



## Tourism Governance and Regional Security in Sebatik–Tawau Border Integration

Novianti\*

Universitas Gadjah Mada,  
Indonesia

Doddy Aditya Iskandar

Universitas Gadjah Mada,  
Indonesia

Sudaryono

Universitas Gadjah Mada,  
Indonesia

Bakti Setiawan

Universitas Gadjah Mada,  
Indonesia

Bambang Hari Wibisono

Universitas Gadjah Mada,  
Indonesia

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**\*Corresponding author:**

Novianti, Universitas Gadjah Mada,  
Indonesia. ✉ [anti.novi19@yahoo.com](mailto:anti.novi19@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract**

**Background:** The Sebatik–Tawau borderland presents an integration paradox in which intensive social and economic interactions coexist with underdeveloped tourism governance and legal mobility facilitation.

**Objective:** This study examines how tourism governance and regional security shape border integration and formulates an applicable governance framework for the Sebatik–Tawau borderland.

**Methods:** An embedded qualitative case-study design was employed, covering five Indonesian subdistricts on Sebatik Island and Tawau District, Malaysia. Documentary evidence comprised official statistics from 2020–2025, policy documents, border-management and security reports, and peer-reviewed literature. The data were examined through thematic coding, pattern matching, source triangulation, and negative-case analysis.

**Results:** The findings reveal asymmetric functional integration, characterized by established cross-border exchanges despite unequal market capacity, limited tourism amenities on the Indonesian side, fragmented governance, inadequate tourism data, and uncertain regular passenger connectivity. The Sei Nyamuk Cross-Border Post provides an institutional node for coordination and surveillance, but infrastructure alone has not ensured an operational tourism corridor. Regional security functions not only as a risk-control mechanism but also as an enabling condition for legal, accessible, and predictable mobility. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Sebatik–Tawau Tourism–Security Integration Model (GPA–ST), comprising shared destination governance, secure corridors, community-based tourism, connectivity and investment, and integrated data and risk management.

**Conclusion:** Intensive cross-border interaction does not automatically produce balanced institutional integration. Strengthening Sebatik–Tawau integration requires coordinated tourism governance, proportionate security facilitation, improved local destination capacity, and field validation of the GPA–ST model.

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### INTRODUCTION

The country's borders are a space where sovereignty, mobility, markets, identity, and everyday life meet. Therefore, borders are inadequate if they are only understood as administrative dividing lines. The border studies approach views it as a social and institutional process that continues to be produced through the practice of "bordering", access arrangements,

network formation, and negotiation of interests between actors (Boháč & Cviková, 2026; Brambilla, 2021; Paasi, 2021; Stoffelen & Timothy, 2023). In this context, the quality of border development is measured not only by the strength of surveillance, but also by the ability of the state to transform a geographical location far from the center into a space of connectivity, well-being, and legal interaction.

Sebatik Island has a very distinctive character as it is divided between Indonesia and Malaysia, while the orientation of services and markets of the Indonesian people has historically been strongly associated with Tawau in Sabah. Sebatik is not an isolated space. Family ties, commodity trade, labor mobility, consumption of basic necessities, and social travel form a cross-border network that has taken place long before the formal infrastructure of the country has adequately developed. Such geographical proximity generates strong integration capital, but at the same time creates vulnerabilities when mobility does not acquire easy, consistent, and cost-rational legal channels (Boháč & Cviková, 2026; Stoffelen & Timothy, 2023).

Demographic evidence shows a real asymmetry of capacity. The BPS publication in 2025 notes that the population of five Indonesian sub-districts on Sebatik Island in 2024 will be 55,870 people, consisting of West Sebatik 14,086 people, Sebatik 7,781 people, East Sebatik 15,791 people, Central Sebatik 9,585 people, and North Sebatik 8,627 people. On the other hand, the Department of Statistics Malaysia estimates that the population of Tawau District will be around 416,000 people by 2025. Thus, the population scale of Tawau is about 7.4 times the overall population of the five Indonesian sub-districts on Sebatik Island. This asymmetry is important because the size of the market, the completeness of services, the transportation network, and the concentration of businesses in Tawau affect the direction of the flow of goods and people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025; Malaysia, 2022).

This asymmetry has not been balanced with strong tourism readiness on the Sebatik side. Village Potential data published in sub-district publications shows that of the 19 villages in five sub-districts in Indonesia, only two villages are reported to have hotels and seven villages have lodging in 2024. This figure is not the number of business units, but the number of villages that have this type of facility; Therefore, this indicator indicates the limited distribution of amenities, not the capacity of the room. A more fundamental limitation is the lack of statistics on Sebatik tourist visits that are disaggregated, periodic, and easily accessible. The absence of a series of visit data makes it difficult to plan destinations, evaluate policies, measure economic impact, and prepare investment propositions, a constraint consistent with findings that destination readiness in borderlands frequently lags behind the intensity of cross-border interaction itself (Stoffelen, 2024).

In the midst of limited amenities, Sebatik has a resource base that is relevant for border tourism, including coastal landscapes, historical tourism and symbols of sovereignty, cultural life of border communities, agrotourism, culinary, and cross-border experiences. The main attraction doesn't have to be built through large-scale attractions. Sebatik's unique value lies in the narrative of life on the island of two countries, the social interaction of the people, the history of boundary formation, and the combination of coastal ecology with the local economy. However, this value can only be converted into tourism products if it is supported by access, accommodation, cleanliness, safety, information, guides, travel packages, and destination governance, since borders function simultaneously as attractions and as barriers that must be actively managed for tourism to materialize (Stoffelen & Timothy, 2023; Su, 2024).

