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DRUG SMUGGLING, MARITIME MOBILITY, AND ENFORCEMENT CHALLENGES IN SABAH'S BORDER SECURITY GOVERNANCE

Amanda Balqis Mohd Mazalan[1], Yarina Ahmad*[2], Siti Zulaikha Mustapha[3], Nur Amalina Aziz[4]

[1]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor
amandamzln7@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0640-8340
[2]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor; Institute for Leadership and Development, Bandar Enstek, Negeri Sembilan
yarina@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6806-7162
[3]Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Machang, Kelantan
szulaikha@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7984-5713
[3]Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Segamat, Johor
amalinaaziz@uitm.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1344-8501
*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Drug smuggling along Sabah's maritime border remains one of Malaysia's most complex transnational security challenges. This vulnerability is driven by the state's extensive coastline, dispersed island communities, porous maritime boundaries, numerous informal sea routes, and strategic proximity to Indonesia and the southern Philippines, all of which facilitate illicit cross-border movement and complicate maritime law enforcement. Despite intensified enforcement efforts, limited research has examined how Sabah's maritime geography shapes drug smuggling vulnerability and influences the operational responses of border enforcement agencies. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Sabah's unique maritime geography structures opportunities for transnational drug trafficking and how enforcement agencies interpret, adapt to, and respond to these spatial security challenges. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study integrates document analysis with semi-structured interviews involving enforcement officers and key informants from major Malaysian maritime and border security agencies, including the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM), Royal Malaysian Customs Department (JKDM), Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), and the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). The findings reveal that drug smuggling in Sabah is not driven solely by enforcement deficiencies. Rather, it is structurally enabled by the

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state's vast maritime space, informal *laluan tikus* (rat trails), the mobility of small vessels, geographical concealment, time-based evasion strategies, and persistent cross-border maritime connectivity. Collectively, these conditions reduce the effectiveness of enforcement coverage, blur the distinction between legitimate and illicit maritime movement, and enable smuggling networks to adapt rapidly in response to changing patrol patterns and enforcement operations. This study extends the literature on maritime border security, border governance, and maritime criminology by conceptualising drug smuggling in Sabah as a challenge of spatially constrained governance rather than merely an enforcement deficit. The findings provide practical guidance for strengthening maritime surveillance, intelligence-led enforcement, inter-agency coordination, border community engagement, and regional security cooperation across archipelagic and coastal border regions.

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Keyword:

Drug Smuggling, Sabah, Maritime Border Security, Spatial Governance, Informal Routes, Enforcement Coordination, Maritime Mobility.

Introduction

Maritime borders constitute one of the most complex arenas of contemporary security governance because they are fluid, commercially active, geographically dispersed, and difficult to regulate through fixed territorial control. Unlike land borders, maritime boundaries are not experienced as static lines. They are travelled, negotiated, and economically used by coastal communities, fishermen, traders, transport operators, and enforcement agencies. In Southeast Asia, this complexity is intensified by archipelagic geography, dense sea-based mobility, historical cross-border linkages, and uneven enforcement capacity across maritime zones. Sabah, Malaysia's easternmost state, illustrates this challenge with particular clarity. Its maritime position connects Malaysia to the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, southern Philippines, and Indonesia, creating a border environment where legal mobility, informal exchange, and illicit movement may overlap within the same spatial system.

Drug smuggling in Sabah must therefore be analysed beyond the conventional frame of seizure statistics, patrol frequency, or agency performance. The persistence of drug trafficking reflects a wider governance problem involving maritime geography, informal economic networks, cross-border livelihood dependency, weak visibility over small-vessel movement, and the adaptive strategies of criminal syndicates. At the regional level, Southeast Asia continues to face a severe synthetic drug challenge. UNODC reported that methamphetamine seizures in East and Southeast Asia reached 236 tonnes in 2024, representing a 24 per cent increase from 2023 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2025a). This regional escalation

is relevant to Sabah because its maritime location places the state within wider transnational corridors linking production, transit, distribution, and consumer markets across Southeast Asia. The issue is also significant at the national level. Malaysia's drug problem continues to show a rising trend in reported users and addicts. AADK's national statistics recorded 169,691 drug and substance abusers and addicts in 2024, compared with 145,526 in 2023 and 137,176 in 2022 (National Anti-Drugs Agency [NADA], 2024a). The same national data indicate that Sabah recorded 395 drug and substance abusers and addicts per 100,000 population in 2024, placing the state within a broader national concern over drug vulnerability (NADA, 2024b). These figures do not directly measure smuggling activity, but they demonstrate that drug governance in Malaysia cannot be separated from supply, mobility, distribution, and border control dynamics.

Sabah's maritime geography generates both economic opportunity and enforcement vulnerability. Its coastal and marine environment supports fisheries, coastal trade, transport, tourism, and local livelihoods. The Sabah Government identifies fisheries as one of the state's key economic sectors, alongside palm oil, petroleum, natural gas, manufacturing, and tourism (Sabah State Government). DOSM further reported that Sabah's tourism industry amounted to RM13.7 billion in 2024 and contributed 12.0 per cent to the state economy (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2025). These figures show that Sabah's maritime and coastal spaces are not peripheral to development. They are central to employment, local enterprise, mobility, and regional economic integration.

