



Rupat Island: Inclusive and Sustainable Development as a Disadvantaged, Frontier, Outmost, and Border

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Abstract. This study examines the dynamics of development on Rupert island, a disadvantaged, frontier, and outermost region that has a strategic position because it directly collides with Malaysia. The main focus of the study is on inclusive and sustainable development efforts, taking into account historical facts, local community participation, environmental sustainability, and the geopolitical challenges faced. A qualitative approach is used through field studies, in-depth interviews, and policy analysis to reveal the actual conditions and complexity of development on Rupert island. The results of the study show that although there are various development policy initiatives such as making Rupert island a National Tourism Destination (*Destinasi Pariwisata Nasional, DPN*) in 2011 and the opportunity for Rupert island as a special economic zone proposed by the Governor of Riau. On the other hand, inequality of access to basic infrastructure, limited community participation, and pressure on the environment are still major challenges. Therefore, a development strategy is needed that is responsive to the local context, strengthens community capacity, and considers geopolitical aspects in order to realize inclusive and sustainable development in the country's border areas.

Keywords: Rupert Island, Inclusive Development, Sustainable Development, Border

1 Introduction

Rupert Island is the largest island geographically on the East Coast of Sumatra in Riau and North Sumatra Provinces. Rupert Island has a geographical area of approximately 1,704.98 km², consisting of two sub-districts, namely Rupert and North Rupert Districts, and administratively has been part of Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province since October 13, 2003. Before the 1998 reformation, Rupert Island only consisted of one sub-district, namely Rupert District. Tanjung Kapal Village is the largest sub-district/village in Rupert District with an area of 264.64 km², while in North Rupert District, Titi Akar Village is the largest sub-district/village with an area of 208.12 km².

The Central Statistics Agency (*Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS*) in 2024, presented data on the population of Rupert Island as many as 61,238 people, consisting of Rupert

District with 44,225 people, and North Rupert with 17,013 people (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). In addition, the number of female residents is much higher than the number of male residents, which is 29,313 people. The sub-district/village with the largest population is Batu Panjang, the capital of Rupert District with a population of 5,038 people. Regarding places of worship, BPS provides data, there are 76 mosques, not including 65 prayer rooms, 14 Protestant churches, 2 Catholic churches, no temples, while there are 8 Buddhist monasteries including Confucian temples.

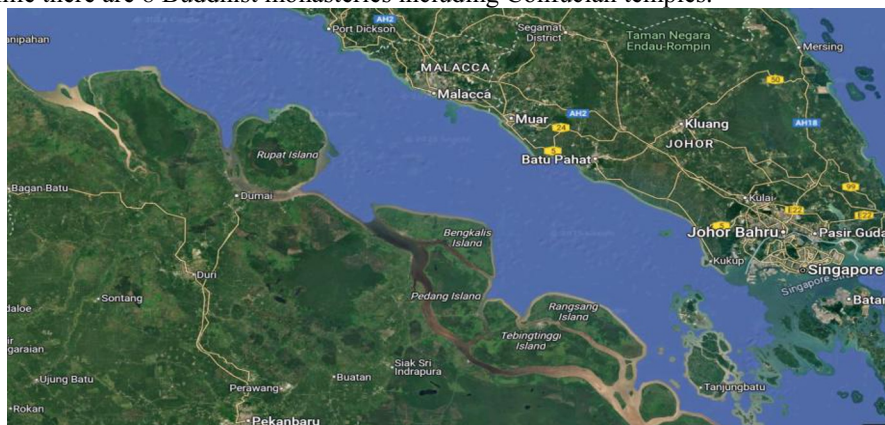


Fig.1. Map of Rupert Island

Source: www.google.com/maps, 2025

The strategic position of Rupert Island does not seem to be fully balanced with infrastructure development, improving community welfare, and strengthening local economic capacity. Development on Rupert Island faces various structural challenges, such as limited access to transportation, isolation of information and technology, and low public services, especially in the fields of education and health (Ikhsan et al., 2024). In addition, its status as a 3T (*Tertinggal, Terdepan, dan Terluar*, Disadvantaged, Frontier, and Outermost) region means that Rupert Island is still dependent on central and provincial government policies, with limited regional institutional capacity in initiating development programs independently and sustainably (Suroyo, 2020; Hasudungan, 2020).