The border policy shows progress through the construction of the Sei Nyamuk PLBN. The PLBN is included in the seven PLBNs inaugurated by the President of the Republic of Indonesia on October 2, 2024. Normatively, PLBN is a node for immigration, customs, quarantine, security, and management administration. In practice, PLBN Sei Nyamuk has carried out coordination, supervision, community capacity building, and involvement in IMPORA operations. However, the BNPP document in 2024 still discusses the reopening of the Sebatik–Tawau crossing line which has been closed since 2013. Until the deadline for searching the research public documents on June 7, 2026, no official announcement was found confirming the resumption of regular passenger services on the corridor. This shows the difference between the existence of infrastructure, institutional activities, and the operationalization of international mobility corridors.

Security dynamics reinforce the urgency of the problem. Sea lanes and unofficial crossing

points can be used for the smuggling of commodities, narcotics, and the mobility of non-procedural migrant workers. In April 2025, Bakamla reported the prevention of the transportation of rice and sugar without official documents around Sei Nyamuk. In June 2025, TIMPORA's joint operation will focus surveillance on vulnerable entry and exit points for foreigners in Aji Kuning, Seberang, and Pancang. The evidence suggests that security is not an external variable that can be separated from tourism. Security systems determine the reputation of the destination, the certainty of travel, the protection of visitors, and the credibility of cross-border management, since the touristification of borders is itself bound up with commodification, desecuritization, and the differentiated treatment of travelers (Amable, 2022; Su, 2024).

An approach that only emphasizes tightening surveillance risks maintaining a paradox: society still needs mobility, but the legal path is not yet easy enough and predictable. Conversely, approaches that solely encourage tourism without risk management can magnify the space for abuse. Therefore, this study uses a security–development nexus perspective: security is understood as a enabling condition for growth, while economic development and legal services are understood as instruments to reduce incentives for informal activities. This perspective is in line with collaborative governance that places cross-agency coordination and the involvement of non-governmental actors as a condition for solving problems that transcend the boundaries of a single jurisdiction (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Ansell & Torfing, 2021; van den Oord et al., 2023).

Previous border studies have largely examined bordering processes, tourism development, collaborative governance, and regional security as separate domains. Consequently, they provide limited explanation of how destination governance and security facilitation jointly shape legal mobility in an institutionally unequal borderland. This study addresses that gap through an embedded case-study design that distinguishes documentary facts, analytical interpretations, and policy propositions. Its purpose is not to claim that tourism automatically produces integration, but to explain the institutional conditions under which tourism can support a safe, legal, inclusive, and sustainable border corridor.

The study therefore introduces asymmetric functional integration as its principal theoretical contribution. The concept describes a borderland in which intensive social and economic functions are maintained through proximity and community networks while formal institutions, destination readiness, legal connectivity, data capacity, and value-retention capacity remain uneven. This concept guides the Sebatik-Tawau Tourism–Security Integration Model (GPA–ST) and positions the study beyond prior work that treats tourism, governance, or security independently.

**Table 1**  
*Empirical Indicators of Research Problems*

| Dimensions          | Empirical evidence                                                                                                                               | Meaning of research                                                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regional asymmetry  | Indonesia's Sebatik population 55,870 people (2024); Tawau is around 416,000 people (2025).                                                      | Tawau has a market scale and services about 7.4 times larger.                      |
| Tourism readiness   | Only 2 of the 19 villages are reported to have hotels and 7 villages have lodgings (2024).                                                       | Limited distribution of amenities; destination capacity is not evenly distributed. |
| Tourism data        | Disaggregated tourist visit statistics for the five sub-districts are not consistently available in public documents.                            | Evidence-based planning and evaluation are still weak.                             |
| Formal connectivity | PLBN Sei Nyamuk will be inaugurated in 2024 and is active as a coordination node; The reopening of regular crossings has not yet been confirmed. | There is a gap between institutional infrastructure and mobility services.         |

| Dimensions | Empirical evidence                                                                                                            | Meaning of research                                                                       |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Security   | Unofficial point surveillance operations and the prevention of undocumented commodity transport will take place in 2024–2025. | Informal mobility remains a risk as well as an indicator of the need for legal corridors. |

Source: Nunukan, ([2025a](#); [2025b](#); [2025c](#); [2025d](#); [2025e](#)); Department of Statistics Malaysia, ([2025](#)); Perbatasan, ([2024a](#)) and Perbatasan, ([2025](#)) Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, (2024)

This study examines four related questions: the condition of tourism governance; the role of security and border-crossing facilitation; the form of asymmetric functional integration; and the factors enabling or constraining integration in the Sebatik–Tawau borderland. It formulates the Sebatik–Tawau Tourism–Security Integration Model (GPA–ST) as an analytically derived policy framework. The theoretical contribution is the concept of asymmetric functional integration; the methodological contribution is a transparent documentary case-study procedure; and the practical contribution is a phased framework for safer and more sustainable cross-border tourism. Evidence covers 2020–2025, with institutional updates through June 2026. Because the analysis relies on public documents and lacks disaggregated tourism-flow data, its claims are analytical rather than statistically generalizable and require field validation.