However, the same maritime routes that sustain legitimate economic activity may also be exploited for illicit movement. Small boats, informal jetties, family-based cross-border networks, fishing routes, and routine sea travel can reduce the visibility of smuggling activities. Drug smuggling therefore does not operate outside the maritime economy. It often embeds itself within existing patterns of movement, exchange, and informal trade. This creates a difficult enforcement environment because the boundary between ordinary mobility and illicit mobility is not always visible at the point of movement. Enforcement agencies are required to distinguish between livelihood activity and organised criminal activity within the same maritime space.

The economic and business implications are substantial. Drug smuggling distorts borderland economies by introducing illicit capital, strengthening underground market networks, and creating unfair advantages for actors who operate outside formal regulatory systems. It may increase the cost of doing business by heightening security risks, raising surveillance costs, disrupting logistics, and weakening investor confidence in vulnerable maritime districts. It also affects legitimate sectors such as fisheries, coastal tourism, small trading enterprises, and maritime transport when criminal activity produces insecurity, reputational damage, or enforcement pressure. UNODC and UNCTAD conceptualise drug trafficking as a source of illicit financial flows that can weaken governance, distort markets, and undermine sustainable development (UNODC & United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2020). In this sense, drug smuggling is not only a criminal justice issue. It is also an economic governance issue because it affects market integrity, business confidence, labour productivity, public safety, and the credibility of state regulation in border economies.

The problem is further complicated by the dual character of informal maritime mobility. Informal routes are not inherently criminal. Many are historically rooted in kinship, subsistence fishing, petty trade, inter-island movement, and local economic survival. Yet these same routes

can be appropriated by trafficking networks because they are familiar, flexible, low-cost, and difficult to monitor continuously. This produces a governance dilemma. Excessive securitisation may disrupt local livelihoods and small-scale business activity, while insufficient control may allow criminal networks to consolidate operational advantage. Border governance in Sabah must therefore balance enforcement, community mobility, economic continuity, and intelligence-led control.

The article contributes to the literature on border security, maritime governance, and business-related security risk in three ways. First, it shows how maritime geography shapes the operational logic of drug smuggling in Sabah. Second, it explains how informal mobility and local economic practices can be exploited by illicit networks without reducing all informal movement to criminality. Third, it links drug smuggling to wider economic and business consequences, including market distortion, enforcement cost, weakened investor confidence, and risks to legitimate maritime livelihoods. These contributions are relevant to business, entrepreneurship, and SME studies because border insecurity affects not only state sovereignty but also the operating environment of local enterprises, coastal traders, logistics actors, tourism operators, and maritime-dependent communities.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Sabah's maritime geography shape vulnerability to drug smuggling?
2. How do informal maritime routes facilitate illicit mobility?
3. How do enforcement agencies interpret and respond to these spatial challenges?
4. What governance strategies are required to strengthen maritime drug control in Sabah?

Literature Review

Drug Smuggling as a Border Security and Governance Issue

Drug smuggling refers to the illegal movement of controlled substances across national boundaries, while drug trafficking covers a wider chain of activities involving production, transportation, distribution, financing, and commercial exchange. This distinction is analytically important in Sabah because the state's drug problem is not shaped by domestic consumption alone. It is also structured by cross-border maritime access, informal routes, enforcement capacity, and the economic logic of illicit supply chains. In Malaysia, the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 provides the legal foundation for drug control, while enforcement responsibilities are distributed across several agencies, including the Royal Malaysia Police, Royal Malaysian Customs Department, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Malaysian Armed Forces, and Eastern Sabah Security Command. The draft literature review already frames Sabah's drug smuggling issue as a governance problem shaped by maritime access, enforcement coordination, and institutional capacity.

Regional evidence confirms that Southeast Asia remains a major zone of illicit synthetic drug production and movement. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that methamphetamine seizures in East and Southeast Asia reached 236 tonnes in 2024, representing a 24 per cent increase from 2023 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2025). This regional trend indicates the scale, adaptability, and resilience of contemporary drug markets. Sabah's location within the Sulu Sea and Celebes Sea maritime environment places the state close to wider transnational corridors linking Malaysia, Indonesia,

and the southern Philippines. Drug smuggling in Sabah therefore reflects a regional security problem, not merely a local enforcement issue.

From a governance perspective, drug smuggling demonstrates the limits of conventional border control in fluid maritime environments. Maritime borders cannot be secured through fixed checkpoints alone because mobility occurs through fishing routes, island settlements, informal landing points, and small-vessel networks. Bueger and Edmunds (2017) argue that maritime security requires coordinated governance across jurisdictions, agencies, sectors, and public-private actors because threats at sea rarely fit neatly within fixed territorial boundaries. This argument is highly relevant to Sabah, where drug smuggling occurs within maritime spaces that simultaneously support livelihood mobility, local trade, fisheries, and cross-border movement.

Maritime Geography and Spatial Vulnerability

Maritime geography is central to understanding Sabah's vulnerability to drug smuggling. Maritime borders differ from land borders because they are expansive, porous, mobile, and difficult to monitor continuously. Sabah's long coastline, scattered islands, fishing zones, and informal landing points create an enforcement environment characterised by low visibility and high mobility. In this context, maritime space becomes both an economic resource and a security vulnerability.