Rupert Island as one of the 3T regions in Indonesia faces a number of structural problems in development. Its strategic status because it directly borders Malaysia has not been balanced with adequate local institutional capacity (Imran et al., 2025). Local governments, both at the district and sub-district levels, still have limitations in terms of human resources, planning, and budget to carry out development programs independently. Dependence on the central and provincial governments is very high, both in terms of budgeting and determining policy direction. As a result, development tends to be top-down and less responsive to the needs and local context of the Rupert community.

This situation creates various real social impacts. First, there are symptoms of marginalization of local communities such as the Akit indigenous community, the coastal Malay community, and the Chinese ethnic group who have long lived side by side in this area. These three groups have important roles in local history and culture, but they are often not involved in the planning and implementation of development

programs. The absence of participatory space causes the voices of the community not to be adequately accommodated, and ultimately reduces the sense of ownership of the development programs that are being or have been implemented.

Second, the limited basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity, clean water, educational facilities, and health services are triggers for social and economic inequality between regions on Rupat Island. Communities living in coastal and inland areas experience limited access to services and economic opportunities, which strengthens structural poverty and weakens social mobility. This condition is a major obstacle to the realization of fair and equitable development. Third, in recent years, pressure on the environment has also begun to be felt due to physical development and investment expansion that is not based on sustainable governance.

Unsupervised land clearing, coastal reclamation, and exploitation of marine and forest resources are threats to the local ecosystem that has supported the lives of the community (Asmit et al., 2020). The lack of firmness in protecting customary land rights and community-managed areas increases the potential for conflict between local residents and the government and the private sector. On the other hand, modernization that comes with the development of the tourism and industrial sectors brings external values that are often not in line with local values. This has an impact on the fading of the cultural identity of the Rupat community, especially for the younger generation who are starting to abandon local traditions and languages. This cultural erosion is a subtle but significant form of social pressure on the sustainability of local communities.

These conditions as a whole indicate that Rupat Island faces a major dilemma between its strategic position in national geopolitics and, it's still weak internal capacity. The social problems that arise are not only due to physical backwardness, but also due to the weak structure of participation, access, and justice in development. For this reason, a more responsive development approach to locality is needed. This includes active community involvement in the development process, strengthening local institutions, and protecting the environment and cultural heritage, so that Rupat Island can grow as a fair, resilient, and sustainable border area.

Nevertheless, Rupat Island holds great potential from the natural resource sector, such as fisheries, agriculture, and culture-based tourism and ecotourism. In this context, the dynamics of development cannot be separated from the involvement of local actors, including local governments, indigenous peoples, business actors, and central government intervention through the border area development acceleration program.

This study aims to describe the real conditions of development on Rupat Island, identify factors that hinder and encourage development, and analyze the extent to which border area development policies have had a real impact on the socio-economic lives of local communities. With a qualitative approach and case studies, this research is expected to contribute to the formulation of more contextual and sustainable policies for the 3T region, especially on Rupat Island as an important part of Indonesia's outermost face.

2 Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study strategy that focuses on the dynamics of inclusive and sustainable development in Rupert Island, a 3T region located on the Indonesia-Malaysia border. This approach was chosen because it is able to reach complex social, historical, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions that cannot be explained only by statistical figures. In other words, a qualitative approach allows researchers to explore the reality of development from the perspective of local actors and understand the specific context that influences the development process in the border region (Smith, 2007; Moore, 2015).

The research location, Rupert Island, was chosen purposively because it has a strategic position but faces various development challenges. As a frontier island, Rupert Island is an important point of contact in the Indonesia-Malaysia bilateral relationship, while also holding great potential for natural and cultural resources. However, on the other hand, this region also shows various limitations in infrastructure, public services, and vulnerability to environmental exploitation. Therefore, the main focus of the research is directed at how development on Rupert Island is designed and implemented by considering the principles of inclusivity and sustainability.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with various key informants, including local government officials, traditional leaders, environmental activists, local business actors, and residents directly affected by development (Rutakumwa et al., 2019). Through these interviews, researchers explored the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of the community regarding development in their area. In addition, field observations were also conducted to directly observe the condition of infrastructure, social interaction patterns, and economic and cultural activities of the community. These observations are important for capturing realities that do not always emerge in verbal interviews.

In addition, documentation studies are an important part of data collection, especially to trace development policies implemented on Rupert Island, both at the central, provincial, and regional levels. Documents such as the regional medium-term development plan (*RPJMD, Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah*), village reports, and local historical archives were analyzed to understand the direction of policies and their changes over time. In order to strengthen the theoretical and conceptual foundations, this study is also complemented by a literature review on border area development, inclusiveness, and sustainability.

