

(Re)Thinking Resilience: The Multifaceted Impact of Conflict on Southern Thailand's Youth

Nadia Payo and Kamarulzaman Askandar

Research and Education for Peace, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: nadia.payo@gmail.com

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i4/21069>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i4/21069

Published Date: 04 April 2024

Abstract

This study employs a qualitative research approach to unravel the complex layers of influence that the prolonged conflict in Southern Thailand has on its youth. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participatory observations, the research meticulously explores the psychological, educational, and social ramifications of the conflict on young individuals. The study reveals the detrimental effects of violence and heightened security on the psychological well-being of children and youth, alongside significant disruptions to their educational trajectories and social development. It highlights a paradox where increased educational investments coincide with a decline in educational quality and accessibility. Moreover, it sheds light on the psychological trauma pervading among youth, exacerbated by stringent security measures and laws. The research also uncovers a nuanced picture of youth perspectives, revealing skepticism towards government institutions, yet a strong inclination towards community engagement and aspirations for higher education, despite facing numerous barriers. This study's qualitative methodology allows for a deep understanding of the lived experiences of youth, illuminating the need for holistic interventions that cater to the educational, psychological, and social needs of children and youth in conflict zones. The findings advocate for educational reforms, psychological support systems, and initiatives to foster positive future outlooks among the youth.

Keywords: Southern Thailand Conflict, Youth Resilience, Educational Disruption, Psychological Impact, Community Engagement

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Southern Thailand which is predominantly unfolding in the culturally distinct and predominantly Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has been a significant yet often overlooked area of study in conflict research. Despite its profound implications, the examination of this region's challenges, especially its impact on the younger generation, has not received the scholarly attention it warrants. This region, with its unique

historical, cultural, and linguistic identity, has experienced persistent unrest due to a blend of ethnic, religious, and political tensions. The roots of this conflict can be traced back several decades, but it has notably intensified since the early 2000s, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis marked by violence, human rights violations, and deep-seated mistrust between local communities and the central government. The insurgency, driven by a combination of separatist groups seeking greater autonomy or independence from Thailand, has led to heightened military and security operations in the region, exacerbating the already volatile situation.

Amidst this backdrop of unrest and instability, the impact on children and youth, a particularly vulnerable segment of the population, is profound and multifaceted. The experiences of children and adolescents in conflict zones are often characterized by direct exposure to violence, including witnessing or being victims of armed clashes, security operations, and acts of terror. Such exposure is a critical concern as it can lead to significant psychological trauma, manifesting in increased rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among this demographic. Moreover, the pervasive atmosphere of fear and insecurity can severely disrupt the normal developmental processes, impacting children's ability to form healthy social relationships and establish a sense of normalcy and safety in their daily lives. Another critical aspect of the conflict's impact on youth is the disruption of educational structures and opportunities. In conflict zones, education often becomes a casualty, with schools being damaged or closed, and the journey to and from school becoming perilous. The dire state of education in such contexts not only impedes academic learning but also deprives children of the stable and nurturing environment that schools often provide. The lack of education, in turn, limits future opportunities for these young individuals, potentially contributing to a cycle of poverty and continued unrest. Additionally, the conflict in Southern Thailand has significant social implications for children and youth. Growing up in an environment marked by conflict and mistrust can deeply influence their perceptions of identity, community, and the state. This can lead to a sense of alienation or radicalization, particularly among adolescents and young adults who are grappling with complex questions of identity and belonging. Furthermore, the breakdown of community structures and traditional support systems often leaves children and youth without the essential social support needed to navigate these challenges effectively.

