Journal of Administrative Science
Vol.23, Issue 1, 2026, pp.341-365
Available online at *http:jas.uitm.edu.my*

Framing the Seriousness of Drug Smuggling in Sabah: Enforcement Paradoxes, Borderland Economies, and Regional Drug Flows in Malaysia

Amanda Balqis Mohd Mazalan[1], Yarina Ahmad[2]* & Siti Zulaikha Mustapha[3]

[1] Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor
[2] Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor
[2]Institute for Leadership and Development, Bandar Enstek, Negeri Sembilan
[3] Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Machang, Kelantan

Corresponding Author: yarina@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

Drug smuggling in Sabah has become a persistent and structurally embedded challenge that extends beyond routine border crime and conventional enforcement evaluation. Building on Malaysia's longer historical drug trajectory and Sabah's position within a maritime borderland connecting Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines, this study argues that the seriousness of the issue cannot be measured through seizures and arrests alone but must be understood through a multi-lens framing that captures enforcement, societal, and systemic dimensions. Drawing on a social constructivist approach and qualitative methods, the study employs in-depth semi-structured interviews with operational enforcement officers and strategic-level key persons from multiple agencies, supported by document and field-based contextual analysis. Findings indicate that the seriousness of drug smuggling is shaped by four interrelated indicators: (1) persistent inflow despite continuous enforcement, (2) multi-route operations reflecting organised supply resilience, (3) escalating scale and value of seizures, interpreted as evidence of sustained volume rather than control, and (4) Sabah's structural role as an entry and transit gateway with national spillover risks. The discussion highlights an enforcement paradox in which visible operational outputs may coexist with enduring system-level vulnerability. The study concludes that effective responses require reframing how seriousness is understood through flow-based and system-level indicators, supported by integrated governance, intelligence-led coordination, adaptive legal and technological capacity, and strengthened regional cooperation to disrupt transnational supply chains and reduce long-term harm.

***Keywords**: Drug smuggling; Sabah, Maritime Border Security; Transnational organised crime; Enforcement paradox*

INTRODUCTION

Received: 1 February 2026
Accepted: 1 March 2026
Published: 30 April 2026

Drug smuggling remains one of the most persistent and complex challenges in contemporary drug policy. It is deeply intertwined with a wide range of drug-related harms, including trafficking, production, addiction, organised crime, and public health crises. Smuggling functions as the critical connective mechanism that sustains drug markets by enabling substances to move from production zones to consumer populations, linking local drug use to transnational criminal networks (UNODC, 2023;

Journal of Administrative Science
Vol.23, Issue 1, 2026, pp.341-365
Available online at *http:jas.uitm.edu.my*

2024). As such, the seriousness of drug smuggling cannot be understood in isolation from the broader drug ecosystem in which it operates.

In Malaysia, drug-related problems are not a recent phenomenon. Historical records show that narcotic use and trade existed well before independence, particularly during the colonial period when opium consumption and distribution were institutionalised through state monopolies as a source of revenue (Kaur, 2007; Brook, 2010). Although the post-independence state criminalised narcotics and introduced punitive drug laws, illicit drug markets did not disappear. Instead, they evolved alongside regional conflicts, economic integration, and globalisation, giving rise to increasingly sophisticated transnational supply networks (UNODC, 2023; Windle, 2016). This long historical trajectory situates contemporary drug smuggling challenges within a broader structural continuum rather than as a new or isolated crisis. Recent national reports further indicate that Malaysia continues to experience evolving drug threats, particularly involving synthetic drugs and cross-border trafficking networks, reflecting broader regional trends in Southeast Asia (National Anti-Drugs Agency, 2023; Royal Malaysia Police, 2024).

Within this national context, Sabah has emerged as a critical yet underexamined node in regional drug smuggling networks. Located at the intersection of maritime and land routes linking Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Sabah occupies a strategic position within Southeast Asian mobility and trade systems (Andreas, 2011; Van Schendel, 2005; Omar, Ismail, & Yusoff, 2021). Borderland research has long shown that such peripheral regions often become logistical gateways for illicit flows when geography, informal economies, and transnational networks converge (Andreas, 2011; van Schendel, 2005). While Sabah's geography supports legitimate trade and livelihood activities, it also creates structural opportunities for smuggling that persist despite sustained enforcement efforts. Yet much of the existing drug policy scholarship continues to focus on seizures and arrests, treating seriousness as an output of enforcement rather than a systemic condition (Reuter & Kleiman, 1986; Sparrow, 2015). Recent enforcement data and national reports continue to identify Sabah as a high-risk entry and transit point for illicit drugs, particularly within maritime corridors linked to regional trafficking routes (National Anti-Drugs Agency, 2023; Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia, 2024).

eISSN 2600-9374

Historical and contemporary evidence indicates that Sabah's role in drug smuggling is closely linked to its long-standing function as a porous maritime borderland characterised by high levels of cross-border mobility. The entry of illicit substances into Sabah is facilitated through both formal and informal routes connecting neighbouring regions in Indonesia and the southern Philippines, where longstanding economic, familial, and trade networks enable the movement of goods and people across borders (UNODC, 2023). Previous studies have shown that drug inflows into Sabah are not episodic but structurally embedded within these cross-border systems, often concealed within routine economic activities such as fishing, small-scale trade, and logistics operations (Omar, Ismail, & Yusoff, 2021; Baharudin & Mohd Noor, 2018). These dynamics are further reinforced by price differentials, demand patterns, and the strategic use of Sabah as both an entry point and transit corridor within regional drug supply chains, thereby intensifying the complexity of enforcement and control (UNODC, 2023).