Spatial criminology provides a useful theoretical lens for analysing this problem. Brantingham and Brantingham (1993) argue that crime is not randomly distributed but tends to concentrate in spaces where opportunity, movement, and weak guardianship intersect. Clarke's (1997) situational crime prevention theory similarly explains that criminal opportunities are shaped by environmental conditions. Applied to Sabah, these theories suggest that drug smuggling persists not only because syndicates are organised, but because maritime geography repeatedly creates low-visibility routes, dispersed entry points, and flexible movement corridors.

Geography should therefore not be treated as a passive background factor. It functions as an enabling structure. Sabah's coastlines, island networks, and proximity to neighbouring jurisdictions create movement corridors that are difficult to regulate consistently. Smugglers can exploit weather, darkness, tides, local knowledge, informal jetties, and gaps between agency jurisdictions. This spatial condition produces what may be described as spatially constrained governance, where enforcement agencies remain active but are structurally limited by the physical and social geography of the maritime border.

Drug Smuggling, Informal Economy, and Market Distortion

Drug smuggling must also be analysed as an economic phenomenon. Illicit drug movement generates underground revenue, creates informal employment incentives, strengthens illegal market networks, and distorts legitimate economic activity. In border areas, where communities may depend on fishing, transport, petty trade, and small-scale enterprise, drug smuggling can exploit economic vulnerability, weak formal employment, indebtedness, and the profitability of illicit logistics.

The informal economy is not automatically criminal. In many maritime communities, informal exchange supports survival, flexibility, and local resilience. However, the same informal systems can be appropriated by criminal actors. Van Schendel (2005) argues that illicit flows often move through social and economic networks that are already embedded in borderland life. Drug syndicates may therefore use local transport knowledge, small-vessel operators, informal traders, and coastal landing points to reduce detection risk. This creates a blurred boundary between legitimate economic informality and illicit commercial exploitation.

Market distortion occurs when illicit capital enters local economies. Drug smuggling may inflate local spending, create dependency on illegal income, undermine fair competition, and weaken the formal business environment. It also generates hidden costs for the state and private sector through increased enforcement expenditure, surveillance requirements, insurance risk, reputational damage, and disruption to legitimate maritime activity. UNODC and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development conceptualise drug trafficking as a source of illicit financial flows that can weaken governance, distort markets, and undermine sustainable development (UNODC & United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2020). In this sense, Sabah's drug smuggling problem should be understood not only as a criminal justice issue but also as an economic governance issue.

Business Vulnerability and SME Resilience in Maritime Border Areas

Drug smuggling affects the local business environment by increasing uncertainty, weakening investor confidence, disrupting mobility, and damaging the credibility of formal market regulation. These effects are especially serious for SMEs because small firms often operate with limited capital, narrow profit margins, weak risk buffers, and strong dependence on local transport and supply networks.

SMEs in border and coastal areas are vulnerable to insecurity through several mechanisms. First, smuggling increases the perception of crime risk in maritime districts. Second, intensified enforcement may disrupt logistics and movement, especially when legitimate businesses depend on the same routes that are also exploited by smugglers. Third, illicit capital creates unfair competition by allowing criminally connected actors to operate outside formal regulatory and tax systems. Fourth, crime-linked reputational damage may reduce investor interest, tourism activity, and customer confidence.

Mohd Yusof (2026) stated that innovative ICT adoption, market-sensing capability, and knowledge-management ability influence SME innovation outcomes. Although the study focuses on ICT and innovation, its logic is relevant to border security because SMEs in high-risk maritime areas also require information capability, market awareness, and adaptive capacity to survive uncertain environments. In drug-prone border districts, business resilience depends not only on entrepreneurial capacity but also on security stability, reliable logistics, trusted governance, and access to actionable information.

Similarly, Haider and Maulan (2025) conceptualise digital readiness among Malaysian retail SMEs as a multidimensional capability involving technological infrastructure, human capital, organisational agility, and external support mechanisms. This framework can be extended to maritime-border SMEs because business resilience in vulnerable areas requires not only digital readiness but also security readiness, compliance readiness, and risk-management capacity. SMEs located in border districts require systems for identifying disruption, managing supply-

chain uncertainty, maintaining formal records, and cooperating with enforcement or regulatory authorities.

Maritime Security, Entrepreneurship, and Local Economic Continuity

Entrepreneurship in Sabah's maritime borderlands is shaped by both opportunity and vulnerability. Coastal communities engage in fisheries, small-scale trading, transport, food business, tourism services, and cross-border exchange. These activities depend on mobility, trust, and access to maritime routes. When these same spaces are associated with drug smuggling, local entrepreneurs face a more difficult operating environment. Security control is necessary, but excessive restriction can also reduce mobility, increase transaction costs, and disrupt legitimate economic activity.

Yuneline, Yusoff, and Abdullah (2026) stated that sustainability adoption among MSMEs is influenced by behavioural mechanisms, financial variables, stakeholder pressures, and institutional support. This logic can be applied to border security governance. SMEs and maritime entrepreneurs are more likely to cooperate with enforcement, formalisation, and compliance systems when they perceive clear benefits, manageable costs, and institutional support. Security governance should therefore include business-sensitive mechanisms such as community engagement, simplified reporting, protection for legitimate traders, and support for affected SMEs.