This study is dedicated to a comprehensive and detailed examination of the varied and profound effects that the conflict in Southern Thailand has exerted on youth. By doing so, it aims to shed light on a critical yet understudied facet of conflict impact, underscoring the urgency and necessity of this research. It delves into the psychological, educational, and social realms to uncover the direct and indirect consequences that the prolonged strife has wrought on young individuals. The focus on youth is pivotal, as this demographic embodies the potential for future change and development within the society. By closely analyzing how the conflict has shaped their lives, this research aims to illuminate the complex layers of impact, ranging from immediate to long-lasting ramifications. The insights derived from this study are crucial for crafting targeted interventions that meet the nuanced needs of youth in the conflict zone, thereby laying a foundation for effective peacebuilding, reconciliation, and sustainable development strategies in Southern Thailand. Furthermore, this investigation enriches the global conversation on youth in conflict settings, providing valuable insights and potentially transferable lessons for other regions embroiled in similar conflicts. This study, therefore, not only seeks to address the specific challenges faced by youth in Southern Thailand but also aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the critical role of youth

in conflict transformation and societal resilience. Ultimately, this study not only seeks to address the specific challenges faced by youth in Southern Thailand but also underscores the broader significance of understanding and supporting youth in conflict transformation and societal resilience efforts worldwide.

Literature Review

Overview of Existing Literature on the Impact of Conflict on Children and Youth

The existing literature extensively covers the multifaceted impact of armed conflict on children and youth, addressing psychological, educational, and social dimensions.

Psychological Impact: The psychological toll of conflict on young individuals is well-documented. Studies by Betancourt & Khan (2008) and Qouta, Punamaki, & El Sarraj (2008) demonstrate a high prevalence of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues among children in conflict zones. These mental health challenges are often exacerbated by direct exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, and the constant instability of their living environments.

Educational Impact: Conflict severely disrupts educational systems, a theme explored by researchers like (Shemyakina, 2011; Burde, 2014). The closure of schools, destruction of educational infrastructure, and the displacement of families often lead to interrupted schooling and diminished educational outcomes. This disruption not only affects immediate learning but also has long-term implications for the economic and social prospects of affected children and youth.

Social Impact: The breakdown of social structures is a significant consequence of conflict. Dyregrov et al (2002) explore how children lose essential support systems, including family and community networks, leading to issues in social integration and an increased sense of isolation and vulnerability.

Studies Specific to the Context of Southern Thailand

The ongoing conflict in Southern Thailand has been the focus of various scholarly inquiries, yet the particular ramifications for children and youth remain underexplored. The literature that does exist predominantly pivots around the broader political and cultural dimensions of the strife. McCargo (2008) provides a seminal analysis of the political underpinnings and insurgent strategies, situating the conflict within the wider historical and socio-political context of Thailand. Askew (2007) complements this by delving into the cultural narratives and identities that have both shaped and been reshaped by the conflict. These works are instrumental in unpacking the complex interplay of regional politics and cultural affiliations. However, a lacuna is evident in the literature where the direct impacts on the younger demographics are concerned. The conflict's unique ethnic and religious contours, along with its prolonged duration, hint at a differentiated experience for children and youth when compared to other global conflict zones. Jitpiomsri and McCargo (2008) touch upon the local community's resilience yet stop short of dissecting the specific effects on young individuals' development and wellbeing. Similarly, Liow (2006) examines the broader human security implications but does not disaggregate data by age, thereby obscuring the distinct experience of the youth.

The graph in figure 1 from the Conflict Incident Database of Deep South Watch (2024) suggests a downtrend in overall mortality from 2010 to 2020, but it does not illuminate the qualitative aspects of youth experience during this period. This quantitative data, while

valuable, demands a qualitative complement to fully articulate the conflict's impact on the psychosocial development and prospects of Southern Thailand's younger generations.