Drug smuggling in Sabah is further complicated by the increasing sophistication of contemporary drug syndicates. Empirical research consistently shows that modern smuggling networks are highly adaptive, operating through layered organisational structures, flexible routes, and concealment strategies embedded within legal businesses and supply chains such as fishing, logistics, and cross-border trade (Felbab-Brown, 2010; UNODC, 2023). These networks exploit regulatory gaps, jurisdictional fragmentation, and market demand differentials, enabling them to absorb losses and reconstitute operations after interdiction. As a result, visible enforcement success often coexists with persistent or expanding drug flows, creating what scholars have described as the paradox of interdiction, where seizures increase without durable market disruption (Reuter, 1988; Poret, 2002; UNODC, 2024; ASEANAPOL, 2023).

This article argues that understanding the seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah requires moving beyond enforcement statistics towards a multi-lens analytical approach that captures how seriousness is framed, experienced, and reproduced at different levels. Specifically, the study examines how drug smuggling is understood through the enforcement lens, drawing on perspectives from multiple agencies involved in addressing drug smuggling in Sabah, while situating these views within broader societal and systemic contexts. In doing so, the study addresses the following research question: "How is the seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah framed across

eISSN 2600-9374

enforcement, societal, and systemic lenses, and what are the implications for drug policy and regional cooperation?"

By situating Sabah within Malaysia's historical drug trajectory and the wider regional drug economy, this study contributes empirical evidence from Southeast Asia to debates on drug policy evaluation, border governance, and transnational illicit flows. It further argues that without reframing seriousness at the system level, policy responses will remain trapped in cycles of visible enforcement activity that fail to disrupt the deeper structures sustaining drug smuggling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The drug problem in Malaysia has long been framed as a national security and social issue, with policy responses historically shaped by punitive legislation, compulsory treatment, and enforcement-led strategies. While early drug control efforts focused on internal consumption and street-level distribution, recent evidence suggests that Malaysia's role within regional drug markets has expanded, particularly as a transit and redistribution country within Southeast Asia (UNODC, 2023). This shift reflects broader regional transformations, including the expansion of synthetic drug production, increased maritime trade, and the diversification of trafficking routes away from traditional land corridors.

Sabah occupies a distinctive position within this changing landscape. Unlike Peninsular Malaysia, which is connected to Thailand via land borders, Sabah is embedded within a maritime borderland that links Malaysia directly to Indonesia and the southern Philippines. This positioning situates Sabah not only as an entry point for drugs entering Malaysia but also as a transshipment hub for onward movement to other destinations. Yet, despite this strategic role, much of the Malaysian drug literature continues to treat Sabah as a peripheral enforcement zone rather than as a structurally central node within regional supply chains. This gap has limited the development of context-sensitive drug policy responses tailored to Sabah's border realities.

Drug Smuggling Enforcement in Malaysia

Malaysia's drug control regime is often characterised by strong legal frameworks and high enforcement intensity. Key legislative instruments include the

eISSN 2600-9374

Dangerous Drugs Act 1952, the Dangerous Drugs (Special Preventive Measures) Act 1985, and the establishment of specialised agencies such as the Royal Malaysia Police Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department (JSJN), the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM), and the National Anti-Drugs Agency (AADK). At the policy level, enforcement has historically been positioned as the central pillar of Malaysia’s drug control strategy, with success commonly measured through arrests, seizures, and prosecutions (Ahmad & Abd Rahman, 2017; Ismail & Mahmud, 2020).

In the Malaysian context, the enforcement paradox must be situated within evolving national drug policy frameworks. While early approaches were anchored in punitive legislation such as the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952, more recent policy directions reflect a gradual shift towards a more integrated model combining enforcement, prevention, and rehabilitation. However, despite these policy shifts, enforcement evaluation remains heavily dependent on output-based indicators such as seizures and arrests. This creates a structural misalignment between policy orientation and measurement practices, reinforcing the enforcement paradox in which increased enforcement activity does not necessarily translate into reduced drug flows or systemic disruption.

Empirical studies, however, increasingly highlight the structural limits of enforcement-led approaches, particularly in border and maritime contexts. Research on maritime enforcement in Malaysia has shown that the scale of territorial waters, limited assets, and high operational costs create persistent coverage gaps that cannot be resolved through manpower increases alone (Mohd Noor & Saad, 2019; Hamzah et al., 2021). These constraints are especially pronounced in Sabah, where agencies must operate across long coastlines, island chains, and informal crossing points, often with overlapping jurisdictions and fragmented command structures.

Inter-agency coordination has also been identified as a recurring challenge in Malaysia’s border security architecture. While mechanisms such as ESSCOM have improved coordination in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone, studies note that coordination outside designated security zones remains heavily dependent on informal relationships, personal networks, and ad hoc arrangements (Yusoff & Mohd Azizuddin, 2018). This creates uneven enforcement effectiveness and limits the scalability of integrated operations.

eISSN 2600-9374

Further, Malaysian scholars have noted that enforcement agencies often operate within performance systems that privilege visible outputs, reinforcing reliance on seizures and arrests as indicators of success (Abdullah & Othman, 2021). This aligns with international critiques of output-based policing, where activity becomes a proxy for impact. In border regions such as Sabah, this dynamic risks obscuring the persistence of underlying smuggling systems, as enforcement metrics capture only intercepted flows while undetected movements continue.