Borderlands are relational spaces in which control, mobility, identity, and exchange are continuously negotiated ([Paasi, 2021](#); [Stoffelen & Timothy, 2023](#)). Border tourism research similarly shows that a border can operate as both an attraction and a barrier, making accessibility, amenities, institutional capacity, community participatioz. Collaborative governance explains why interdependent public and non-public actors require shared decision-making, trust, and coordinated action ([Ansell & Gash, 2018](#); [Ansell & Torfing, 2021](#); [van den Oord et al., 2023](#)), while regional-security scholarship clarifies how adaptive security can facilitate legal mobility while mitigating transnational risks ([Amable, 2022](#); [Su, 2024](#)). However, these literatures seldom explain how strong everyday interaction persists alongside weak joint tourism institutions. The present study connects these strands through asymmetric functional integration and the GPA–ST model.

## METHOD

This study adopted a pragmatic–constructivist position within an embedded qualitative case-study design. Constructivism guides interpretation of how documentary sources frame borders, tourism, mobility, and security, whereas pragmatism supports the use of complementary evidence needed to answer the applied governance questions. Descriptive statistics are used only to summarize documented population ratios and the distribution of tourism amenities; they do not test hypotheses or establish causal effects. The case covers five Indonesian subdistricts on Sebatik Island and Tawau District, Malaysia, during 2020–2025, with institutional updates through June 2026. Sources include official statistics, regulations, institutional reports, peer-reviewed literature, and credible media. Priority was given to official statistics and primary institutional documents, followed by peer-reviewed scholarship and corroborated media reports. Each document was inventoried, source-coded, cross-checked, and recorded in an audit trail.

Data analysis comprised data reduction, open coding, axial coding, pattern matching, and explanation building ([Braun & Clarke, 2019](#); [Katsiroumpa & Galanis, 2026](#); [Miles et al., 2020](#)). Codes covered governance, tourism, security, integration, asymmetry, and policy intervention. Triangulation compared sources, years, institutions, and indicators; negative-case analysis retained conflicting or unverified evidence instead of forcing convergence. Descriptive values contextualized qualitative patterns but were not treated as causal estimates. Interpretive validity was strengthened by separating documented facts from analytical inferences and policy propositions, limiting conclusions to the available evidence, and identifying claims that require primary field confirmation. No human participants were involved. The absence of stakeholder interviews, tourist-flow records, and expenditure data limits statistical generalization and means that the GPA–ST model remains an analytically derived framework requiring pilot and field validation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### *Geographical and Administrative Configuration*

Sebatik Island is situated along the Indonesia–Malaysia border and is divided by an international land boundary. The Indonesian part belongs to Nunukan Regency, North Kalimantan Province, whereas the Malaysian part is located in Sabah. The five Indonesian subdistricts form an interconnected spatial unit linked by village, coastal, and interdistrict road networks. Tawau, located on the east coast of Sabah, functions as an urban, commercial, transportation, and service center for the surrounding border region.

The character of the Sebatik border is both terrestrial and maritime at the same time. The boundary line on the mainland is adjacent to the waterway to Tawau. This configuration increases the number of points that must be monitored and requires coordination between PLBN managers, immigration, customs, quarantine, the TNI, the National Police, Bakamla, local governments, and port authorities. On the Malaysian side, Tawau falls under the scope of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), a security coordination structure that includes elements of the police, military, maritime, and civil administration.

For tourism, the geography opens up opportunities for packages based on land borders, sea travel, history, coastal ecology, and cultural interactions. However, geography also increases the cost of connectivity. Product development should take into account weather, marine safety, dock quality, transportation schedules, as well as international procedures.

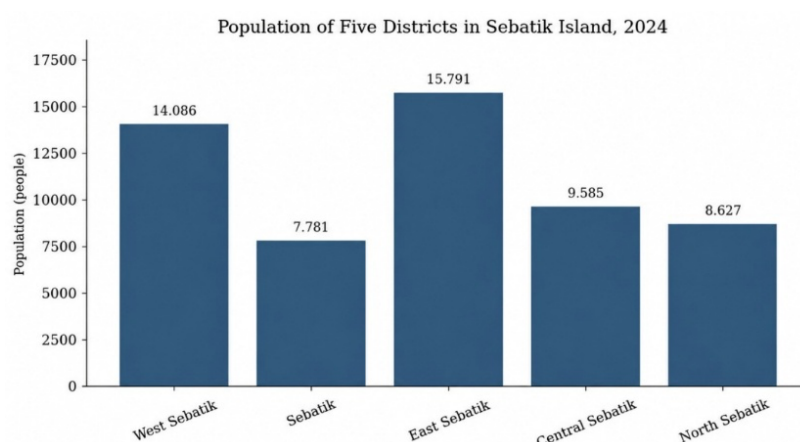
#### *Demographics and Asymmetry of Scale*

**Table 2.**

*Population of Five Indonesian Districts on Sebatik Island, 2024*

| Districts       | Population (soul) | Proportions |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| West Sebatik    | 14.086            | 25.2%       |
| Sebatik         | 7.781             | 13.9%       |
| East Sebatik    | 15.791            | 28.3%       |
| Central Sebatik | 9.585             | 17.2%       |
| North Sebatik   | 8.627             | 15.4%       |
| Total           | 55.870            | 100,0%      |