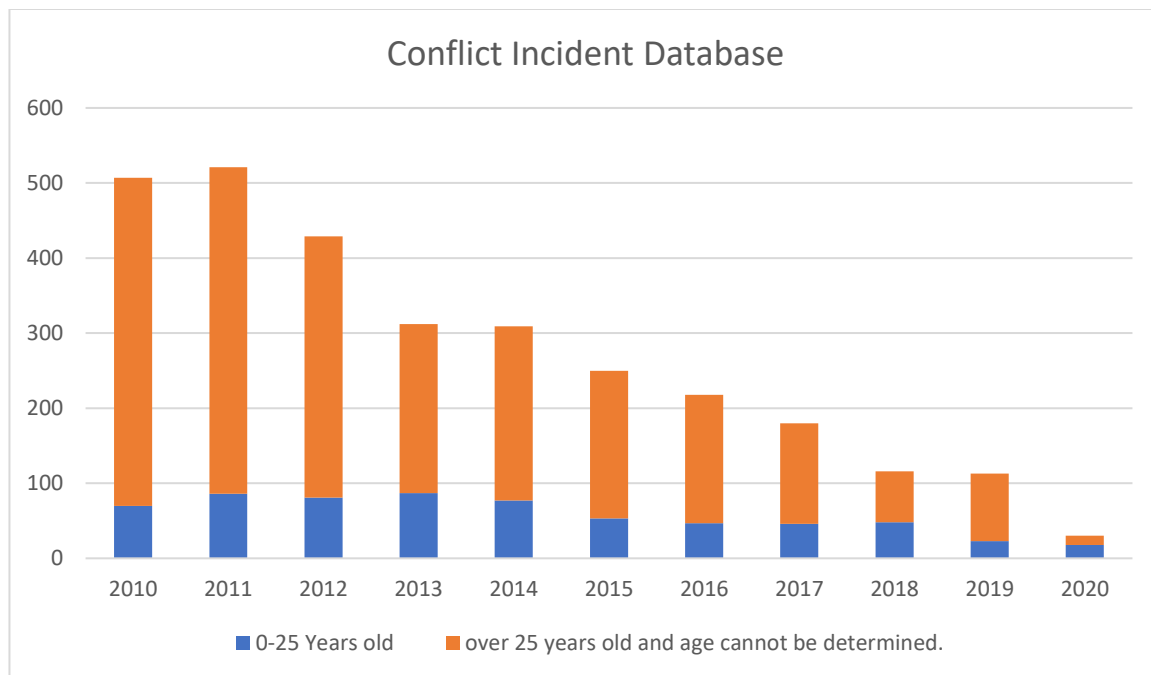


Figure 1: Conflict Incident Database

(Source: the conflict incident database collected by Deep South Watch under the Center of Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity (CSCD), Institute of Peace Studies, Prince of Songkhla University)

While the experiences of children and youth affected by the Southern Thailand conflict are acknowledged in various human rights documents, such as reports by Amnesty International (2017), there remains a conspicuous gap in scholarly research concerning these demographics. The human rights reports, for example, although valuable for their first hand accounts and advocacy, often do not achieve the methodological rigor, comprehensive data analysis, and depth of insight characteristic of academic research. Consequently, there is an evident need for systematic, empirical studies that delve into the lived experiences, adaptive strategies, and future prospects of young individuals in this conflict zone.

The extant body of global research, though substantial, lacks specificity when addressing the nuanced impacts of the conflict within the unique milieu of Southern Thailand. Current literature fails to adequately examine the psychosocial ramifications borne by children and youth amidst the region's distinct cultural, ethnic, and religious tapestry. Comprehensive empirical research that integrates these local contextual factors is necessary to fill this void. Such studies are imperative not only for advancing academic understanding but also for informing the development of targeted interventions and policy formulations that are sensitive to the affected youths' cultural and societal contexts.

This gap in the literature signals an academic urgency and an ethical imperative to prioritize research that captures the complexities of children and youth's experiences in the Southern Thailand conflict. Through such an investigative lens, stakeholders can gain a multidimensional understanding of the conflict's impact. This, in turn, would empower policymakers, humanitarians, and educators to create effective, evidence-based strategies to

support the psychosocial health and resilience of these young populations, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive peacebuilding process in the future.

Methodology

This study delves into the significant impact of the Southern Thailand conflict on youth, specifically targeting individuals aged 17-24. It adopts a qualitative research methodology to uncover the complex, nuanced experiences and perspectives of these young people living amidst conflict. The choice of a qualitative framework is deliberate, aimed at capturing the rich, multi-dimensional narratives of youth affected by the conflict, including their psychological responses, educational disruptions, and altered social dynamics.