Malaysian enforcement literature suggests that while enforcement commitment is high, capacity ceilings, coordination limits, and structural geography constrain long-term impact, particularly in peripheral and maritime regions. These findings provide essential context for understanding why drug smuggling persists in Sabah despite sustained operations and why seriousness must be assessed beyond conventional enforcement indicators.

Measuring Seriousness

Drug policy evaluation in Malaysia, as in many countries, relies heavily on enforcement statistics such as seizures, arrests, and prosecutions. These indicators are institutionally embedded within agency performance systems and are often used to demonstrate success to policymakers and the public. However, international drug policy scholarship has repeatedly cautioned that such indicators are especially problematic in border and transit regions, where interdiction outcomes are strongly influenced by market volume, route shifts, and enforcement displacement (Reuter, 1988; UNODC, 2023).

In the Sabah context, rising seizure values may paradoxically indicate expanding inflows rather than improved control. This reflects what Reuter and Kleiman (1986) describe as the misalignment between enforcement outputs and market outcomes, where visible enforcement masks underlying system resilience. Moreover, in transit regions, smugglers often accept losses as operational costs, meaning that seizures do not necessarily reduce supply or profitability. As a result, seriousness in Sabah cannot be assessed through enforcement outputs alone but must be understood through the persistence, redundancy, and adaptability of smuggling systems.

eISSN 2600-9374

Journal of Administrative Science
Vol.23, Issue 1, 2026, pp.341-365
Available online at *http:jas.uitm.edu.my*

Border Regions as Crime Multiplier

Border studies literature consistently shows that borderlands function not simply as lines of separation but as zones of intensified mobility and opportunity, where legal, semi-legal, and illegal flows intersect (Andreas, 2011; van Schendel, 2005). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in maritime borderlands, where the absence of fixed checkpoints and the presence of informal routes reduce the state's capacity to regulate movement effectively (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017).

Sabah exemplifies these dynamics. Its long coastline, dispersed islands, and reliance on small-scale maritime movement create a high-volume mobility environment in which illicit flows can be concealed within everyday economic activity. Fishing, trade, and family movement across borders are socially normalised practices that smugglers exploit to blend in and reduce detection risk. In this sense, Sabah functions as a crime multiplier, where geography and economy jointly amplify smuggling opportunities beyond what would exist in non-border regions.

Peripheral Security Vulnerabilities and the Limits of Enforcement

Security and governance literature highlights that peripheral regions often experience structural under-governance, characterised by limited resources, fragmented authority, and uneven institutional presence (Scott, 2009; Jones, 2012). In such contexts, enforcement agencies operate under chronic constraints that restrict their capacity to sustain control, even when political commitment is high.

In Sabah, these vulnerabilities are compounded by geographic complexity, logistical costs, and the need for inter-agency coordination across maritime, land, and immigration domains. Studies of peripheral security suggest that enforcement in such environments is inherently reactive, prioritising visible interdiction over system-level disruption (Ahram & King, 2012). This helps explain why intensified operations in Sabah have not produced commensurate reductions in smuggling flows and why enforcement success must be interpreted cautiously in policy evaluations.

eISSN 2600-9374

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a social constructivist research philosophy, which recognises that social reality is produced through shared meanings, institutional practices, and interactions among actors rather than existing as an objective and fixed condition (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within this framework, the seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by the experiences and interpretations of actors operating at different levels of the enforcement and governance system. Social constructivism is particularly appropriate for addressing this study's research question, which seeks to examine how the seriousness of drug smuggling is framed across enforcement, societal, and systemic lenses and how these framings shape drug policy and regional cooperation (Schön & Rein, 1994).

To address potential bias, particularly when engaging with high-ranking officials, the study applies a social constructivist approach that does not treat any single account as objective or authoritative. Instead, meanings are interpreted as context-dependent and shaped by institutional roles and experiences. Data were systematically triangulated across multiple agencies and hierarchical levels, including both operational officers and strategic-level informants, to identify convergence and divergence in perspectives. Reflexive interviewing techniques were employed to critically probe responses, allowing the researcher to distinguish between institutional narratives and experiential insights. This cross-level and multi-source comparison reduces the risk of elite bias and enhances the credibility and robustness of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2012).

A qualitative research approach was employed to capture in-depth insights into the lived experiences, interpretations, and professional judgments of informants directly involved in addressing drug smuggling in Sabah. Qualitative methods are especially suitable for exploring complex, hidden, and sensitive phenomena such as illicit markets, where quantitative indicators often obscure underlying processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2012). Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allow researchers to explore informants' perspectives while retaining flexibility to probe emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach

eISSN 2600-9374

Journal of Administrative Science
Vol.23, Issue 1, 2026, pp.341-365
Available online at *http:jas.uitm.edu.my*

enabled the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions to examine how seriousness is constructed within institutional and operational contexts.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in drug smuggling-related enforcement activities and a minimum of two years of professional experience. Selection criteria prioritised information-rich cases across key enforcement agencies, including PDRM, APMM, JKDM, and ESSCOM, to ensure coverage of operational, maritime, border control, and strategic perspectives.