Enforcement Effectiveness and Institutional Constraints

Enforcement effectiveness in maritime drug control cannot be measured only through arrests, seizures, patrols, and interdiction. These indicators capture operational activity but do not necessarily show whether smuggling routes have been disrupted, syndicate networks weakened, or high-risk spaces brought under sustained control. Effective enforcement should reduce route reuse, improve intelligence sharing, strengthen inter-agency coordination, and increase the state's capacity to anticipate rather than merely react to smuggling activity.

Institutional constraints remain central to the Sabah case. Enforcement agencies may have formal authority but still face operational limitations caused by fragmented mandates, limited assets, manpower shortages, overlapping jurisdictions, legal gaps, integrity risks, and uneven intelligence integration. Scott's (2014) institutional theory explains that organisational performance is shaped by rules, norms, resources, and institutional arrangements. In complex maritime settings, agencies may be legally empowered but operationally constrained by the structure of the enforcement ecosystem.

Bueger and Edmunds' (2020) concept of "blue crime" is particularly useful because maritime drug smuggling belongs to a wider category of transnational organised crime at sea, alongside smuggling, trafficking, piracy, and illegal fishing. Blue crime cannot be effectively addressed through single-agency enforcement. It requires integrated maritime governance, intelligence coordination, legal harmonisation, and sustained cooperation across agencies and jurisdictions.

Inter-Agency Cooperation in Maritime Border Security

Inter-agency cooperation is a central theme in Sabah's maritime drug enforcement. PDRM contributes to criminal investigation and narcotics enforcement. APMM contributes maritime

patrol and interception. JKDM contributes customs control and anti-smuggling enforcement. ATM supports border defence and surveillance. ESSCOM provides security coordination in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone. These agencies occupy different points in the enforcement chain. No single agency controls the whole process from detection to interdiction, investigation, prosecution, and prevention.

Collaborative governance theory provides a strong analytical basis for this issue. Ansell and Gash (2008) argue that complex public problems require joint decision-making, shared resources, trust, and institutionalised coordination. Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012) similarly emphasise that collaboration requires principled engagement, shared motivation, and capacity for joint action. Applied to Sabah, these theories suggest that maritime drug control depends on whether agencies can convert separate mandates into coordinated operational capability.

Weak cooperation may produce intelligence gaps, duplication, delayed response, jurisdictional ambiguity, and fragmented accountability. Strong cooperation may improve route mapping, risk profiling, surveillance coverage, evidence gathering, and operational efficiency. The governance question is therefore not whether agencies exist, but whether they operate as an integrated border security system.

Drug Smuggling, Investment Climate, and Development Risk

Drug smuggling also has implications for investment climate and development. Business confidence depends not only on infrastructure and market potential but also on safety, rule of law, regulatory predictability, and institutional credibility. When maritime districts are associated with smuggling, violence, corruption, or weak enforcement, investors may perceive higher risk. This can affect tourism, logistics, fisheries, coastal development, and other sectors linked to Sabah's maritime economy.

Kamsin, Alin, Kogid, Madli, and Kristina (2026) revealed that research on FDI and sustainable human capital development increasingly links investment policies, labour productivity, and long-term development goals. Although their study does not examine drug smuggling directly, its development logic is relevant. Border insecurity can weaken the enabling conditions required for investment, labour productivity, and sustainable economic growth.

Drug smuggling therefore functions as a development risk. It affects the quality of the local business environment, the credibility of state regulation, and the capacity of legitimate enterprises to compete fairly. It also creates social costs through addiction, crime, family disruption, youth vulnerability, and reduced workforce productivity. These effects show that maritime drug smuggling should be studied as a cross-sectoral problem connecting security, economy, business, entrepreneurship, and governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine drug smuggling, maritime mobility, and enforcement challenges in Sabah's border security governance. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study seeks to understand institutional experiences, enforcement interpretations, operational constraints, inter-agency coordination, and the contextual meaning of drug smuggling within Sabah's maritime border environment. Qualitative research is

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especially suitable for examining complex governance issues because it allows researchers to capture perceptions, practices, meanings, and decision-making processes that are not easily measured through numerical indicators alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study uses document analysis and in-depth interviews as the main research strategies. Document analysis is used to examine laws, policies, reports, agency documents, enforcement-related materials, and secondary data relevant to drug smuggling, maritime border control, and Sabah's security governance. Document analysis is appropriate because it enables the researcher to identify institutional mandates, policy frameworks, historical developments, and governance structures related to border enforcement (Bowen, 2009). In-depth interviews are used to obtain detailed insights from enforcement officers and key informants who possess direct knowledge of drug smuggling patterns, operational realities, inter-agency cooperation, and enforcement challenges. This method is useful because it allows participants to explain not only what happens in practice, but also why particular enforcement constraints persist (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Patton, 2015).

Research Areas

The research focuses on three hotspot areas in Sabah: Kota Kinabalu, Tawau, and Lahad Datu. These locations were selected because of their relevance to drug-related enforcement, maritime border vulnerability, agency presence, and strategic security significance. Kota Kinabalu was selected because it functions as a major administrative centre where several state-level and federal enforcement agencies maintain headquarters, coordination offices, or senior command structures. Its inclusion enables the study to capture policy-level, strategic, and administrative perspectives on drug smuggling and maritime enforcement.