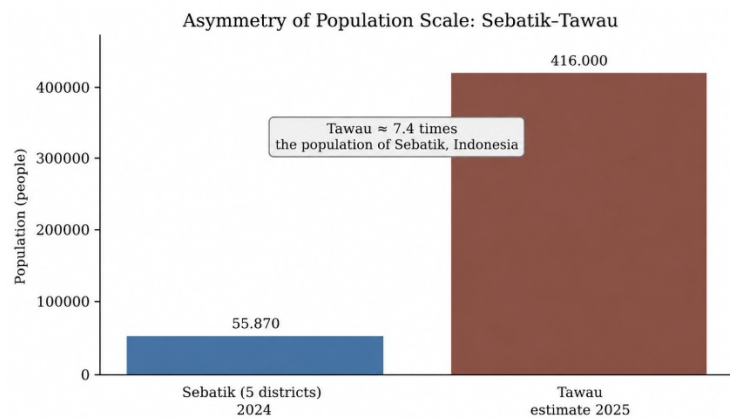
Source: Nunukan, (2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e), processed by researcher.



**Figure 1.** Population of Five Districts on Sebatik Island, 2024

Source: Nunukan, (2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e), processed by researcher

East Sebatik has the largest population, which is 15,791 people or 28.3 percent of the total population of Sebatik Indonesia. West Sebatik ranks second with 25.2 percent. The distribution shows that destination development cannot be centered on just one sub-district. Connectivity between attractions and service centers needs to be designed as an island network.



**Figure 2.** Asymmetry of the Sebatik–Tawau Population Scale

Source: Nunukan, (2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e) and Department of Statistics Malaysia, (2025), processed by researchers. Tawau's figure is an estimate of 2025

The ratio of around 7.4:1 does not mean that all of Sebatik's needs depend on Tawau, but it does indicate the difference in market size and possible service completeness. In center-periphery theory, the larger center has cumulative appeal. Without a value retention strategy, opening up connectivity can increase outbound spending faster than inbound tourism receipts. Therefore, the readiness of local products must be developed before or at the same time as the opening of the corridor.

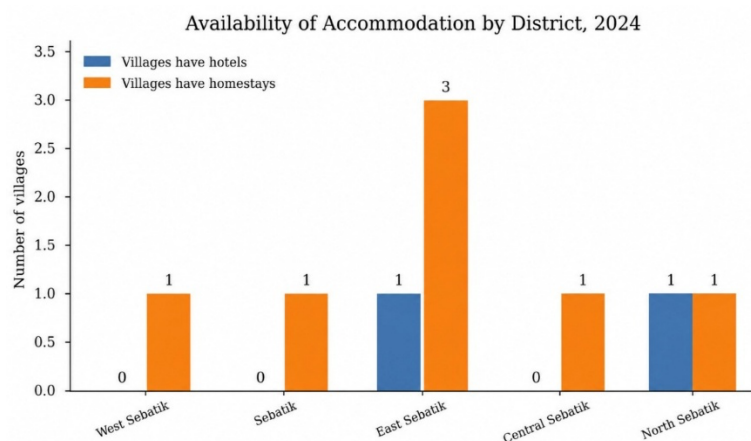
### Basic Infrastructure and Tourism Amenities

**Table 3**

*Accommodation Availability by District, 2024*

| Districts                               | The village has a hotel | The village has an inn |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| West Sebatik                            | 0                       | 1                      |
| Sebatik                                 | 0                       | 1                      |
| East Sebatik                            | 1                       | 3                      |
| Central Sebatik                         | 0                       | 1                      |
| North Sebatik                           | 1                       | 1                      |
| Total reported villages have facilities | 2                       | 7                      |

Source: Nunukan, (2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e). Units are the number of villages that have facilities, not the number of hotel/lodging units.



**Figure 3.** Accommodation Availability by District, 2024

Source: Nunukan, (2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e), processed by researcher

Of the 19 villages, the coverage of villages that have hotels is only around 10.5 percent, while the coverage of villages that have lodging is 36.8 percent. The two percentages cannot be summed up because a single village may have both types of facilities. The data also does not inform the number of rooms, service standards, prices, occupancy, or digital readiness. Therefore, the valid conclusion is that the distribution of facilities is still limited, not that Sebatik only has a certain number of facilities.

Accommodation limitations affect the length of stay, group capacity, and event organization. In the early stages, development does not have to wait for large hotel investments. Standardized homestays, local lodging, and day visit packages can be a transition strategy, but they require standardization of cleanliness, safety, reservations, host training, and complaint mechanisms.

BPS shows the main access between villages using land transportation. This fact supports the design of thematic routes around the island. However, internal land access does not automatically resolve external connectivity. The point of arrival from Nunukan and possible routes to Tawau must be connected by scheduled last-mile transportation.

### ***Tourism Product Potential***

Based on local government sources, regional publications, and spatial characters, the product portfolio can be grouped into five clusters. First, historical and sovereignty tourism featuring pillars, museums/interpretation rooms, stories of boundary formation, and village life that is divided by boundaries. Second, coastal and marine tourism that utilizes beaches, mangroves, fisheries, and boat trips with safety standards. Third, agro and culinary tourism based on local commodities, gardens, seaweed, fisheries, and border foods. Fourth, cultural and community tourism featuring multiethnic practices, markets, and family networks. Fifth, educational tourism targeting schools, universities, researchers, and officials to learn about border management.

