is more a tool of legitimation than a tool for redistribution of power. Similarly, the center-local relations reveal an unmistakable movement of recentralization which effectively constrains local agency in the development process. This typology thus not only summarises the empirical findings but also makes a conceptual contribution by showing that border development can produce forms of sovereignty that are primarily representational rather than substantive. In this sense, sovereignty is not only exercised, but actively produced and performed in the interplay of infrastructure, developmental narratives and participatory practices.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that infrastructure modernisation in border regions, especially at the Aruk PLBN, should not be understood solely as an economic development project, but as a practice of performative sovereignty where the state produces and performs its presence through infrastructural materiality, developmentalist discourse, and participatory mechanisms. Infrastructure is not just a form of connectivity but a means through which the state becomes visible, legible and legitimised in the space of the border. But the empirical evidence shows a persistent gap between the visibility of the state and the substantive impacts of development, where the socio-economic transformation of the local community does not fully correspond to the projected representations of progress.

Furthermore, the developmentalist narratives and their participatory practices are more likely to enhance state legitimacy than to substantially change the power relations or benefit sharing. In this regard, border development produces a condition that is interpreted as a symbolic surplus without distributive depth, or a successful production of visibility and legitimacy without equitable economic transformation. Theoretically, the article synthesises the literatures on border governance and developmentalism by advancing the concept of performative sovereignty as an analytical framework to understand the state's operation through representation, materiality and social practices in frontier regions. The results indicate that the assessment of border development should not be confined to physical and symbolic measures, but should also give greater consideration to the substantive effects on local communities.

These results have important implications for both academia and policy making. Academically, this study provides a space for further research into sovereignty as a performative and contextual practice in other diverse borderlands. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of transitioning the approach to border development from one of visibility and representation to a more substantive paradigm of local community welfare. Therefore, the borderland is not only an arena of staging the state, but also an arena of measuring the presence of the state, through the tangible effects experienced by the governed population.

Limitation

While this study offers in-depth insights into the practice of performative sovereignty in the borderlands, several analytical limitations must be acknowledged. First, this research is a single case study specifically focused on the Aruk PLBN at the Indonesia–Malaysia land border. Consequently, the findings may not be entirely generalizable to other border regions possessing distinct historical, geographical, and socio-economic characteristics, such as maritime borders or land borders shared with other nations (e.g., Papua or East Nusa Tenggara). Second, given the reliance on a qualitative interpretive approach, the findings are inherently context-bound, capturing the dynamics of actors within a specific post-development temporal snapshot.

Future research could productively expand upon this analytical framework through comparative studies across various border crossing posts in the frontier regions of the Global South. Furthermore, subsequent studies specifically exploring the everyday resistance or adaptive tactics of local communities against centralized border governance would further enrich the discourse on the production of sovereignty from below.

Declarations

Ethical Statement

This research was conducted in full accordance with the ethical guidelines and regulations of Universitas Tanjungpura, approved by the Instituional Review Borad (IRB), Dean's Office of Social and Political Science Faculty, Universitas Tanjungpura, as mandated under institutional Decree No. **13150/UN22.2/PT.01.05/2023**. All research procedures, including semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis, were carried out in compliance with academic ethical standards.

Prior to each interview, all twelve (12) informants were fully informed of the nature, scope, and purpose of the study; their right to withdraw from participation at any time without consequence; and the intended use of the data for academic research and publication.

Verbal informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to the commencement of each interview. No personally sensitive or identifying information beyond what participants explicitly agreed to disclose was recorded or included in the manuscript. Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, and all data were handled and stored securely. We confirm that the research was performed in accordance with all relevant named guidelines and regulations, and that informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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None to be stated

Author Contribution

IR is the principal investigator of this research, she acted mainly in conceptualizing, methodology, investigation, analysis, and data curation. She partially manually draft the manuscript and provided an overall review of the finished draft. AA acted in data curation and investigation, contributed to theoretical framework in this study, partially wrote the draft. Lastly, IA contributed in resource provisioning, validating data, data curation, writing and copyeditting, and project administration.

Data Availability

Data of this study is made available to public and can be accessed in the supplementary material file. The final transcript has been processed to remove duplicate entries among informants and irrelevant dialogues. This also include survey coding, raw unique transcripts in Bahasa Indonesia and English, and analysis matrices of the study. Due to established informed consent agreement and several of the participants status being key figures in their respective positons, raw recording and field records are not made available.

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Figures



Figure 1

Border Documentation

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