The data obtained were analyzed thematically, namely by identifying patterns of meaning and main issues that emerged in the field data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The analysis was conducted through a process of data reduction, theme categorization (such as community participation, environmental sustainability, geopolitical challenges, and historical heritage), to in-depth interpretation of the dynamics of ongoing development. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were used in terms of both sources and methods. In addition, confirmation of the results to informants (member checking) was carried out as a form of research ethics and verification of the truth of the information (Birt et al., 2016). With this approach, the research is expected to provide a complete and contextual understanding of the development process on Rupert Island, as well as contribute to the formulation of policies that are fairer, more sustainable, and in favor of the interests of local communities, especially in the outermost regions of Indonesia.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 A Brief History of Rupert Island

Rupert Island, which borders Malaysia, is only separated by the Strait of Malacca (Charras, 2013), thus forming a multicultural Rupert society. The composition of the Rupert community is very diverse, consisting of Malay, Chinese, Akit, Javanese, Bugis, Batak, Minang, and other ethnic groups (Anderbeck, 2012), making it unique considering that this island is included in the category of underdeveloped, outermost, and outermost islands. In addition to being the border between Indonesia and Malaysia, Rupert Island is also the entry point for drugs and the entry and exit of illegal Indonesian Migrant Workers (*Pekerja Migran Indonesia, PMI*). The strategic location of Rupert Island and the many public ports are the main factors in carrying out these activities.

Rupert Island began to be mentioned in historical documents after 1512. With the publication of a compendium (*summa*) written by Tomé Pires in 1512-1515, namely The Suma Oriental by Tomé Pires, a Portuguese national. Pires describes "The Kingdom of Rupert (*Reino de Rupert*) borders on one side with Rokan and on the other side with Purim. This kingdom is small, most of its inhabitants are robbers in small pardos. This kingdom has the same obligations to Malacca as the land of Rokan. This kingdom helps the Sultanate of Malacca in war. This kingdom also has a little rice, grapes, fruit, and they catch shad fish and other fish in large quantities. During the reign of Mansur Syah as Sultan of Malacca from 1459 until his death in October 1477,

Rupert Island together with Siak became an area that was successfully seized from competition with Malay sultanates such as Kedah, Pahang, Kampar, and Indragiri and was initially made a vassal area by Malacca. In Dutch colonial records, Rupert Island (*Roepat*) is called *P. Ségaro*, a small island that is part of the Bengkalis afdeling area, East Coast of Sumatra. The word "*segoro*" in Javanese means ocean. The oral tradition of the Rupert community says that the word Rupert comes from the tree *Perepat* (*Sonneratia alba*) that grows abundantly on Rupert Island.

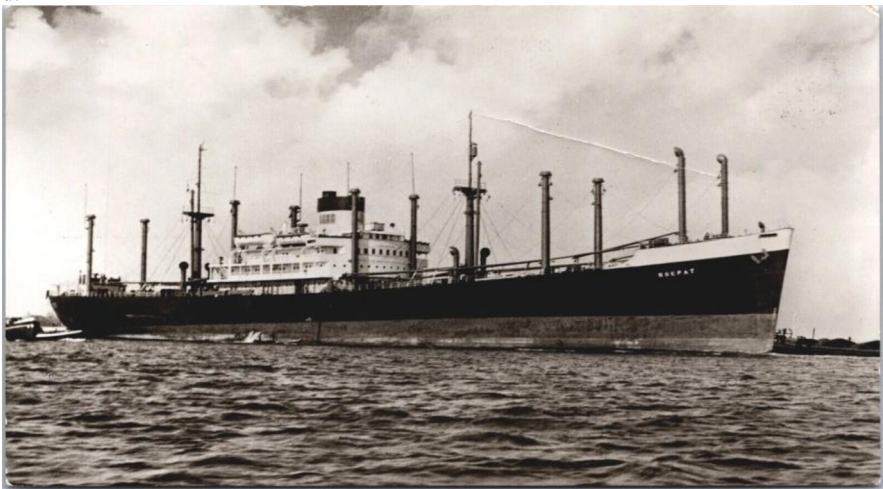


Fig.2. SS. Roepat Ship

Source: (Modelbouwtekeningen, 1946)