The final sample of six informants was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no substantially new themes emerged during the later stages of data collection. In qualitative research, saturation is reached when additional data no longer contribute new insights but instead reinforce existing patterns and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Given the focused scope of the study and the inclusion of both operational and strategic-level informants, the sample size is consistent with established qualitative research practices that prioritise depth of insight over numerical representation (Moustakas, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Fieldwork was conducted in three strategically selected locations in Sabah, namely Lahad Datu Coastal Zone, Kota Kinabalu Port Area, and Kem Batalion 14 PGA, Tawau, which represent distinct yet critical operational environments for understanding drug smuggling dynamics across coastal, border, and urban logistics contexts. Observations in Kem Batalion 14 PGA Tawau identified it as a high-risk coastal zone characterised by informal entry points and late-night small boat activity, indicating potential maritime routes for illicit movement amid porous boundary control and limited surveillance. In Lahad Datu, multiple unregulated landing points were observed along the coastline, where routine economic activities such as fishing and small-scale trade create conditions conducive to the concealment of illicit goods. Meanwhile, the Kota Kinabalu Port Area demonstrated high-volume cargo and logistics movement, increasing enforcement complexity and enabling smuggling concealment within legitimate supply chains.

Consistent with case-based qualitative research, these strategically selected sites provide analytically rich insights into the spatial variation of smuggling practices (Yin, 2018). While Sabah's geographic scale limits full territorial coverage, the selected locations offer sufficient depth to capture key patterns across different operational

eISSN 2600-9374

settings, with broader coverage requiring substantially greater time and resources. In addition to field-level informants, representatives from agency headquarters were also interviewed to capture strategic-level perspectives on policy coordination, institutional priorities, and systemic challenges. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and richness of the data, a practice recommended for rigorous qualitative analysis (Poland, 1995).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following an inductive coding process to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships across the dataset. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative policy and criminological research due to its flexibility and capacity to generate analytically meaningful themes from complex data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Through iterative coding and refinement, themes and sub-themes were developed to answer the research question and to illuminate how the seriousness of drug smuggling is constructed across institutional and structural levels.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study applied data triangulation by integrating multiple sources of evidence, including primary data from in-depth interviews and field observations, as well as secondary data from academic literature, official reports, and policy documents. This approach enables crossverification of findings and reduces the risk of bias associated with reliance on a single data source. Consistency of themes across different informants and data sources further strengthens the trustworthiness of the analysis. In qualitative research, triangulation is widely recognised as a key strategy for enhancing credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

eISSN 2600-9374

Journal of Administrative Science
Vol.23, Issue 1, 2026, pp.341-365
Available online at *http:jas.uitm.edu.my*

FINDINGS

Table 1:
Profile of Informants (Enforcement officers)

No.	Agency/ Organisation	Designation/Psudonym	Location/ Command	Scope of Role and Relevance to Study
1.	Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) *Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM)*	Enforcement Officer, PDRM, JSJN, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah Representing JSJN, PDRM KK and Sabah as a whole	Kota Kinabalu (provides feedback for all areas in Sabah, including Tawau and Lahad Datu)	Responsible for intelligence gathering, operational enforcement, and detainee management related to narcotics crimes in Sabah.
2.	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) *Agensi Penguatkuasaan Maritim Malaysia (APMM)*	Enforcement Officer, ESSCOM/APMM, Lahad Datu, Sabah (Representing APMM Lahad Datu)	Lahad Datu	Responsible for oversees maritime enforcement operations under the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM), including coordination with ESSCOM in addressing maritime security threats.
3.	Royal Malaysian Custom Department (RMCD) *Jabatan Kastam Diraja Malaysia (JKDM)*	Enforcement Officer, JKDM, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah (Representing JKDM KK and Sabah as a whole)	Kota Kinabalu	Responsible for customs enforcement and border control operations at entry and exit points in Kota Kinabalu.

Table 2:
Profile of Informants (Senior Officer)

No.	Agency/ Organisation	Designation/Psudonym	Location/ Command	Scope of Role and Relevance to Study
1.	Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) *Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM)*	Senior Officer, JSJN, PDRM, Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur	Supports national-level leadership in the planning, coordination, and implementation of narcotics enforcement operations.
		Senior Officer, JSJN, PDRM KK, Sabah	Kota Kinabalu	Provides senior leadership and oversight of narcotics crime investigations and enforcement operations in Sabah.
2.	Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) *Kawasan Keselamatan Khas Pantai Timur Sabah (ESSCOM)*	Senior Officer ESSCOM/PDRM, Lahad Datu, Sabah	Lahad Datu	Provides strategic leadership and overall operational command for security enforcement within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE).

eISSN 2600-9374

Findings and Analysis

1) Persistent Inflow Despite Continuous Enforcement

All informants, regardless of agency, emphasised that drug inflow into Sabah continues despite sustained enforcement operations. While arrests and seizures are frequent, they have not translated into long-term reduction in smuggling attempts. Informants repeatedly described enforcement as "interrupting" rather than "stopping" the flow. A senior JSJN officer explained:

"We may arrest today, but tomorrow another group will try. The flow never really stops. That's the reality we face."*(Senior Officer, JSJN, PDRM Sabah)*

Similarly, an ESSCOM senior officer described the situation as cyclical:

"Every time we increase patrols, they pause, then they come back. It is like waves. It shows this is not random; it is organised." (*Senior Officer ESSCOM/PDRM, Lahad Datu, Sabah)*

APMM officers also echoed this persistence, noting that the same maritime sectors are repeatedly targeted:

"We keep seeing the same patterns. Even when we succeed, they return. That tells us this route is already established in their system." (*Enforcement Officer, ESSCOM/APMM, Lahad Datu, Sabah)*

This continuity led informants to conclude that Sabah has evolved into a structural entry and transit point, where smuggling is embedded within routine cross-border movements rather than driven by isolated opportunities.