Governance capacity remains fragmented across multiple authorities. The tourism office manages tourism products and promotion; the transportation agency regulates local mobility; BNPP and PLBN administer border areas; CIQS agencies conduct immigration, customs, and quarantine inspections; security agencies manage border risks; and village governments oversee local assets and communities. Meanwhile, the establishment of an international tourism corridor requires bilateral approval. No single actor can independently develop a cross-border destination. This institutional interdependence confirms the relevance of collaborative governance while also explaining the high coordination costs involved.

### ***Tawau Economic Structure and Orientation***

Tawau plays a role as an urban center that is much larger than the sub-districts in Sebatik Indonesia. The proximity and completeness of the market shape the orientation of trade and consumption. In the context of integration, the relationship can be considered an asset because it provides a market for Sebatik products. However, it can also be a source of leakage if tourists and residents only use Sebatik as a transit point.

The biggest economic opportunity is not just increasing the number of passers-by, but building local value chains. Agricultural, fishery, culinary, handicrafts, transportation, guides, and homestay commodities need to be connected to a package that can be purchased before or when tourists arrive. Payment systems, pricing information, and digital marketing should reduce transaction friction.

On the scale of Nunukan Regency, the economy has a strong resource base. However, district data should not be equated with Sebatik's structure. The study treated district indicators as context, while conclusions about destinations were built from sub-district data and Sebatik-specific documents.

### **Border Institutional Architecture**

**Table 4.**

#### *Institutional Architecture of Border Areas*

| Level/ Actor                                                 | Relevant mandate                                               | Strength                                        | Identified gaps                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Central government/<br>BNPP                                  | Coordination of boundary management and PLBN.                  | Cross-sectoral mandate; PLBN infrastructure.    | Dependence on ministerial synchronization and bilateral agreements.         |
| PLBN Sei Nyamuk/<br>CIQS                                     | Inspection, service, security, area administration.            | Physical nodes and local coordination.          | Regular passenger services across Tawau have not been confirmed.            |
| Kaltara Provincial Government/<br>Nunukan Regency Government | Regional development, tourism, MSMEs, local transportation.    | Close to the needs of the community.            | Limited international budget and authority.                                 |
| Indonesian security forces                                   | Land and sea security, law enforcement.                        | Postal network and cross-agency operations.     | The risk of data fragmentation and the number of unofficial paths.          |
| Sabah/<br>Authority                                          | Tawau Local government, economy, ports, tourism.               | The scale of the market and services is larger. | A sustainable cross-border technical mechanism is needed.                   |
| ESSCOM                                                       | The coordination of the security of East Sabah includes Tawau. | Cross-element integrated security structure.    | Security priorities can limit flexibility without travel facilitation.      |
| Communities and business actors                              | Production of local experiences, services, information.        | Social capital and regional knowledge.          | Standard capacity, financing, and market access are not evenly distributed. |

Source: Processed from Law No. 43/2008, BNPP (2024–2025), Kementerian Dalam Negeri Malaysia, (2025), and local government documents

### **Position of PLBN Sei Nyamuk**

The inauguration of PLBN in October 2024 is an infrastructure and symbolic achievement. PLBN provides a platform to unify the functions of immigration, customs, quarantine, security, and management. Evidence of 2024–2025 activities shows that PLBN carries out social, coordination, and supervision roles, including involvement in TIMPORA. Therefore, the assessment that states that PLBN is completely non-functional is not supported by evidence.

On the other hand, the institutional function is not the same as the opening of tourist corridors. BNPP in January 2024 said that the traditional Sebatik–Tawau strip has been closed since 2013 and discussed its reopening with SEDIA Malaysia. Even after the inauguration, the public documents found recorded more coordination and readiness than regular passenger flow statistics. This gap is called the operationalization gap: physical and organizational assets are available, but the cross-border service products that tourists perceive have not been confirmed.

The operationalization gap can be caused by a combination of bilateral approvals, counterpart readiness, port facilities, CIQS SOPs, security, document schemes, transportation operators, schedules, and commercial feasibility. Because the study did not obtain the minutes of bilateral negotiations, the factor was treated as a policy hypothesis that needed to be verified, rather than a final conclusion.

## Discussion

### *Summary of Key Findings*

**Table 5**

*Evidence Trail and Findings*

| Evidence trail                                                                            | Empirical findings                                                      | Interpretation                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sebatik population 55,870; Tawau ±416,000.                                                | The scale of the market and services is very uneven.                    | Integration takes place in a central-periphery structure.   |
| Limited distribution of accommodation; Undisaggregated visit data.                        | Destination readiness and information capacity are low.                 | Potential has not been converted into a destination system. |
| PLBN was inaugurated and actively coordinated; Regular corridors have not been confirmed. | There is institutional progress but there is an operationalization gap. | Formal integration lags behind mobility needs.              |
| Unofficial line operation and undocumented commodity prevention.                          | Cross-border risks are actual.                                          | Security should be risk-based facilitation.                 |
| Economic, family, and cultural relations continue.                                        | Socio-economic integration does not wait for formal institutions.       | Asymmetrical functional integration is formed.              |

Source: Synthesis of research analysis results

### ***Tourism Governance: High Potential, Low System Capacity***

The first finding is that Sebatik's principal constraint is not a lack of attractions but weak destination-system capacity. Limited amenities, fragmented data, uncertain cross-border access, and the absence of coordinated marketing indicate a resource-based rather than fully managed destination. This pattern extends border-tourism theory: a border becomes a viable attraction only when governance converts symbolic and natural resources into accessible, safe, and bookable experiences.