To thoroughly explore these experiences, the research utilizes a diverse array of data collection methods, including surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Surveys are designed to gather a broad spectrum of information, highlighting the varied ways the conflict influences the lives of young individuals within this specific age group. In-depth interviews provide a conduit to the personal stories and reflections of the youth, offering insights into their inner thoughts and emotional landscapes. Focus group discussions serve as a platform for collective expression, allowing young participants to voice their experiences and perceptions in a shared space, thereby illuminating the communal and individual impacts of the conflict.

The participant selection process employs purposive sampling to ensure a rich representation of the youth aged 17-24, encompassing a diverse range of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. This approach facilitates an in-depth examination of how the conflict affects this particular age segment, providing valuable insights into their specific challenges and resilience mechanisms.

Ethical considerations are paramount in the conduct of this research. Participants are thoroughly briefed on the objectives of the study, and their informed consent is obtained prior to participation. Strict confidentiality measures are in place to safeguard the privacy and security of the participants' information. The research process is designed with acute awareness of the potential psychological impact on participants, ensuring that the methodology is sensitive to their well-being, with appropriate support available as needed.

The analysis phase involves a meticulous thematic examination of the data collected through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. This process aims to identify common themes, patterns, and individual experiences that emerge from the narratives of the youth. By focusing on the age group of 17-24, this analysis seeks not just to aggregate data but to interpret the profound and personal ways in which conflict shapes the lives and futures of young people in Southern Thailand, contributing to a deeper understanding of their unique perspectives and needs in the context of conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.

Findings

The findings from this qualitative study present a comprehensive view of the psychological impact of the conflict in Southern Thailand on youth, highlighting the depth and complexity of these impacts.

1. Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Challenges

The study conducted in Southern Thailand reveals a deeply concerning landscape of psychological trauma among youth, intricately tied to the ongoing conflict and the enforcement of specific laws by state authorities. Central to these findings is the evidence of

widespread Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression among the younger population, which is a direct consequence of their prolonged exposure to violence and the prevailing climate of insecurity.

In the context of addressing racial discrimination and its impacts within Thailand, particularly in the conflict-ridden southern border provinces, the enactment of legislations such as the 1914 Martial Law, the 2005 Emergency Decree, and the 2008 Internal Security Act has been pivotal. These laws were ostensibly designed to enhance the government's capacity to manage unrest and insurgency. They confer extensive powers upon state officials, enabling them to conduct operations ranging from detentions without charge to arbitrary searches and monitoring communications, ostensibly for security purposes. Nevertheless, the practical application of these legislations has frequently exceeded legal boundaries, resulting in actions that not only challenge established legal norms but also infringe upon fundamental human rights.

A particularly egregious manifestation of this overreach is the systematic and forced collection of DNA samples from Malay Muslims in the SBPs, a practice that has been consistently reported since 2012. According to the Cross-Cultural Foundation's fact sheet, this practice involves intrusive operations such as house raids and the collection of DNA samples without consent, often justified by authorities as necessary for prosecuting alleged insurgents. The foundation's research, incorporating desk reviews and interviews with over 20 individuals subjected to DNA collection, reveals that such actions are not isolated incidents but part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy. This strategy includes other surveillance measures like mandatory facial scans for SIM card registration and random ID checks, which collectively contribute to a climate of fear and intimidation among local populations.

The impact of these policies on human rights is profound. Between 2005 and 2018, there have been reports of the detention of 127 children and youth and the arrest of 16 others, actions that have been widely criticized for their violation of both legal norms and international human rights standards. A particularly disturbing case reported by Bangkok Biz News in 2022 involved the coercive extraction of DNA from a 10-month-old infant, highlighting the extent of state power overreach. These practices not only undermine the trust between the government and the local communities but also exacerbate the psychological distress among youths, who live in constant fear of being targeted by state security measures. The findings of this study paint a vivid picture of the interplay between legal measures, state authority, and the mental well-being of children and youth in conflict zones. It underscores the pressing need for a judicious approach to law enforcement, one that harmonizes the imperatives of security with the imperatives of human rights protection. This balance is crucial in shaping interventions and policy reforms that not only address the immediate mental health needs of the younger population but also respect and uphold their legal and human rights in these challenging environments.