Interesting fact, the Dutch colonial gave one of their ships the name *Roepat* (old Indonesian spelling) which was taken and inspired by Rupert Island. In Dutch colonial records, Pulu Rupert was also an area producing fish and wood, besides that Rupert Island was described as an island that had a strategic position on the Malacca Strait shipping route. This island was often used as a stopover point by small ships crossing the area. The main function of Rupert at that time was as a transit point for various commodities, especially spices and agricultural products from the interior of Sumatra. These goods were usually collected on Rupert Island before being transported further to large ports that became regional trade centers. In addition, Rupert Island was also often used as a temporary shelter by ships facing bad weather or threats from pirates who often operated in the surrounding waters (Meilink-Roelofs, 1962). With small bays and relatively calm waters, this island offers a safe anchorage before ships continue their journey. The important role of Rupert Island as a node in this shipping route shows that even though it was not a colonial administrative center, its existence was still recorded and noted in Dutch reports as part of the maritime logistics and security system in the east coast of Sumatra.

The development of Rupert Island as Indonesia's foremost and strategic region cannot be separated from the ethnic diversity that forms the socio-cultural landscape of this region. Three main groups—Malay, Akit, and Chinese—live side by side in interrelated historical, cultural, and economic dynamics (Aktasih & Masunah, 2019). In the context of sustainable and inclusive development, these inter-ethnic relations are an important key to understanding local potential, as well as the challenges faced in realizing equitable and sustainable development (Abdi et al., 2023).

Interestingly, in 1996 and 1997, The Straits Times and The New Paper, both Singaporean newspapers, reported on the idea of building a bridge between Rupert Island and Malaysia. One review in The New Paper (1996) noted that a Malaysian consortium also expressed interest in investing in road infrastructure and palm oil plantations in Sumatra, given Malaysia's limited land area. This is indeed a strength of Riau and Rupert, as Riau is the province with the largest palm oil production in Indonesia. A review in The Straits Times (1997) reported that, the Coordinating Minister for Production and Distribution of the Republic of Indonesia, Hartarto Sastrosoenarto (1993-1998), reported that this proposal emerged during a meeting between President Soeharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in November of that year in Kuala Lumpur. Both leaders welcomed the idea as a step towards improving trade relations and interaction between the countries.

This certainly provides an important conclusion: Rupert Island's geography serves not only as a border area but also as a connecting link between Malaysia and Indonesia. In the current context, this idea could be integrated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/One Belt, One Road, whose primary goal is to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and sea routes. If this were to happen, Rupert Island could become an impacted area, meaning development would no longer have to rely solely on local and central governments.

Indonesia studying bid to build bridge to Malaysia

JAKARTA — Public Works Minister Radinal Mochtar disclosed here that the government was seeking further details from a Malaysian consortium that has proposed a major project to build a bridge connecting Penang with Dumai, in the Riau province.

Describing the proposal as a first as it intended to link two countries on opposite sides of the Malacca Straits, he told members of a parliamentary commission that the government wanted more details "to see whether the project is feasible".

Mr Radinal declined to identify the Malaysian consortium, but said the proposal, which was submitted to his ministry recently, involved a link between Penang and Pulau Rupat, just off Sumatra, with a second bridge span connecting Pulau Rupat and Dumai.

The consortium had also indicated its willingness to invest in a road project which would then link Dumai to Bukit Tinggi, Padang and Teluk Bayur on the western coast of Sumatra.

There were no indications from Mr Radinal whether the proposed link between Penang and Pulau Rupat would be entirely across the straits, or whether it would involve using existing road links along Malaysia's west coast to then connect to a point more directly across the straits from Pulau Rupat.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday after a parliamentary committee hearing, he said the consortium had obviously recognised the business potential of Indonesia's Riau and West Sumatra

provinces, especially the opportunity to invest in palm oil plantations as it was getting more difficult for expansion of such plantations in Malaysia.

In March this year, the Johor state government's investment arm, the Johor Corporation, signed several joint-venture agreements with businessmen in West Sumatra.

Among other things, there were plans to develop two palm oil plantations as well as a cement plant and port facilities at Teluk Nayer.

The Johor Corporation and the West Sumatra provincial government also agreed to jointly develop a US\$20-million (S\$23-million) industrial park in Padang.

These and other tie-ups underlined the growing links between Indonesia and Malaysia under the auspices of the southern and northern growth triangles — sub-regional areas of economic activity which Jakarta sees as a means of promoting growth and development of its outer provinces. — By Paul Jacob.