2) Multi-Route Smuggling as an Indicator of Organised Supply Networks

The seriousness of the problem was further demonstrated by the use of multiple overlapping routes, which increased enforcement complexity and reduced the effectiveness of single-agency interventions. Informants described smuggling networks as highly flexible, switching routes based on enforcement presence and operational risk. A senior ESSCOM informant noted:

"They don't rely on one route. If the sea is risky today, they wait or move to another point. If land is quiet, they use land. It's all planned." *(Senior Officer ESSCOM/PDRM, Lahad Datu, Sabah)*

Customs officers highlighted that this multi-route strategy required coordination and advance planning:

eISSN 2600-9374

"This is not small-time smuggling. You need logistics, timing, and people on both sides. It shows the seriousness of the syndicates involved." *(Enforcement Officer, JKDM, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah)*

Another informant from PDRM emphasised that route diversification was a sign of supply resilience:

"Even if we block one way, the supply is not affected much. They already have alternatives. That's why we say the problem is serious." *(Enforcement Officer, PDRM, JSJN, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah)*

These accounts illustrate that the multiplicity of routes is not accidental but reflects a systematic smuggling architecture, further reinforcing Sabah's role as a key operational hub.

3) Escalating Scale and Value of Drug Seizures

Informants repeatedly referred to the increasing value and frequency of seizures as a critical indicator of seriousness. While these figures are often reported as enforcement achievements, informants interpreted them as evidence of growing supply pressure and sustained demand.

A Customs officer remarked:

"When the numbers keep increasing every year, it means the flow is increasing. We are only seeing a portion of what gets through." *(Enforcement Officer, JKDM, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah)*

A JSJN, PDRM informant echoed this concern:

"We know the seizures are big, but that also means the syndicates are confident. They are willing to lose one shipment because the profit is still there." *(Enforcement Officer, PDRM, JSJN, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah)*

Another senior officer described seizures as the "visible part of a larger movement":

"What we catch is not the whole story. The serious part is what we don't see." *(Senior Officer, ESSCOM/PDRM, Lahad Datu, Sabah)*

These perceptions reinforce the view that escalating seizures reflect expanding smuggling volume, not simply improved enforcement effectiveness.

4) Sabah as a Strategic Entry and Transit Zone with National Spillover Risks

eISSN 2600-9374

Journal of Administrative Science
Vol.23, Issue 1, 2026, pp.341-365
Available online at *http:jas.uitm.edu.my*

Beyond state-level impacts, informants consistently framed Sabah as a gateway into the national drug market, with drugs redistributed to other regions after entry. This framing elevated the issue from a local enforcement problem to a national security concern. A senior informant explained:

"Most of the drugs are not for Sabah. Sabah is just the door. After that, it moves to other states." *(Senior Officer, JSJN, PDRM KK, Sabah)*

Another senior officer emphasised the long-term risk:

"If this entry point is not controlled, the rest of the country will always be affected. You cannot fix the problem downstream." *(Senior Officer, JSJN, PDRM, Malaysia)*

This perspective was shared across agencies, reinforcing the assessment that drug smuggling in Sabah represents a systemic upstream vulnerability with direct implications for national drug control, public health, and organised crime expansion. These findings are consistent with existing academic and policy literature on drug smuggling in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Previous studies have shown that drug trafficking networks operating in border regions such as Sabah are highly adaptive, utilising multiple routes and embedded within broader socio-economic and mobility systems (Baharudin & Mohd Noor, 2018; Omar, Ismail, & Yusoff, 2021). Similarly, international research highlights that persistent inflows despite enforcement efforts reflect structural resilience within transnational drug markets rather than enforcement failure alone (UNODC, 2023; Felbab-Brown, 2010). This convergence between field-based findings and established literature strengthens the validity of the results and supports the interpretation that drug smuggling in Sabah is a systemic and sustained phenomenon.

DISCUSSIONS

Framing Seriousness Through Multiple Lenses: Enforcement, Society, and the System

The findings of this study reveal that the seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah is not understood uniformly, but is framed differently depending on the lens through which the problem is observed namely, the enforcement lens, the societal lens, and the systemic or national security lens. This aligns with framing theory, which argues that complex policy problems are interpreted differently by actors depending on institutional roles, incentives, and normative expectations (Schön & Rein, 1994; Benford & Snow, 2000). When these frames are examined together, they expose a critical enforcement

eISSN 2600-9374

paradox, where operational success may coexist with, and even mask, systemic failure (Reuter, 1988; Poret, 2002).