2. Educational Disruption and Impact on Learning

In the Southern border regions of Thailand, an in-depth analysis presents a paradox within the educational sector. Families in these areas allocate a substantial portion of their income towards education, yet the caliber of education their children receive remains markedly below par. According to the National Statistical Office (2021), the average monthly educational expenditure in these regions is reported at 2,423 baht, closely mirroring the regional average of 2,106 baht and slightly below the national average of 2,602 baht. Despite

these investments, the expenditure on education in the Southern border areas accounts for an astonishing 25.8% of total family income, substantially higher than the 14.1% observed in the broader Southern region and the 13.0% national average. This discrepancy underscores the disproportionate financial burden shouldered by families in the conflict-affected Southern border areas.

The qualitative aspects of education in these regions further accentuate this disparity. The Youth Survey Results 2022, conducted by KID for Kids, reveals that approximately 51.5% of students in these areas grapple with outdated educational materials, a challenge less prevalent in the broader Southern region (40.2%) and at the national level (39.7%). The predicament is aggravated by the lack of access to computers, with 50.2% of students in the border regions facing this issue, as opposed to 35.0% in the broader Southern region and 29.1% nationally. Furthermore, nearly half of the students (48.9%) reported that their teachers lack adequate subject knowledge, and a significant 69.6% perceive that teachers do not allocate sufficient time for instruction.

Despite these formidable challenges, the aspirations among youth in the Southern border regions for higher education remain high. Notably, 29.8% of these youths aim for degrees beyond a bachelor's degree, slightly surpassing the aspirations in the broader Southern region (25.1%) and the national average (25.5%). However, there exists a pronounced lack of confidence in attaining these educational objectives. Only 5.4% of youths in the border regions aspire to obtaining vocational certificates, compared to 8.7% in the broader Southern region and 14.0% nationally, with a significant 41.4% doubting their ability to fulfill their educational ambitions due to financial constraints. Moreover, educational institutions in these areas frequently become embroiled in the turmoil of state and insurgent activities. Incidents of school searches, data collection on teachers and students, and detentions within educational premises have rendered schools as zones of unrest and insecurity. This hostile environment not only hampers the effectiveness of teaching but also places students at a developmental and educational disadvantage relative to their counterparts in more stable regions.

3. Altered Social Behaviors and Relationships

The 2022 youth survey from Thailand's Southern border regions sheds light on young people's views toward political institutions and their socio-political environment. The results indicate a prevalent skepticism among the youth towards politicians, the military, and the police, signaling deep-seated issues and ongoing underdevelopment in these areas. This skepticism contributes to a reluctance to engage with the central government, underscoring a disconnect due to historical and ongoing socio-political challenges. Despite this skepticism, the youth show a strong attachment to their region and actively engage in addressing local issues. Notably, a significant portion has participated in local political meetings and formed groups to solve community problems, demonstrating higher levels of political involvement and initiative than observed nationally or in the broader Southern region.

Additionally, the survey highlights the youth's active participation in volunteerism, with a majority taking on leadership roles in student or youth groups and engaging in social and environmental volunteer work at rates exceeding those of their peers nationally and in the broader Southern region. A smaller percentage of these youths consider moving abroad a crucial life goal, suggesting a strong commitment to their local communities. These findings, corroborated by in-depth interviews, reveal a complex relationship between distrust in broader political structures and a robust engagement with local community issues. The

youth's skepticism towards political institutions contrasts with their strong desire to contribute positively to their region, necessitating nuanced policy and community development strategies that recognize the unique perspectives and proactive attitudes of these conflict-affected youths.