Fig.3. The idea of building the Rupert and Malaysia bridges

Sumber: (The Straits Times, 1996)

Furthermore, the bridge from Rupert Island to Johor, mentioned by Hartarto, appears to be part of the same project. This plan would connect Dumai on the Sumatran mainland with Rupert Island, followed by a bridge across the Strait of Malacca to Johor. After arriving in Malaysia, travelers could continue their journey by road and rail along the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The Malay community, as the dominant and historical group, has a central role in the social structure and value system on Rupert Island (Suroyo & Putra, 2022). Malay culture is the foundation of the island's cultural identity, reflected in traditions, language, art, and religious practices. The local government also places Malay culture as the main icon in the development of cultural tourism and strengthening the region's identity. However, this cultural dominance has the potential to drown out the cultural expressions of other groups if not managed inclusively.

Meanwhile, the Akit community—often categorized as a coastal indigenous community—faces a double challenge: social marginalization and the pressures of globalization. Their traditional life, which is based on a spiritual relationship with nature, is increasingly pressured by development currents that are not always in line with their ecological values. In many cases, the Akit community still has limited access to basic services, political representation, and economic opportunities. In fact, within the framework of sustainable development, the ecological wisdom of the Akit community is a social and cultural capital that is very relevant for the conservation and management of local resources.

As for the Chinese ethnic group, although the population may be smaller and less documented on Rupert Island, they have become part of the social and economic networks in the coastal areas of Sumatra (Warningsih et al., 2023). As in other areas such as Bangka Island or Mainland Riau, the Chinese community is known for its unique adaptability and assimilation process. Their identity is not only integrated with local elements, but also maintains its own cultural values in the form of language, ancestral beliefs, and unique economic practices. In the context of cultural tourism, the Chinese contribution could actually be an element of differentiation that enriches the multicultural narrative of Rupert Island—if given proper space and recognition.

These three groups—Malay, Akit, and Chinese—represent the plural face of Rupert Island. Development that only emphasizes one cultural identity and ignores social diversity can lead to inequality, exclusion, and even identity conflict. Therefore, the inclusive development paradigm demands the presence of fair representation mechanisms, equal cultural recognition,

and the active involvement of all ethnic groups in the planning and decision-making process. Through an approach that respects cultural plurality, the development of Rupert Island has the potential to become a border model that is not only economically advanced, but also socially just and deeply rooted in local wisdom. Efforts to integrate Malay cultural values, Akit ecological spirituality, and the adaptive power of the Chinese community into development policies will be key to realizing Rupert Island as an outermost region that is culturally resilient and socio-ecologically sustainable.

3.2 The Concept of Sustainable and Inclusive Development

The outermost islands and border areas are areas that have a strategic position, both geopolitically and geoculturally. However, these areas also face major challenges in development, such as isolation, infrastructure inequality, ecological vulnerability, and socio-cultural complexity. In this context, the concept of sustainable and inclusive development becomes very relevant as a normative and operational framework for designing development that is fair, resilient, and responsive to local dynamics.

Sustainable development is rooted in the idea that economic progress should not be achieved at the expense of the environment and social stability. The World Commission on Environment and Development's (WCED) 1987 concept emphasized three main dimensions: equitable economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being across generations (Qizilbash, 2001). In border areas such as Rupert Island, this sustainability includes wise management of coastal natural resources, protection of traditional fishing areas, and adaptation to climate change. Moreover, development must be able to create a local economic structure that does not depend on the center, but is based on the potential and wisdom of the local community.

Meanwhile, inclusive development emerged as a response to the social inequality that often occurs in the development process. It demands the active involvement of all community groups, including marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples, women, ethnic minorities, and coastal communities. In the context of outer islands, inclusive development is not only about equalizing basic services such as education and health, but also concerns cultural recognition, participation in decision-making, and access to economic resources and political space.

Various studies show that the development approach in border areas must simultaneously consider socio-cultural and geopolitical factors. In several cases such as in Natuna, Entikong, and Miangas, neglect of local identity and community participation has resulted in a weak sense of ownership of development programs, the emergence of conflicts of interest, and even social alienation (Kementerian Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional/ Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2013). Likewise, the promotion of tourism and investment on small islands often threatens the sustainability of ecology and cultural heritage if not accompanied by strong regulations and involvement of local communities (Allam & Jones, 2019).