Governance capacity is fragmented by the division of authority. The tourism office manages products and promotions; the transportation agency regulates local transportation; BNPP/PLBN manages border areas; CIQS handles inspections; security apparatus; the village manages assets and communities; Meanwhile, the opening of international routes requires bilateral approval. Neither actor can produce cross-border destinations independently. This condition confirms the theory of collaborative governance that interdependence is the reason for collaboration, but also the source of coordination costs.

Data gaps are the clearest indicator of governance capacity. Without data on the number of visits, origin of tourists, length of stay, expenses, satisfaction, and incidents, policies tend to be activity-based. Budgets can be absorbed for festivals or promotions without proof of impact. Data should be treated as the public infrastructure of the destination, equivalent to roads and docks.

Community participation has the potential to be a strength because citizens master local narratives, networks, and resources. However, participation should not be romanticized. The community needs decision-making rights, service standards, financing, marketing, protection of cultural assets, and benefit-sharing. The community-based tourism model that relies solely on voluntary work is not sustainable.

**Table 6**

*Tourism Governance Gap*

| Components | Current conditions                                          | Risks                                                             | Need for intervention                         |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Data       | Fragmented; Visits are not available in a piecemeal manner. | Policies are not measurable; Investments are difficult to assess. | Destination observatory and shared dashboard. |

| Components    | Current conditions                                               | Risks                                                     | Need for intervention                                         |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Products      | The potential is diverse but not yet curated as a route.         | Stand-alone attractions; length of stay is low.           | Thematic routes, calendars, interpretations, standardization. |
| Amenities     | Limited distribution of hotels/lodgings.                         | Groups and overnight visits are difficult to accommodate. | Standardized homestays and business incentives.               |
| Access        | Internal roads are available; International access is uncertain. | Reliance on indirect/informal routes.                     | Official schedules, operators, last-miles, information.       |
| Promotions    | No cross-border brands have been documented yet.                 | Booking a weak and separate destination.                  | Brand "Two Nations–One Island" with sensitive protocols.      |
| Institutional | Many actors do not have a permanent destination secretariat.     | Activity-based coordination.                              | Destination Management Forum and technical units.             |

Source: Results of research analysis

### ***Security as a Productive Prerequisite***

The second finding is that security cannot be classified as just a hindrance. Evidence of surveillance operations shows real risks, but also demonstrates coordination capacity. TIMPORA combines various agencies and targets vulnerable points. PLBN provides a location and organization for the coordination. Thus, security infrastructure can become a destination asset when translated into clear travel procedures and a sense of security.

Security becomes a barrier when regulations are unclear, official crossing channels are unavailable, compliance costs are high, or inspection procedures are inconsistent. Under these conditions, travelers may choose faster but riskier informal routes. From an institutional perspective, compliance is influenced by the perceived costs and benefits of using legal channels. An effective strategy should therefore reduce compliance costs through one-stop services, accessible document information, reliable schedules, transparent charges, and predictable processing times, while increasing the capacity to detect unauthorized crossings.

Tawau's experience in ESSCOM shows the existence of an integrated security structure on the Sabah side. This structure is relevant for tourism development because the decision to open or expand mobility is not only determined by the tourism authority. The cooperation mechanism needs to include security confidence-building measures, such as contact exchanges, incident protocols, passenger manifests, operator inspections, and periodic evaluations.

Excessive securitization approaches should be avoided. Border communities should not be positioned as a source of threat. Most mobility is a legitimate social and economic practice. Surveillance needs to target behaviors and risks, not identity or regional origin. The principle of proportionality is important to maintain trust.

**Table 7**

### ***Security Events Relevant to Tourism Governance***

| Time          | Documented events                                                                   | Meaning of analytics                                               | Implications                                                  |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| November 2024 | Identification of unofficial routes on Sebatik Island by PLBN and related agencies. | Shows the number of crossing points and the need for risk mapping. | Zoning, adaptive patrols, and legal pathway information.      |
| April 2025    | Prevention of undocumented transportation of rice and sugar around Sei Nyamuk.      | Maritime lanes can be used for illegal/undocumented commodities.   | Risk-based inspection and education of transportation actors. |

| Time      | Documented events                                                                               | Meaning of analytics                        | Implications                                                   |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| June 2025 | TIMPORA joint operation at vulnerable points in Aji Kuning, Seberang, and Pancang.              | Cross-agency coordination has been running. | Integrate surveillance protocols with tourism services.        |
| 2024–2025 | The case of non-procedural migrant workers and narcotics in the Nunukan-Sebatik–Tawau corridor. | Security risks are network and cross-mode.  | Information exchange, migrant protection, and flow separation. |

Sources: Perbatasan, (2024b) and Perbatasan, (2025); official report of the relevant agency. Events are used as an illustration of risk, not a measure of prevalence