Tawau and Lahad Datu were selected because they are located within Sabah's eastern maritime security environment and are directly relevant to the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE). These areas are strategically important due to their proximity to Indonesia and the southern Philippines, active maritime movement, fishing activity, inter-island connectivity, and historical exposure to cross-border security threats. Their selection allows the study to examine drug smuggling in operationally sensitive border locations where enforcement agencies face direct maritime security challenges.

The selection of these three locations reflects the logic of hotspot-based qualitative inquiry. Rather than attempting to cover all districts in Sabah, the study concentrates on locations that are information-rich, operationally relevant, and strongly connected to the research problem. This approach is consistent with qualitative case selection principles, where cases are chosen because they provide deep insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Participants and Agencies Involved

Participants in this study consist of enforcement officers, operational personnel, and key informants from agencies directly involved in drug control, maritime enforcement, border security, customs control, and security coordination in Sabah. The agencies involved are:

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
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Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

1. Royal Malaysia Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia, PDRM)
2. Malaysian Armed Forces (Angkatan Tentera Malaysia, ATM)
3. Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Agensi Penguatkuasaan Maritim Malaysia, APMM)
4. Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM)

Sampling Strategy

This study uses a combination of cluster sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. The use of multiple sampling strategies is appropriate because the research involves different locations, agencies, and categories of informants with specialised operational knowledge. Cluster sampling is applied through the selection of three geographical clusters: Kota Kinabalu, Tawau, and Lahad Datu. These clusters represent different dimensions of Sabah's border security governance. Kota Kinabalu represents administrative and strategic-level governance, while Tawau and Lahad Datu represent operationally sensitive maritime border areas. Cluster-based site selection is useful when a study involves geographically dispersed settings and when selected locations represent meaningful variations in the research context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Purposive sampling is used to identify participants who possess direct experience, institutional responsibility, or specialised knowledge related to drug smuggling enforcement, maritime security, intelligence coordination, border operations, and inter-agency cooperation. Purposive sampling is suitable because qualitative research prioritises information-rich participants who can provide detailed and relevant data on the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). In this study, informants are selected based on their role, experience, agency involvement, and ability to explain enforcement realities in Sabah's maritime border context.

Snowball sampling is used when selected participants recommend other officers or key informants with relevant operational knowledge. This method is appropriate for research involving specialised enforcement environments where access to knowledgeable participants may depend on institutional networks, trust, and professional referrals (Noy, 2008). Snowball sampling is particularly useful in this study because drug smuggling enforcement involves sensitive information, operational discretion, and specialised knowledge that may not be easily accessible through formal lists alone.

Data Analysis

Interview data are analysed using thematic analysis. The process involves familiarisation with interview data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme refinement, and interpretation. This procedure follows the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), which is widely used in qualitative research because it allows researchers to identify patterned meanings across a dataset.

Findings and Analysis

Profile of Informants

The informants for this study were selected based on their direct involvement in maritime enforcement, border control, customs monitoring, intelligence gathering, and security

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

coordination in Sabah. The selection of informants reflects the study's focus on drug smuggling, informal maritime routes, enforcement challenges, and inter-agency governance within Sabah's border security environment. Two categories of informants were involved: enforcement officers and senior officers.

The first category comprises operational-level enforcement officers who possess direct field experience in maritime patrol, customs inspection, intelligence monitoring, and local enforcement activities. Their insights are important because they provide grounded evidence on smuggling routes, modus operandi, small-vessel movement, temporal evasion, and operational constraints at the enforcement level. The second category consists of senior officers who hold strategic or command-level responsibilities. Their perspectives are important for understanding institutional coordination, route displacement, cross-border mobility, and the broader governance challenges affecting drug smuggling control in Sabah.

The use of both operational and senior-level informants strengthens the reliability of the findings. Operational officers provide detailed field-based observations, while senior officers offer broader institutional and strategic interpretations. This combination allows the study to examine drug smuggling not only as an enforcement problem, but also as a governance issue shaped by maritime geography, inter-agency coordination, and transnational mobility.

Table 1: Profile of Informants (Enforcement Officers)

No.	Informant Profile	Agency / Unit	Location / Context	Relevance to Findings
1.	**Local Maritime Intelligence Officer**	Maritime intelligence unit	Sabah maritime border area	Provided insight on informal maritime routes used by both fishermen and smugglers.
2.	**Customs Officer**	Royal Malaysian Customs Department	Eastern Sabah	Explained route substitution and the difficulty of closing multiple small maritime passages.
3.	**Customs Officer**	Royal Malaysian Customs Department	Tawau	Highlighted syndicate logistics, timing, and cross-border coordination.
4.	**PDRM Officer**	Royal Malaysia Police	Sabah	Explained route diversification and the resilience of drug supply networks.
5.	**APMM Patrol Officer**	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency	Maritime patrol area	Described the use of small vessels and night-time camouflage by smugglers.
6.	**ESSCOM Maritime Unit Officer**	Eastern Sabah Security Command	Maritime enforcement context	Explained temporal evasion, including movement during weather changes and reduced patrol intensity.

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
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Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

Table 2: Profile of Informants (Senior Officers)

No.	Informant Profile	Agency / Unit	Location / Context	Relevance to Findings
1.	**ESSCOM Senior Officer**	Eastern Sabah Security Command	ESSZONE / Eastern Sabah	Described the flexibility of smuggling networks in shifting between sea and land routes.
2.	**Senior APMM Officer**	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency	Sabah maritime border	Explained cross-border maritime continuity between Sabah, southern Philippines, and eastern Indonesia.
3.	**ESSCOM Commander**	Eastern Sabah Security Command	Eastern Sabah	Emphasised that geographic routes remain available even after enforcement action.