From the enforcement lens, seriousness is primarily interpreted through measurable outputs such as the number of arrests, raids, and the value of drug seizures. Performance management literature in policing shows that such indicators are deeply embedded in organisational accountability systems and key performance indicators (KPIs), as they provide tangible evidence of activity, productivity, and resource justification (Sparrow, 2015). In drug enforcement specifically, seizure statistics have long been used as proxy indicators of effectiveness, despite their known limitations (National Academies of Sciences, 2001). Informants in this study consistently referred to these metrics when describing operational achievements, reinforcing what Sparrow (2015) describes as the logic of visible performance, where success is defined by what can be counted rather than what can be prevented.

However, from the societal lens, seriousness is framed very differently. Public and community perceptions tend to interpret rising seizure figures as evidence that the drug problem is worsening, not improving. This mirrors findings in public policy and media studies, which show that enforcement visibility often amplifies perceptions of crisis and insecurity, regardless of actual risk reduction (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2001). Framing research further explains that when the same indicator is interpreted differently by institutions and the public, policy legitimacy becomes fragile (Schön & Rein, 1994). In Sabah, this produces a perception paradox: low arrests are framed as weak enforcement, while high arrests are interpreted as proof of systemic failure—placing agencies in a no-win situation and reinforcing public anxiety even when operational intensity increases.

At the systemic level, the findings show that seriousness must be understood beyond arrests and perceptions, and instead through the continuity of flows, route redundancy, and national spillover effects. Drug market scholarship has long warned against interpreting seizures as indicators of control, as they capture only the intercepted fraction of much larger illicit flows (Pardo, 2020). Empirical studies on interdiction consistently demonstrate that rising seizures may reflect increasing supply, displacement of routes, or market adaptation rather than effective deterrence (Felbab-Brown, 2010; UNODC, 2023). From this perspective, seizures in Sabah may paradoxically signal expanding smuggling attempts and increased risk tolerance among

eISSN 2600-9374

syndicates, while undetected flows continue to sustain the market. This system-level framing reveals the structural embeddedness of smuggling networks and the limits of output-based evaluation.

When these three lenses are integrated, the enforcement paradox becomes clear. Agencies may be meeting their KPIs and demonstrating high operational productivity, communities may perceive escalating threat levels, and the system as a whole may continue to experience persistent inflows and national distribution. Similar paradoxes have been observed in border security contexts, where enforcement functions simultaneously as control, performance, and symbolism (Andreas, 2000). In such contexts, visible enforcement success may coexist with deeper structural vulnerabilities that remain unaddressed.

This multi-lens framing has important implications for policy and evaluation. It suggests that seriousness should be assessed using flow-based and system-level indicators, such as persistence, adaptability, and spillover risks, rather than relying solely on enforcement outputs. This approach is consistent with recent calls in drug policy research to move beyond seizure statistics towards indicators that capture market dynamics and systemic risk (Pardo, 2020; UNODC, 2023). Without such reframing, policy responses risk remaining trapped in a cycle of visible enforcement activity that satisfies performance requirements but fails to disrupt the underlying smuggling system.

Sabah as a Structural Gateway within Regional Drug Supply Chains

The findings further reveal that Sabah's role extends beyond local drug consumption and routine enforcement challenges. Instead, Sabah functions as a structural gateway within regional drug supply chains, shaped not only by geography but also by the historical, cultural, and economic practices of border communities that have long been involved in the cross-border movement of goods. This positions drug smuggling not as an isolated criminal activity, but as an extension of pre-existing informal trade and mobility systems that have evolved around Sabah's strategic location.

Border and borderland studies emphasise that communities in peripheral and maritime regions often develop hybrid economic cultures, where formal and informal exchanges coexist as survival strategies in geographically fragmented and economically

eISSN 2600-9374

marginalised settings (Andreas, 2011; van Schendel, 2005). In Sabah, cross-border trade, small-scale smuggling of goods, fuel, food, and consumer items has historically been normalised as part of everyday life due to proximity to international borders, weak market integration, and long-standing kinship ties across borders. The findings suggest that drug smuggling has increasingly become embedded within this broader culture of cross-border exchange, transforming illicit drugs into one of several high-value commodities circulating through these established networks.

Informants described how strategic location and economic opportunity create a convergence of supply, demand, and price incentives, making drug smuggling an attractive activity compared to other forms of cross-border trade. The high profit margins associated with drugs, combined with persistent regional demand and the relative ease of concealment within existing movement patterns, elevate drug smuggling from opportunistic crime to a structurally enabled economic activity. This supports crime opportunity theory, which argues that illegal markets flourish when high rewards intersect with low perceived risk and available infrastructure (Clarke, 1997).

This structural embedding explains why Sabah has become not only an entry point but also a logistical hub for redistribution, with drugs moving onward to Peninsular Malaysia and beyond. As a result, drug smuggling in Sabah constitutes a national security vulnerability, as disruptions in Sabah reverberate across the wider Malaysian drug market. Enforcement focused solely on state-level interdiction is therefore insufficient, as it fails to address the socio-economic and cultural conditions that sustain cross-border supply chains.