### ***Forms of Regional Integration That Have Been Formed***

**Table 8**

#### ***Forms of Integration of the Sebatik–Tawau Region***

| Dimensions     | Found shapes                                                        | Level           | Remarks                                                                    |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Socio-cultural | Kinship, language, interaction history, and social mobility.        | Strong          | Based on community networks and a long history.                            |
| Economy        | Trade, basic necessities, commodities, transportation services.     | Strong but lame | Tawau serves as a center of markets and services.                          |
| Infrastructure | Internal roads, ports/docks, PLBN.                                  | Medium          | Assets are available, but regular international connectivity is uncertain. |
| Institutional  | Coordination of PLBN, TIMPORA, dialogue with Sabah authorities.     | Growing         | It has not yet become a permanent shared destination governance.           |
| Tourism        | Product potential and social visits; Limited cross-border packages. | Weak–thriving   | Data, amenities, access, and marketing constraints.                        |
| Security       | Cross-agency operations and ESSCOM architecture.                    | Medium-strong   | It has not been fully integrated with tourism facilitation.                |

Source: Results of research analysis

### ***Asymmetric Functional Integration***

The core finding is asymmetric functional integration. Cross-border relations already perform concrete social and economic functions, including family contact, markets, mobility, supply, and services, yet institutional capacity and the ability to retain value remain unequal. The concept explains why frequent interaction should not be equated with balanced or formal regional integration.

Three mechanisms form asymmetry. First, market gravity: Greater Tawau attracts shopping and service. Second, institutional lag: mobility needs are evolving faster than corridor agreements, procedures, and operations. Third, local capacity gap: Sebatik has the potential but not enough amenities, data, products, and organizations to withstand tourist spending.

This finding qualifies linear spillover assumptions: repeated sectoral interaction has not automatically produced shared tourism governance. Collaborative-governance theory helps explain the institutional lag because the relevant actors are mutually dependent but divided across agencies, levels of government, and national jurisdictions. Institutional entrepreneurship, counterpart symmetry, bilateral decisions, and local capacity investment are therefore necessary to translate everyday interaction into formal cooperation.

The consequence of the policy is that increased mobility is not the end goal. Success indicators should include local transaction proportions, length of stay, number of certified businesses, local workers, compliance, service time, and incident reduction. Without such indicators, the opening of routes can magnify the asymmetry.

### ***Supporting and Inhibiting Factors***

#### **Supporting Factors**

- 1) Geographical proximity reduces the potential cost of travel and allows for short visit products.
- 2) Family, language, and cultural networks provide the trust capital and narrative of the destination.
- 3) PLBN Sei Nyamuk provides physical and organizational nodes that can be developed as gateways.
- 4) Tawau's position as a market and hub opens up opportunities for tourists, investment, and marketing of Sebatik products.
- 5) Coastal potential, border history, agro, and culinary provide the basis for a portfolio that is different from conventional destinations.
- 6) TIMPORA's coordination experience proves that cross-agency collaboration can be carried out.

#### **Inhibiting Factors**

- 1) Uncertainty of regular international crossing corridors and travel documents.
- 2) Limited distribution of accommodation and tourist services.
- 3) Absence of a destination statistical system and a joint evaluation mechanism.
- 4) Fragmentation of authority between levels and the need for bilateral approval.
- 5) The risk of smuggling, non-procedural migrant workers, and cross-border crime.
- 6) Market asymmetry that can increase economic leakage to Tawau.
- 7) MSME capacity, standardization, financing, and digital marketing are not evenly distributed.
- 8) Sensitivity of border objects that require interpretation and security protocols.

### ***Sebatik–Tawau Tourism–Security Integration Model (GPA–ST)***



**Figure 4.** Sebatik–Tawau Tourism–Security Integration Model (GPA–ST)

Source: Processed by researcher

The GPA–ST model is an analytical synthesis of five interdependent pillars rather than an empirically validated intervention. It relies on coordination nodes, technical working groups,

shared targets, and minimum interoperability instead of a supranational institution. Its secure-facilitation principle seeks to increase the benefits of legal mobility while managing risks through transparent procedures, integrated data, and proportionate surveillance. Implementation claims must therefore be tested through stakeholder consultation and a monitored pilot.

**Table 9**

*GPA-ST Model Pillars*

| Pillar                                   | Core programs                                                                              | Main actors                                                                                   | Output indicators                                                          |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Shared destination governance         | Sebatik-Tawau Forum; Technical Secretariat; route master plan; shared calendar.            | Regency Government, Provincial Government, BNPP/PLBN, Tawau/Sabah, associations, communities. | Periodic meetings; work plan; budget; the decision was implemented.        |
| 2. Safe and legal cross-border corridors | SOP CIQS; licensed operators; schedule; e-manifest; information center; incident protocol. | PLBN, immigration, customs, quarantine, security, ports, Malaysian counterpart.               | Service time; the number of legal crossers; compliance; incidents.         |
| 3. Community-based tourism               | Historical, coastal, agro, culinary routes; homestay; driver; certification.               | Villages, Pokdarwis, MSMEs, tourism offices, universities.                                    | Local businesses; labor; length of stay; satisfaction; Spending retention. |
| 4. Connectivity and investment           | Last-mile; dock; reservations; payment; amenity incentives; market partnerships.           | Transportation, PUPR, investment, BUMD/private, banking.                                      | Transport capacity; infilling; investment; digital access.                 |
| 5. Data and risk management              | Observatory; dashboard; survey; risk maps; A Quarterly Evaluation.                         | BPS, DOSM/data authority, PLBN, agency, security, academia.                                   | Publication data; completeness; risk response; evidence-based policies.    |

Source: Research result model

### ***Model Institutional Design***

On the Indonesian side, the Sebatik Border Destination Management Forum can be led by the Nunukan Regency Government with PLBN as the co-lead for crossing issues. The forum should have a small secretariat, dashboard, decision calendar, and product working group, connectivity, CIQS-security, as well as data. On the Malaysian side, the counterpart needs to be determined through a mechanism agreed with the Tawau/Sabah authorities.