Fig.4. Chinese New Year Celebration on Rupat Island in 2025

Source: Personal Documents

In the case of Rupat Island, the application of the concept of sustainable and inclusive development means not only strengthening economic growth through strategic sectors such as tourism, fisheries, and cross-border trade, but also ensuring that the Malay community as the dominant group, the Akit community as an indigenous community, and the Chinese ethnic group as part of cultural pluralism have equal and recognized roles. This approach not only ensures spatial and social justice, but also strengthens social cohesion as an important foundation for stability in the country's border areas. That sustainable and inclusive development is not just a technocratic strategy, but a socio-political process that requires recognition, redistribution, and participation. Outer islands like Rupat require a development approach that respects diversity, strengthens local resilience, and bridges national interests with the aspirations of the people on the front lines of the country.

Table 1. Concept of Sustainable and Inclusive Development in Outer Islands and Border

No.	Expert	Key Concepts	Brief Explanation	Relevance for Outermost Islands/Country Borders
1	Amartya Sen (2006)	Development as Freedom	Development must expand human freedom, including economic, social and political freedom.	Emphasizing the importance of access for citizens on outermost islands to education, public services, and participation in the development process.
2	Jeffrey D. Sachs (2015)	Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Emphasizing development that integrates economic, social and environmental aspects in a sustainable manner.	The implementation of SDGs is very relevant in outermost islands that are prone to exploitation of natural resources and social marginalization.
3	Todaro & Smith (2015)	Inclusive Growth	Economic growth must be accompa-	Outermost islands often experience unequal access and distribution

				nied by equal distribution of benefits to all levels of society, especially vulnerable groups.	of development outcomes, thus requiring an inclusive growth approach.
4	Chambers (1986)	Putting the Last First		Development must prioritize marginalized groups in the planning and implementation process.	Communities in border areas are often neglected in national decision-making; this approach provides space for participation.
5	Ministry of National Development Planning of the Republic of Indonesia (Peraturan Presiden Nomor 105 Tahun 2021 Tentang Strategi Nasional Percepatan Pembangunan Daerah Tertinggal Tahun 2020-2024, 2021)	3T Regional Development		Emphasizing equitable development through improving connectivity, basic services, and local economic capacity in the 3T regions.	Providing an operational framework for development interventions on outer islands such as Rupert.
6	United Nations Development Programme (2016)	Leaving No One Behind		The main principle of sustainable development emphasizes that no group should be left behind in the benefits of development.	In accordance with the socio-economic conditions of the outermost islands which are at high risk of being systematically left behind.
7	Elinor Ostrom (1990)	Governing the Commons		Natural resource management must be carried out collectively by local communities to ensure sustainability.	Outer islands often have local wisdom in managing resources, which needs to be recognized in development policies.
8	Soedjatmoko (1984)	People-Based Development		Encourage bottom-up development, rooted in local culture, and strengthen national identity.	Responding to geopolitical challenges by strengthening national identity in border areas through cultural and local approaches.

Source: (Sen, 2006; Sachs, 2015; Todaro & Smith, 2015; Chambers, 1986; United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Ostrom, 1990; Soedjatmoko, 1984)

The table above shows that the concept of sustainable and inclusive development does not only emphasize the economic aspect, but also comprehensively integrates social, cultural, environmental, and regional political dimensions. In the context of outer islands and border areas such as Rupat Island, successful development is development that is able to:

1. **Recognize and Empower Local Communities**
The approach of Amartya Sen, Chambers, and Soedjatmoko emphasizes that development must provide space for local communities as subjects, not objects. This is important for outer islands that are often marginalized structurally. Active participation of local residents is a key element in building a sense of ownership and sustainability of development.
2. **Integrating the Principles of Justice and Inclusivity**
The concept from Todaro & Smith and UNDP shows the importance of non-exclusive economic growth. In border areas that are vulnerable to inequality, inclusive development is a strategy to bridge the social and economic gap between the center and the periphery.
3. **Strengthening Social Resilience and National Identity.**
In the geopolitical context, as shown by Soedjatmoko and the 3T regional development concept from Bappenas (Ministry of National Development Planning of the Republic of Indonesia), development in border areas is not only about infrastructure, but also strengthening national identity, maintaining sovereignty, and building social cohesion amidst the influence of neighboring countries.
4. **Maintaining Environmental Sustainability and Local Wisdom**
The Ostrom and SDGs approaches remind us that environmental sustainability is an inseparable part of sustainable development. Outer islands generally have unique ecosystems and local wisdom in their management. Therefore, community involvement in resource management is very important.
5. **Requires Adaptive and Responsive State Intervention**
Although community participation is crucial, the role of the state is still needed, especially in terms of regulation, infrastructure investment, and strengthening basic services. The 3T regional development concept from Bappenas emphasizes the importance of an affirmative strategy that is tailored to the characteristics of border areas.