Findings

Using a qualitative case study approach, this study integrates document analysis with semi-structured interviews involving enforcement officers and key informants from major Malaysian maritime and border security agencies, including the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM), Royal Malaysian Customs Department (JKDM), Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), and the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM).

Six major themes emerged from the analysis: seriousness of drug smuggling, maritime routes and spatial vulnerability, modus operandi and adaptive strategies, enforcement measures, inter-agency cooperation, institutional and logistical constraints, and recommendations for strengthening maritime drug control.

Perceptions of Drug Smuggling Seriousness in Sabah

Informants consistently described drug smuggling in Sabah as a serious and persistent security problem. The seriousness was not measured only by seizure volume or arrest numbers. It was reflected in the organisation, adaptability, and continuity of smuggling networks. Several agencies indicated that drug smuggling in Sabah involves planning, timing, transport coordination, cross-border contacts, and local route knowledge.

A Customs Officer in Tawau emphasised that smuggling activity is not random or opportunistic:

> "This is not small-time smuggling. You need logistics, timing, and people on both sides. It shows the seriousness of the syndicates involved." *(Customs Officer, Tawau)*

This statement indicates that drug smuggling in Sabah operates as a coordinated supply activity rather than isolated criminal movement. The involvement of "people on both sides" suggests cross-border coordination, while reference to "logistics" and "timing" shows that smuggling depends on organised planning.

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
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A Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) officer similarly explained that route diversification reflects the resilience of supply networks:

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

This feedback shows that enforcement success at one point does not necessarily disrupt the wider supply chain. Smuggling networks maintain alternative routes, substitute landing points, and adjust movement patterns. The seriousness of the problem therefore lies in network resilience. Supply continues because smugglers operate across multiple spatial options.

Maritime Routes and Spatial Vulnerability

The findings show that Sabah's maritime geography creates persistent vulnerability to drug smuggling. Informants repeatedly referred to long coastlines, scattered islands, informal landing points, and daily sea movement as major enforcement challenges. The maritime border is difficult to regulate because it is not concentrated at a small number of formal entry points. Instead, movement occurs through dispersed routes used by fishermen, traders, transport operators, and local communities.

A Local Maritime Intelligence Officer explained that informal routes are not hidden from the community:

> "These routes are not secret. Fishermen use them every day. Smugglers just follow the same path." *(Local Maritime Intelligence Officer)*

This statement is important because it shows that illicit movement does not necessarily depend on secret geography. Smugglers exploit ordinary maritime knowledge. Routes used for fishing and inter-island movement may also be used for drug transportation. This blurs the operational boundary between licit and illicit mobility.

A Customs Officer in Eastern Sabah reinforced this point by highlighting the multiplicity of small passages:

> "You can close one small passage, but there are five more nearby. All are part of the same system." *(Customs Officer, Eastern Sabah)*

The findings suggest that Sabah's maritime space dilutes enforcement capacity. Agencies cannot be present at all possible routes simultaneously. Even when patrols are active, smugglers can shift to nearby channels, beaches, informal jetties, or less visible landing points. This creates a condition of enforcement dilution, where the size and complexity of the maritime area reduce the impact of patrol coverage.

Modus Operandi and Adaptive Smuggling Strategies

The findings indicate that smuggling networks in Sabah are adaptive, flexible, and responsive to enforcement pressure. Informants described several common strategies: route substitution, timing adjustment, use of small vessels, night movement, camouflage within fishing activity, and exploitation of weather conditions.

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
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A senior officer from Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) explained that smugglers do not depend on a single route:

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

This statement shows that smuggling networks use a flexible route strategy. They assess enforcement risk and adjust movement accordingly. If maritime routes are heavily monitored, they may delay movement, shift to another landing point, or use land-based routes. This indicates planning, surveillance awareness, and operational patience.

The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM) informant highlighted the use of small vessels and visual camouflage:

> "At night, all boats look the same. They know this, and they take advantage of it." *(APMM Patrol Officer)*

This feedback shows that smugglers exploit the visual limitations of maritime enforcement. Small vessels are difficult to distinguish from fishing boats, especially at night. Smugglers do not necessarily require sophisticated technology. They rely on low-profile movement, local knowledge, darkness, and the density of legitimate maritime traffic.

An ESSCOM Maritime Unit officer added that smugglers also use temporal evasion:

> "They move during weather changes, when patrols slow down. The sea helps them hide." *(ESSCOM Maritime Unit Officer)*

This finding shows that smugglers exploit environmental conditions. Weather changes, rough seas, reduced visibility, and lower patrol intensity can become operational opportunities. The sea itself becomes part of the smuggling strategy.

Enforcement Measures and Operational Responses

Informants reported that enforcement agencies respond through patrols, surveillance, intelligence gathering, joint operations, interdiction, inspection, and area monitoring. The Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) focus on narcotics enforcement, investigation, intelligence, and criminal network disruption. The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APMM) contributes maritime patrol, interception, and sea-based enforcement. The Royal Malaysian Customs Department (JKDM) focuses on customs control, smuggling prevention, inspection, and border-related movement of goods. Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) coordinates security operations within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE), while maritime intelligence units provide route-level and community-based information.