4. Health Concerns and Developmental Risks

The National Statistics 2022 highlight critical health and developmental issues affecting the younger population in Southern Thailand's border regions, particularly emphasizing the severe impact on youth aged 17-24, while also acknowledging the foundational challenges experienced by children aged 0-5 years. The early childhood years are marked by alarming rates of malnutrition, with 23.5% of children in this demographic being moderately to severely stunted—a figure that is nearly double the regional (12.9%) and national averages (13.3%). This early malnutrition sets a precarious stage for ongoing health and developmental challenges as these children grow into youth. Among the youth, these foundational health issues are compounded by elevated levels of stress related to educational and financial insecurities, which are direct outgrowths of the socio-economic hardships pervasive in these regions. The situation is further exacerbated for youth by the direct and indirect effects of the Southern Thailand conflict. A report on the Situation of Children, Youth, and Women in the Southern Border Provinces indicates that between 2004 and 2020, 6,687 children became orphans, predominantly losing their fathers, due to the conflict. This loss has profound emotional and psychological repercussions, with 27% of these orphans reported to suffer from depression. Such data underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by youth, linking early childhood adversity to ongoing developmental and mental health risks in later years. The developmental trajectory from early childhood malnutrition to the compounded stress and mental health challenges in youth illuminates a continuum of vulnerability exacerbated by the socio-economic and conflict-related realities of the region. The health and developmental risks facing youth are not isolated issues but are deeply intertwined with the broader socio-economic challenges, including poverty and educational barriers, that perpetuate cycles of intergenerational poverty and hardship.

This comprehensive analysis underscores the critical need for interventions that are not merely reactive but proactive, addressing the root causes of health and developmental challenges. Effective strategies must encompass immediate health and psychological support for affected youth, alongside long-term socio-economic initiatives aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty and educational disruption. By focusing on the interconnected nature of these issues, interventions can more effectively target the complex web of factors contributing to the health crisis among youth in Southern Thailand's border regions. The goal is not only to mitigate the immediate impacts of malnutrition and psychological stress but also to foster a supportive environment that enables the younger generation to thrive despite the adversities they face.

5. Impact on Aspirations and Future Outlook

The protracted conflict in Southern Thailand's border regions casts a long shadow over the aspirations and future perspectives of its youth. This influence manifests as a pronounced erosion of hope and a noticeable decline in optimism regarding their futures. Among the youth affected by this conflict, a sense of hopelessness pervades, not merely as a transient emotional reaction but as a condition with deep, enduring implications for their development and societal participation. The suppression of youthful ambitions is a critical concern, as it not

only stymies the personal growth of these individuals but also has the potential to curtail their contributions to the socio-economic and cultural rejuvenation of the region.

This reduction in forward-looking optimism among the youth is a significant issue that merits close examination. It suggests that the impact of the conflict extends beyond the immediate physical and psychological harm to affect the very way young people envision their place in the world and their ability to effect change within it. The findings point to a pressing need for interventions, yet the challenge lies not only in addressing the symptoms of this disillusionment but in tackling its root causes. Efforts to revitalize hope and restore aspirations among the youth in these conflict-ridden areas must be nuanced and multifaceted, recognizing the complex interplay between the conflict and its broader socio-economic implications.

Critically, while interventions are essential, their design and implementation require careful consideration to avoid simplistic solutions to deeply entrenched problems. The task of rekindling hope and ambition in the youth of Southern Thailand's border regions demands more than generic peacebuilding initiatives; it necessitates targeted strategies that acknowledge the unique experiences, fears, and desires of these young individuals. These strategies should aim not just to mitigate the immediate effects of the conflict but to foster an environment in which youth can envision a future that transcends the current constraints imposed by their circumstances.

Discussion

In the comprehensive study of the impact of conflict on children and youth in Southern Thailand's border regions, the findings paint a complex picture of the multifaceted challenges faced by this young population. These challenges resonate with various theoretical perspectives, offering a rich tapestry of insights into their experiences.

The psychological trauma and mental health challenges observed in these children and youth are significantly aligned with the principles outlined in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. This theory posits that an individual's development is deeply affected by various layers of environmental systems, including the broader societal and legal context. Specifically, the implementation of laws such as Martial Law and the Emergency Decree in the conflict area serves as a stark illustration of how macrosystem elements, like government policies and legal frameworks, can profoundly impact individual psychological well-being. This scenario is in stark contrast to the ideals of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, which advocates for environments that support and empower young individuals towards optimal growth. Unfortunately, the harsh realities of the conflict undermine the supportive conditions championed by PYD, leading to heightened vulnerability and mental health problems among the youth. This analysis demonstrates how real-world events and conditions underscore and validate the theoretical constructs proposed by Bronfenbrenner, rather than the theory influencing the events themselves.