Thus, sustainable and inclusive development on outermost islands such as Rupat Island must be designed holistically, contextually, and participatively. The concepts from these experts provide a complementary framework for thinking—from strengthening local actors, equalizing economic benefits, preserving the environment, to strengthening the country's strategic position. The integration of these values is the basis for building a resilient, just, and sovereign border region.

3.3 Evaluation of Rupat Island as a National Tourism Destination (DPN), 2010–2025

Rupat Island is one of the destinations designated as part of the National Tourism Destination (DPN) within the framework of the National Tourism Development Master Plan (*Riparnas, Rencana Induk Pembangunan Kepariwisata Nasional*) 2010–2025 (Fatmasari et al.,

2023). This designation places Rupert Island among 50 DPNs spread across 33 provinces in Indonesia. This designation is based on the great potential of Rupert Island, both in terms of its natural beauty, local cultural richness, and its strategic location because it directly borders Malaysia. The geographical position is not only important in terms of tourism, but also has strategic value in the context of geopolitics and national defense.



Fig.5. Foreign Tourists at the 2024 Rupert Festival

Source: (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif Republik Indonesia, 2024)

As part of the destination development strategy, Rupert Island is directed to be developed comprehensively and sustainably. This development includes improving and managing tourist attractions including natural tourism, cultural tourism, and artificial tourism. This effort aims to strengthen the character of Rupert Island as a unique and competitive destination.

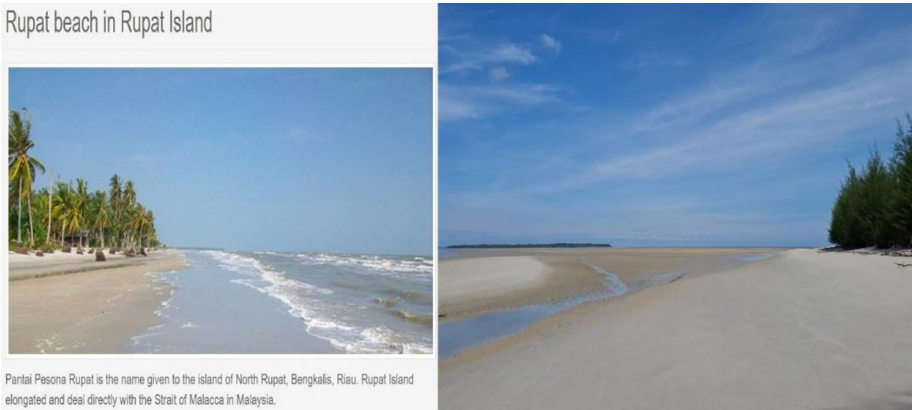


Fig.6. Rupert Island Beach in 2025

Source: Indonesia-Tourism (2025) and Personal Documents

In addition, the accessibility aspect is also a major concern. Improvement of transportation facilities and infrastructure continues to be carried out so that the movement of tourists from and to Rupert Island becomes easier, more comfortable, and safer. On the other hand, the development of public infrastructure and tourism support facilities such as accommodation, tourist information centers, and sanitation and environmental cleanliness are carried out to create

comfort for tourists and encourage regional economic growth. No less important is the empowerment of the local community. In this context, the community is not only positioned as an object of development, but also as a subject actively involved in tourism development. Through training, mentoring of small and medium enterprises, and the development of tourist villages, it is hoped that the community can enjoy economic benefits while maintaining local wisdom.

Tourism development on Rupat Island also receives special attention because this area is included in the category of underdeveloped, outermost, and remote areas. Therefore, the development approach is carried out by paying attention to social and environmental sensitivity. The main focus is on preserving local culture and protecting the natural environment which are the main strengths of the destination. In the context of state sovereignty, tourism on Rupat Island is also directed as a means of cultural diplomacy and strengthening national identity in the border region (Salam et al., 2019; Pazli et al., 2024; Yasir et al., 2024). Overall, tourism development on Rupat Island is not only designed to increase tourist visits, but also to strengthen the role of this area in inclusive, sustainable, and national-minded national development.