Cross-border cooperation can start from low-risk issues: exchange of destination information, cultural calendars, training, simulations of handling travelers, standardization of operators, and complementary promotions. The opening of the full route is only carried out after the readiness of documents, ports, CIQS, and security is met. A phased approach reduces the risk of political lock-in.

Accountability is carried out through a quarterly scorecard. Each indicator has a baseline, target, data source, person in charge, and status. The results are published in a concise form so that the public and business actors are aware of developments. Transparency reduces uncertainty and prevents forums from becoming ceremonial.

### ***Implementation Roadmap 2026–2030***

**Table 10**

#### ***Implementation Roadmap 2026–2030***

| Stages                                      | Period | Priorities                                                                                              | Minimum output                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I. Consolidation                            | 2026   | Establishment of a forum; readiness audits; baseline data; curation of 3 routes; SOP sensitive objects. | S.S. Forum; initial dashboard; business list; risk maps; pilot route.         |
| II. Technical domestic and bilateral pilots | 2027   | Test Sebatik package; homestay; training; CIQS simulations; operator/counterpart agreement.             | Packages sold; certified businesses; SOP tested; bilateral events.            |
| III. Limited corridors                      | 2028   | Limited cross-border services are schedule/manifest based if approved.                                  | Legal flows are recorded; service time; incident mechanisms; visitor surveys. |
| IV. Expansion and investment                | 2029   | Increased frequency; joint promotion; investment in amenities; payment integration.                     | Increased length of stay, local shopping, room capacity, and business.        |
| V. Institutionalization                     | 2030   | Independent evaluation; policy revision; product replication; sustainability targets.                   | Permanent model; recurring financing; impact reports; regional standards.     |

Source: Processed by researcher. Phase III implementation is contingent on the approval of both countries and the fulfillment of security requirements

### ***Assessment of Analytical Propositions***

Documentary evidence is consistent with P1: limited destination coordination and data capacity coincide with low readiness of tourism amenities and products. Security-related collaborative activities indicate that coordination capacity can develop when institutional mandates and forums are clearly defined. Evidence is conditionally consistent with P2 because security supports mobility only when legal channels and proportionate procedures are available. P3 remains provisional because the relationship between corridor availability and informal mobility requires before-and-after evidence. The population and service-capacity disparity between Tawau and Sebatik is consistent with P4, although its effect on economic leakage has not been directly measured. Continuing socio-economic interaction despite limited institutionalization supports the analytical logic of P5. Finally, P6 represents a policy synthesis derived from cross-sectoral gaps; its effectiveness must be assessed through stakeholder consultation and pilot implementation.

### ***Theoretical contributions***

First, the study introduced asymmetric functional integration as a condition when socio-economic interactions are strong, but regional capacity and formal integration are unbalanced. This concept combines borderlands thinking with center-fringe theory.

Second, the study conceptualizes security as a productive enabling mechanism rather than a statistical mediating variable. Through secure facilitation, proportionate security arrangements can support the transition from informal mobility to legal and predictable mobility while strengthening travelers' and market actors' confidence.

Third, the research expands collaborative governance by demonstrating the importance of counterpart symmetry. Strong domestic collaboration is not enough if there are no equal nodes

and procedures on the side of neighboring countries.

Fourth, the research adds data capacity as a core component of destination readiness. Within border areas, data is needed not only for promotion, but also for security, CIQS, impact evaluation, and bilateral negotiations.

### **Practical Implications**

The most pressing implication is to shift the focus of policy from "building objects" to "operating ecosystems". Sebatik requires bookable routes, scheduled operators, basic services, data, and procedures. The inauguration of physical assets must be followed by service commissioning. All investments must be tested against two questions: does it increase local benefit retention and does it increase the proportion of legal mobility?

### **CONCLUSION**

The Sebatik–Tawau borderland exhibits asymmetric functional integration: intensive socio-economic interaction coexists with weak formal tourism integration, unequal destination capacity, fragmented governance, limited data, and uncertain regular cross-border passenger connectivity. Security is not merely a restriction; when implemented through proportionate and transparent procedures, it enables legal and predictable mobility. The analytically derived Sebatik–Tawau Tourism–Security Integration Model (GPA–ST) connects shared governance, secure corridors, community-based tourism, connectivity, and integrated data and risk management. The study's theoretical contribution is to show that functional interaction does not automatically generate institutional integration, while its practical implication is that border development should measure legal mobility, service performance, local value retention, and risk management together. Because the findings rely on secondary documents and uneven cross-country statistics, the model requires field validation. Future research should incorporate stakeholder and traveler data, pilot evaluation, comparative border cases, and longitudinal evidence.

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All authors contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, document analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the original manuscript. All authors participated in revising the manuscript in response to the anonymous reviewers' comments, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for the integrity of the work.

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