In the realm of education, the paradox of high investment and poor-quality educational outcomes challenges the Human Capital Theory. This theory posits that investments in education lead to enhanced skills and knowledge, resulting in increased productivity and economic benefits. However, in the Southern border regions, the financial burden on families does not translate into quality education, indicating systemic inefficiencies and the need for educational reforms that emphasize equity and quality.

The youth's skepticism towards political institutions, juxtaposed with their strong community engagement, is aligned with Social Identity Theory, which explains how group affiliations

influence self-perception and behavior. Furthermore, Erikson's theory of identity development highlights the role of social experiences in shaping individual identity. The conflict and the youths' responses to it are crucial in the formation of their identity and their perception of political entities.

Health concerns, particularly malnutrition and its developmental implications, are framed within the Bioecological Model of Human Development. This model suggests a complex interaction between biological and environmental factors in development. The malnutrition observed, exacerbated by environmental stressors like poverty, aligns with the Life Course Theory, which emphasizes the long-lasting effects of early life conditions on an individual's development and health trajectories.

Lastly, the decline in future aspirations and hope among the youth is clearly explained by the Learned Helplessness Theory. This theory posits that exposure to uncontrollable adverse events can lead to a perception of helplessness, diminishing motivation and future aspirations. An environment of conflict may contribute to a sense among the youth that their efforts to improve their circumstances are futile, leading to reduced optimism about their future.

Conclusion

This qualitative investigation into the effects of conflict on youth in Southern Thailand's border regions reveals a complex crisis that significantly impacts their psychological well-being, educational opportunities, social engagement, and health. A critical examination of these findings highlights several areas of concern.

Psychologically, the widespread trauma among youth, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression, is notably aggravated by the imposition of state security measures such as Martial Law and the Emergency Decree. Although these legal frameworks aim to ensure security, they have paradoxically heightened fear and anxiety, contributing to a mental health crisis among the youth. This unintended consequence of security policies calls for a reevaluation of their impact on young populations, suggesting a need for approaches that balance security with the psychological welfare of the community.

The educational sphere presents a paradox of significant investment yet subpar outcomes, pointing to systemic inefficiencies and the failure to deliver socio-economic benefits promised by the Human Capital Theory. The financial strain on families for education that falls short of quality expectations underscores a critical gap in the education system. This discrepancy demands educational reforms that prioritize equity and quality, questioning the current allocation of resources and the effectiveness of educational policies.

Youth skepticism towards political institutions, juxtaposed with active local community involvement, illustrates a nuanced socio-political landscape. This duality, grounded in Social Identity Theory and Erikson's theory of identity development, underscores the complex interplay between distrust in larger political structures and a robust commitment to community-level issues. This dynamic suggests a need for political engagement strategies that are responsive to the unique perspectives and needs of the youth, fostering a sense of trust and efficacy.

Health issues, particularly malnutrition, spotlight the critical interconnection between biological and environmental factors as outlined in the Bioecological Model of Human Development and the Life Course Theory. The high prevalence of malnutrition, exacerbated by poverty, highlights the pressing need for comprehensive health interventions that address

both immediate nutritional needs and the broader socio-economic conditions contributing to these health challenges.

Lastly, the noticeable decline in youth aspirations and optimism, as explained by the Learned Helplessness Theory, presents a profound challenge. The theory's application here suggests that continuous exposure to adverse conditions has led to a diminished sense of agency among the youth, impacting their motivation and outlook towards the future. This finding emphasizes the importance of developing targeted interventions that not only address the immediate effects of conflict but also aim to restore hope and foster a sense of empowerment among the youth.

The Future Prospects for Youth in Southern Thailand

In closing, the future prospects for youth in southern Thailand are intricately tied to the actions taken by stakeholders in the region. While they face substantial challenges, these young individuals possess remarkable resilience, determination, and a commitment to contributing positively to their communities. The path forward should prioritize investments in education, economic opportunities, and psychological well-being. By doing so, we can empower the youth of southern Thailand to overcome the barriers they face and become active agents of change in their communities.