Organised Adaptation, Community Normalisation, and the Persistence of Smuggling

Another important implication of the findings is that route diversification and operational flexibility should be interpreted not merely as tactical responses to enforcement, but as indicators of organised adaptation operating within a permissive social and economic environment. The use of multiple overlapping routes reflects supply systems that are deeply integrated into both organised networks and community-level practices of cross-border movement.

eISSN 2600-9374

Studies on organised crime resilience demonstrate that enforcement pressure tends to produce displacement, diversification, and innovation rather than market collapse (Felbab-Brown, 2010). In Sabah, this adaptation is reinforced by the fact that smuggling routes and practices have become normalised within broader borderland mobility systems, where legal, semi-legal, and illegal activities frequently overlap. As such, smuggling networks do not need to create new routes; they merely adapt existing ones that are socially recognised and economically functional.

The findings indicate that this adaptation is institutionalised rather than reactive. Smuggling routes are routinely adjusted based on enforcement presence, but the underlying system remains intact because it is supported by local knowledge, social ties, and economic dependence. This reflects what van Schendel (2005) describes as the "illicitness continuum" in borderlands, where activities shift fluidly between legality and illegality depending on state presence and market opportunity.

In this context, the seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah is not only a function of organised crime sophistication, but also of its embedding within the everyday economic practices of border communities. The convergence of strategic geography, normalised cross-border trade, and high-value drug markets creates a self-reinforcing system that is difficult to dismantle through enforcement alone. This helps explain why smuggling in Sabah persists despite repeated operations and reinforces the argument that the problem must be addressed as a structural gateway issue, not merely a policing challenge.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine the seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah by analysing enforcement experiences, community dynamics, and systemic patterns of illicit flows. The findings demonstrate that drug smuggling in Sabah is not a marginal or localised problem but a structural and strategic phenomenon, shaped by the convergence of geography, socio-economic practices, organised adaptation, and regional market dynamics. Sabah's position as an entry and transit gateway within regional drug supply chains has elevated the issue from a state-level enforcement challenge to a national and regional security concern.

eISSN 2600-9374

The seriousness of drug smuggling in Sabah must be understood within the context of changing drug trends and substances, both nationally and globally. The diversification of drug types, the emergence of new psychoactive substances, synthetic drugs, and poly-drug markets have increased the profitability and portability of illicit commodities. Globally, drug markets have become more fragmented and adaptive, with syndicates exploiting maritime routes, borderlands, and weakly governed spaces to minimise risk and maximise returns. These trends have been mirrored in Malaysia, where enforcement agencies increasingly encounter new substances, evolving concealment methods, and cross-border logistics that transcend traditional trafficking patterns.

Within this evolving landscape, Sabah's strategic location creates additional vulnerabilities. While Sabah functions as an entry point for drugs destined for Peninsular Malaysia, the findings also indicate that Sabah is increasingly utilised as a transit corridor for outbound flows to neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. This dual role, both inbound and outbound, positions Sabah as a regional hinge point in the Southeast Asian drug market, amplifying the consequences of any enforcement gaps within the state.

Given the transnational nature of these flows, effective responses require stronger and more institutionalised regional cooperation. Bilateral and multilateral arrangements between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines must move beyond ad hoc coordination towards operational integration, particularly in intelligence sharing, maritime patrols, and real-time information exchange. Joint surveillance of shared maritime corridors, harmonisation of controlled substance scheduling, and shared risk profiling systems would significantly enhance interdiction capacity.

Regional cooperation mechanisms such as ASEANAPOL, trilateral patrol frameworks, and joint maritime tasking should be further operationalised at the field level, ensuring that strategic agreements translate into daily enforcement collaboration. The findings suggest that without shared situational awareness and synchronized operations, enforcement efforts remain fragmented, allowing syndicates to exploit jurisdictional boundaries.

At the national level, the study highlights the need to strengthen enforcement capacity through a whole-of-government and integrated operational model, similar to

eISSN 2600-9374

the ESSCOM framework. The ESSCOM model demonstrates how multi-agency coordination, shared command structures, and pooled resources can reduce enforcement silos and enhance operational coherence. Expanding this model beyond security zones to drug smuggling control, particularly in high-risk maritime and border corridors, would improve response speed, reduce duplication, and maximise asset utilisation.

To support this, several enforcement enhancements are recommended:

1. *Integrated Command and Information Systems*

Establish a unified operational platform that links PDRM, APMM, Customs, Immigration, and relevant defence assets, enabling real-time intelligence fusion and coordinated tasking.

2. *Joint Asset Deployment and Patrol Scheduling*

Implement shared patrol planning across agencies to ensure continuous coverage of high-risk corridors, reducing the predictability of enforcement presence.

3. *Flow-Based Performance Indicators*

Reform enforcement evaluation frameworks to move beyond arrest and seizure counts, incorporating indicators such as route disruption, persistence reduction, and network displacement.

4. *Specialised Border and Maritime Units*

Strengthen specialised enforcement units with training in maritime interdiction, financial investigation, and cross-border intelligence, ensuring they are equipped to engage transnational networks rather than isolated smugglers.

Ultimately, this study argues that addressing drug smuggling in Sabah requires a shift from incident-focused enforcement to system-level disruption. Enforcement must be complemented by regional integration, governance reform, and socio-economic interventions that reduce reliance on informal cross-border economies. Without such a holistic approach, enforcement gains will remain temporary, and the structural conditions sustaining smuggling will persist.