The results of the study show that although various development initiatives have been carried out, Rupat Island still faces problems of infrastructure gaps, transnational crime, especially drug trafficking (Hasudungan, 2020), and ecological vulnerability (abrasion) (Husaini et al., 2021). However, there is great potential to encourage more inclusive and sustainable development through synergy between the government, local communities, and other stakeholders. This study recommends the need for affirmative policies that are oriented towards empowering local communities by utilizing coastal tourism and Malay culture, as well as environmental conservation to make Rupat Island a model for resilient and equitable border region development.

Table 2. Critical Analysis of Rupat Island Development

No	Development Aspects	Government Achievements	Critical Analysis (Inclusive and Sustainable)
1	Infrastructure & Connectivity	Construction of main road, proposed Rupat Strait bridge (Sani, 2021)	Physical dominance; low community involvement; has not touched basic needs (water, electricity, health services)
2	Economy & Special Economic Zones (<i>Kawasan Ekonomi Khusus, KEK</i>)	Establishment of Tourism & Agro Special Economic Zone; investment plan (Prayuda et al., 2025)	Slow realization; has not had a direct impact on local communities; risks economic exclusion without affirmative policies
3	Tourism & Local Culture	Fire Zapin Festival, Chinese New Year, tourist village, cultural event (Aziz et al., 2023)	Still ceremonial; no sustainable preservation system; need cultural institutions and culture-based economic empowerment
4	Environment & Natural Resources	Marina and ecotourism plans (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Kemaritiman dan	Risk of ecosystem damage if not monitored; no local

		Investasi Republik Indonesia, 2017)	conservation-based community management model yet
5	Participation and Social Justice	Development Planning Conference and community involvement in promoting tourist villages (Haq et al., 2023)	Participation is not yet substantive; minimal training, social protection, and access for vulnerable groups
6	Geopolitics and Security	Placement of defense infrastructure; strengthening the status of outermost islands (Muslim et al., 2024)	Focus on symbols and militarization; has not guaranteed human security (education, economy, health, environment) evenly.

Source: (Sani, 2021; Prayuda et al., 2025; Aziz et al., 2023; Haq et al., 2023; Muslim et al., 2024)

Development on Rupert Island has shown some initial progress in various sectors, marking a positive step towards improving the condition of the region. However, these efforts do not fully reflect the ideal principles of inclusivity and sustainability. There is still a gap between the policies implemented and the real needs of the local community. In this context, development tends to be symbolic—as seen from infrastructure projects that have not fully addressed the basic problems of the residents. To encourage more meaningful change, development on Rupert Island needs to be directed towards a more participatory approach, where the local community is not only the beneficiary, but also the main actor in every planning and decision-making process. This is important so that development is not merely present as an external intervention, but grows from real local needs and potential.

Furthermore, development needs to balance economic interests, cultural preservation, and ecological sustainability. This means that every policy and program implemented must consider its impact on the environment and the socio-cultural values that have long lived in the community. Thus, the transformation from symbolic development to substantive development can be achieved, namely development that truly touches and improves the quality of daily life of the residents of Rupert Island as a whole.

4 Conclusion

This study reveals the complexity of development dynamics on Rupert Island, a 3T region that is geopolitically strategic because it borders directly with Malaysia. Despite various initiatives from the central and regional governments—such as the determination of Rupert Island as a National Tourism Destination (DPN) since 2011 and the proposal to make it a Special Economic Zone (KEK)—development implementation in this region still faces fundamental challenges that hinder the realization of inclusive and sustainable development. The findings show that development has not fully involved local communities in the planning and decision-making process, resulting in a gap between government programs and the real needs of the community. Inequality in access to basic infrastructure such as roads, clean water, and public services remains a crucial problem, especially for vulnerable groups such as the Akit indigenous community and other

coastal communities. In addition, pressure on the environment due to physical development and the potential exploitation of natural resources adds to the ecological vulnerability of this region. This condition is exacerbated by the weak response to local historical and cultural factors that should be a strength in building regional identity and competitiveness. Geopolitical challenges as a border region have also not been fully integrated into development strategies, even though Rupat Island functions as Indonesia's front porch which requires social, cultural, and economic resilience. Therefore, development on Rupat Island requires a more contextual and integrative approach. Future development strategies must prioritize the active involvement of local communities, strengthen community capacity in resource management, protect cultural and ecological heritage, and align development policies with national geopolitical interests. Only with this kind of approach can Rupat Island develop into a resilient, just, and sustainable border region.

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