The significance of this study extends beyond the borders of southern Thailand. It serves as a reminder of the broader implications of conflict on youth and underscores the importance of addressing their needs and aspirations in conflict-affected societies worldwide. The potential of youth to shape the future, even in the face of adversity, should not be underestimated.

Ethical Declaration

This study complied with ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were fully informed about the research purpose, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. This research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

References

- Amnesty International Thailand. (2017). Annual Report. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from https://www.amnesty.or.th/files/3715/2846/0994/Annual_Report__Eng_final.pdf
- Askew, M. (2007). *Conspiracy, Politics, and a Disorderly Border: The Struggle to Comprehend Insurgency in Thailand's Deep South* (Vol. 29). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Bangkokbiznews. (2022). The "Move Forward" Party demands that the military stop violating rights after collecting DNA from a 10-month-old baby. Retrieved February 3, 2024, from <https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/1032679>
- Becker, G. S. (2009). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. University of Chicago press.
- Betancourt, T. S., & Khan, K. T. (2008). The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience. *International Review of Psychiatry, 20*(3), 317-328.
- Booranacharoenkit, D. (2021). Situation of children, youth, and women in the southern border provinces. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://peaceresourcecollaborative.org/deep-south/overview-analysis/children-and-women>.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard university press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. J. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review, 101*(4), 568-586.
- Burde, D. (2014). *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan*. Columbia University Press.
- Cross-Cultural Foundation. (2019). Fact sheet: Forced DNA Collection in the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand. Retrieved February 5, 2024, from https://voicefromthais.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/fact-sheet_forced-dna-collection-in-the-southern-border-provinces-of-thailand-edited.pdf
- Deep South Watch. (2024). Conflict Incident Database. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://deepsouthwatch.org/>
- Duayjai Group. (2018). Human rights situation in the southern border provinces of Thailand. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://ilaw.or.th/node/5269>
- Dyregrov, A., Gjestad, R., & Raundalen, M. (2002). Children exposed to warfare: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 15*(1), 59-68.
- Elder, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development, 69*(1), 1-12.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Human Rights Watch. (2007). No one is safe: Insurgent attacks on civilians in Thailand's southern border provinces. *Human Rights Watch Report*. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/thailand0807.pdf>
- Jerryson, M. (2010). Militarizing Buddhism: Violence in Southern Thailand.
- Jitpiromrsi, S., & McCargo, D. (2008). A ministry for the south: New governance proposals for Thailand's southern region. *Contemporary Southeast Asia, 40*3-428.
- KID for Kids. (2022). Youth survey results 2022. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://kidforkids.org/youth-survey-2022/>
- Lerner, R. M., Brentano, C., Dowling, E. M., & Anderson, P. M. (2002). Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *New directions for youth development, 2002*(95), 11-34.
- LIOW, T. J. C. (2006). Violence and the long road to reconciliation in Southern Thailand. In *Religion and conflict in south and southeast Asia* (pp. 164-183). Routledge.

- McCargo, D. (2017). *Tearing apart the land: Islam and legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. Cornell University Press.
- National Statistical Office. (2021). Survey on the situation of children and women in 17 provinces of Thailand, 2019. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/5871/file/MICS6%2017%20Provinces%20EN.pdf>
- Qouta, S., Punamaki, R.-L., & El Sarraj, E. (2008). Child development and family mental health in war and military violence: The Palestinian experience. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 32(4), 310-321.
- Seligman, M. E. (1972). Learned helplessness. *Annual Review of Medicine*, 23, 407-412.
- Shemyakina, O. N. (2011). The effect of armed conflict on accumulation of schooling: Results from Tajikistan. *Journal of Development Economics*, 95(2), 186-200.
- Shepler, S. (2005). The rites of the child: Global discourses of youth and reintegrating child soldiers in Sierra Leone. *Journal of Human Rights*, 4(2), 197-211.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2010). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In T. Postmes & N. R. Branscombe (Eds.), *Rediscovering social identity* (pp. 173–190). Psychology Press.
- Wessells, M. (2006). *Child soldiers: From violence to protection*. Harvard University Press.