By reframing drug smuggling in Sabah as a strategic gateway issue embedded within regional and global market dynamics, this study contributes a more realistic foundation for policy design. Strengthening regional cooperation, adopting integrated

eISSN 2600-9374

enforcement models such as ESSCOM, and reforming evaluation metrics are essential steps towards a more effective and sustainable response to drug smuggling in Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian region.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their deepest appreciation to all individuals and parties who, directly or indirectly, contributed their time, expertise, and support throughout the research process, thereby facilitating the successful completion and refinement of this paper.

Funding

There is no funding for this research.

Author contributions

All authors contribute as a writer in this article.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abdullah, M. A., & Othman, Z. (2021). Measuring enforcement performance in Malaysia's drug control system. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, *14*(3), 389–405.

Ahmad, N. A., & Hamzah, S. (2020). Regulatory challenges in controlling novel psychoactive substances in Malaysia. *Malayan Law Journal*, *6*, 45–62.

Ahmad, N., & Abd Rahman, A. (2017). Malaysia's drug control policy: Enforcement, prevention and treatment. *Journal of Public Security and Safety*, *5*(2), 15–28.

eISSN 2600-9374

Ahram, A. I., & King, C. (2012). The ungoverned spaces of the modern world. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, *1*(1), 1–19.

Andreas, P. (2011). *Illicit globalization: Myths, misconceptions, and historical lessons*. University of Chicago Press.

ASEANAPOL. (2023). *ASEAN Drug Trafficking Trends Report*. Kuala Lumpur: ASEANAPOL Secretariat.

Baharudin, N., & Mohd Noor, M. (2018). Maritime border security challenges in Sabah. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, *5*(2), 145–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797018776701

Brook, T. (2010). *Opium regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952*. University of California Press.

Bruns, B., & Miggelbrink, J. (2012). Subverting borders. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *27*(2), 133–150.

Bueger, C., & Edmunds, T. (2017). *Blue crime*. Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Felbab-Brown, V. (2010). *Shooting up: Counterinsurgency and the war on drugs*. Brookings Institution Press.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 59–82.

Hamzah, A., & Mustaffa, N. (2016). Drug control policy in Malaysia: From punitive to preventive approaches. *Kajian Malaysia*, *34*(2), 1–23.

eISSN 2600-9374

Hamzah, A., & Mustaffa, N. (2019). Emerging drug threats and enforcement challenges in Malaysia. *Kajian Malaysia*, *37*(1), 45–68.

Hamzah, Z., Jamaluddin, J., & Wahab, H. A. (2021). Maritime security challenges in Eastern Sabah. *Journal of Maritime Studies and National Integration*, *5*(1), 45–61.

Ismail, M. N., & Mahmud, M. (2020). Inter-agency coordination in Malaysia's drug enforcement system. *Kajian Malaysia*, *38*(2), 1–22.

Ismail, W. N. H. W., & Yusoff, M. A. (2014). Cross-border crimes and maritime security in Eastern Malaysia. *Borneo Research Journal*, *8*, 73–89.

Jones, R. (2012). Border security and the marginalisation of borderlands. *Geopolitics*, 17(4), 1–20.

Kaur, A. (2007). *Historical dictionary of Malaysia*. Scarecrow Press.

Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia (KDN). (2024). *National Security and Border Control Report*. Putrajaya: KDN.

Mohd Noor, M. A., & Saad, S. (2019). Maritime enforcement capacity and border security in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, *27*(3), 355–373.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.

National Anti-Drugs Agency (AADK). (2023). *Laporan Dadah Malaysia 2023*. Putrajaya: AADK.

Omar, R., & Ghazali, R. (2017). Border vulnerability and maritime security in Sabah. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, *2*(2), 123–139.

Omar, R., Ismail, W. N. H. W., & Yusoff, M. A. (2021). Transnational organised crime and border governance in East Malaysia. *Borneo Research Journal*, *15*, 1–18.

Pardo, B. (2020). *Drug supply indicators*. RAND.

eISSN 2600-9374

Poret, S. (2002). Paradoxical effects of law enforcement policies: The case of illicit drug markets. *International Review of Law and Economics, 22*(4), 465–492.

Reuter, P. (1988). Quantity illusions and paradoxes of drug interdiction. *Law and Contemporary Problems, 51*(1), 233–254.

Reuter, P., & Kleiman, M. A. R. (1986). Risks and prices: An economic analysis of drug enforcement. *Crime and Justice, 7*, 289–340.

Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM). (2024). *Annual Report on Narcotics Crime 2024*. Kuala Lumpur: PDRM.

Salleh, M., & Ibrahim, R. (2020). Networked organised crime and drug trafficking in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space, 16*(2), 89–104.

Scott, J. C. (2009). *The art of not being governed*. Yale University Press.

Sparrow, M. K. (2015). *Measuring performance in a modern police organization*. NIJ.

Sparrow, M. K. (2015). *Measuring performance in a modern police organization*. National Institute of Justice.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2024). *World Drug Report 2024*. Vienna: United Nations.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). Drug Trafficking Dynamics in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

UNODC. (2023). *World Drug Report 2023*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Van Schendel, W. (2005). *Illicit flows and criminal things: States, borders, and the other side of globalization*. Indiana University Press.

Windle, J. (2016). *Suppressing illicit opium production: Successful intervention in Asia and the Middle East*. I.B. Tauris.

eISSN 2600-9374

Yusoff, M. A., & Mohd Azizuddin, M. (2018). ESSCOM and security governance in Eastern Sabah. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *40*(3), 417–441.

eISSN 2600-9374