However, agency feedback indicates that operational responses are constrained by geography. Enforcement actions may stop specific movements but may not remove the wider opportunity structure. An ESSCOM Commander explained this clearly:

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

> "Today we stop them here, tomorrow they use the same route again when we leave. The geography doesn't change." *(ESSCOM Commander)*

This statement captures one of the most important findings of the study. Enforcement can disrupt movement temporarily, but the routes remain physically available. Once patrol attention shifts, smugglers may return. This shows that successful interdiction does not necessarily equal sustained control.

The findings therefore suggest that enforcement effectiveness should not be measured only by arrests or seizures. Agencies may achieve operational success while still facing strategic vulnerability. A route can be intercepted today and reused tomorrow. This means that enforcement needs to move beyond reactive patrols toward sustained route denial, intelligence mapping, community reporting, and technology-assisted monitoring.

Inter-Agency Cooperation and Joint Operations

The findings show that inter-agency cooperation is essential because no single agency controls the full maritime drug enforcement chain. Each agency contributes a different function. PDRM provides narcotics intelligence and criminal investigation. APMM provides maritime interception and patrol presence. JKDM provides customs enforcement and anti-smuggling expertise. ESSCOM provides coordination within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone. The Malaysian Armed Forces (Angkatan Tentera Malaysia, ATM) supports border defence, surveillance, and wider security presence.

Informants recognised the importance of joint operations. However, they also indicated that coordination must be continuous rather than episodic. Smuggling networks are flexible, while enforcement structures can be procedural and agency specific. This creates a mismatch. Syndicates move quickly across routes, while agencies may require coordination protocols, information verification, and jurisdictional clearance.

The study therefore finds that inter-agency cooperation is not merely an administrative requirement. It is an operational necessity. Sabah's maritime environment requires integrated enforcement because smuggling networks move across sea, land, communities, and jurisdictions.

Institutional, Legal, Logistical, and Resource Constraints

Informants identified several constraints that weaken maritime drug control in Sabah. These include large enforcement areas, limited manpower, limited patrol assets, difficulty monitoring small vessels, fragmented jurisdiction, uneven intelligence sharing, weather-related limitations, and the challenge of distinguishing legal from illegal maritime movement.

The scale of Sabah's maritime space creates a structural resource problem. Agencies cannot maintain continuous surveillance over all routes, islands, informal landing points, and coastal passages. Even when patrols are increased, the maritime area remains too wide for full coverage. This produces selective enforcement, where agencies must prioritise, high-risk areas based on available intelligence.

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

Logistical constraints are also significant. Smugglers often use small vessels that are difficult to detect, especially at night or during poor weather. Patrol boats, radar coverage, fuel allocation, manpower rotation, and response time all affect enforcement capacity. Informants noted that smugglers understand these constraints and adapt their movements accordingly.

The findings therefore show that enforcement challenges are not caused by agency inaction alone. They are shaped by structural constraints in geography, resources, jurisdiction, technology, and coordination.

Border Proximity and Cross-Border Maritime Continuity

Several informants emphasised that Sabah's smuggling routes cannot be understood within Malaysia's borders alone. Maritime movement in Eastern Sabah is connected to wider cross-border mobility involving the southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia. This regional continuity makes enforcement more difficult because national jurisdictions do not fully reflect how maritime communities and smuggling networks move.

A Senior APMM Officer explained:

> "For them, there is no border at sea. It's one continuous route." *(Senior APMM Officer)*

This statement shows that smugglers perceive the maritime border differently from the state. For enforcement agencies, the border marks jurisdiction, authority, and sovereignty. For smugglers, the sea may function as a continuous mobility corridor. This mismatch creates a governance challenge because criminal movement can cross jurisdictional boundaries faster than institutional response mechanisms.

Fifth, cross-border cooperation with the Philippines and Indonesia should be strengthened because Sabah's maritime vulnerability is linked to regional mobility. Intelligence exchange, joint monitoring, and coordinated response mechanisms are necessary to address smuggling routes that extend beyond Malaysia's jurisdiction.

Summary of Findings

Theme	Key Finding	Agency-Based Feedback	Analytical Interpretation
Seriousness of drug smuggling	Smuggling is organised, coordinated, and resilient.	PDRM and JKDM described route alternatives, logistics, timing, and cross-border coordination.	Drug smuggling operates as a structured supply network, not isolated movement.
Maritime routes and spatial vulnerability	Sabah's coastline and informal passages create enforcement dilution.	Maritime intelligence and Customs officers highlighted everyday routes and multiple small passages.	Geography continuously produces opportunities for illicit movement.

Informal routes	*Laluan tikus* overlap with fishing and inter-island mobility.	Maritime intelligence officers explained that smugglers use the same paths as fishermen.	The boundary between licit and illicit mobility is blurred.
Modus operandi	Smugglers use small boats, night movement, weather changes, and route substitution.	APMM and ESSCOM officers described night camouflage and temporal evasion.	Syndicates adapt to enforcement rhythms and environmental conditions.
Enforcement response	Patrols and interdictions disrupt activity but do not remove underlying routes.	ESSCOM emphasised that routes remain available after enforcement action.	Operational success does not always produce sustained spatial control.
Inter-agency cooperation	Multi-agency enforcement is necessary but must be continuous and intelligence led.	Agencies perform different roles across investigation, patrol, customs control, and security coordination.	Integrated governance is required because no single agency controls the full enforcement chain.
Resource and institutional constraints	Wide maritime areas, limited assets, jurisdictional overlaps, and weather weaken control.	Agencies reported practical difficulties in monitoring small vessels and dispersed routes.	Enforcement constraints are structural, not merely administrative.
Cross-border continuity	Smuggling routes connect Sabah with southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia.	APMM described the sea as one continuous route from the smugglers' perspective.	Sabah's vulnerability is regional and requires cross-border cooperation.

Discussions

This study demonstrates that drug smuggling in Sabah is best understood as a spatially structured governance problem rather than a simple enforcement failure. The findings show that Sabah's maritime geography, informal mobility systems, small-vessel traffic, and cross-border seascapes continuously reproduce opportunities for illicit movement. Enforcement agencies remain active, but their capacity is constrained by the scale, fluidity, and social embeddedness of the maritime border. This interpretation shifts the analytical focus from "weak enforcement" to spatially constrained governance, where geography shapes the limits of state control.

The findings also show that drug smuggling in Sabah is not isolated from wider regional drug dynamics. Southeast Asia continues to experience a serious synthetic drug challenge, with UNODC reporting record methamphetamine seizures of 236 tonnes in East and Southeast Asia in 2024, a 24 per cent increase from 2023 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2025). This regional pattern supports the finding that Sabah's maritime

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343
vulnerability must be located within wider transnational mobility corridors rather than treated as a purely local enforcement problem.

Maritime Geography as a Governance Constraint

The findings reinforce the argument that maritime borders are inherently difficult to govern because they are expansive, fluid, and dispersed. In Sabah, long coastlines, scattered islands, informal landing points, and high-volume maritime movement prevent continuous surveillance. This produces enforcement dilution, where agency presence is active but geographically stretched. The issue is therefore not merely the number of patrols conducted, but the mismatch between available enforcement capacity and the spatial scale of the maritime environment.

This finding aligns with maritime security literature. Bueger and Edmunds (2017) argue that maritime security threats rarely fit within fixed territorial or institutional boundaries, requiring governance across agencies, sectors, and jurisdictions. Their argument is directly relevant to Sabah because drug smuggling occurs across sea routes that simultaneously support fishing, trade, inter-island mobility, and informal local movement. Maritime space is therefore not only a security zone. It is also an economic and social space.

Informant accounts further show that smuggling networks do not need advanced technology to evade detection. They exploit geographic scale, darkness, weather, route density, and predictable patrol limitations. This supports crime pattern theory, which argues that crime is spatially patterned and tends to occur where movement, opportunity, and weak guardianship intersect (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). In Sabah, weak guardianship is not necessarily caused by agency neglect. It is structurally produced by a maritime environment that cannot be constantly guarded.

Geography as a Self-Regenerating Opportunity Structure

The findings show that even successful interdictions do not remove underlying opportunities for smuggling. Routes remain physically available after enforcement assets move elsewhere. This explains why informants repeatedly described the same routes being reused. Geography therefore operates as a self-regenerating opportunity structure.

This interpretation is supported by situational crime prevention theory. Clarke (1997) argues that crime is shaped by opportunity structures embedded in specific environments. Offending can be reduced when opportunities are removed, blocked, or made riskier. In Sabah, however, many maritime opportunities cannot be fully removed because the sea, islands, informal landing points, and community routes remain physically present. Enforcement can interrupt movement, but it cannot easily eliminate the spatial conditions that enable movement.

This explains the gap between operational success and strategic control. Arrests and seizures may indicate enforcement activity, but they do not necessarily prove that smuggling opportunities have been structurally reduced. If the same routes remain usable, interdiction becomes cyclical. Agencies disrupt movement today, smugglers wait or shift tomorrow, and the opportunity reappears when patrol intensity changes. This finding suggests that enforcement effectiveness should be assessed not only through seizure numbers, but also

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343
through route disruption, reduced route reuse, improved intelligence penetration, and sustained control over high-risk maritime corridors.

Small Vessels, Camouflage, and Low-Technology Evasion

The findings show that smugglers rely heavily on small vessels, night movement, weather changes, and visual similarity with fishing activity. This reflects a form of low-technology evasion. Smugglers do not need sophisticated equipment when the maritime environment itself provides concealment.

The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Agensi Penguatkuasaan Maritim Malaysia, APMM) informant's observation that boats look similar at night is analytically significant. It shows that detection is not only a technical challenge. It is also a classification challenge. Enforcement officers must distinguish between ordinary maritime livelihood activity and illicit movement under conditions of darkness, weather variation, and limited visibility.

This finding strengthens the argument that maritime drug smuggling belongs within the broader category of blue crime. Bueger and Edmunds (2020) define blue crime as transnational organised crime at sea, including smuggling, trafficking, piracy, and illegal fishing. Their framework is useful because it shows that maritime crimes often share routes, vessels, concealment methods, and governance weaknesses. Sabah's drug smuggling problem therefore cannot be separated from broader maritime security challenges involving illegal movement, informal trade, and transnational criminal adaptation.

Regional Seascapes and Transnational Continuity

The findings further show that Sabah's maritime routes form part of a continuous regional seascape linking Sabah, the southern Philippines, and eastern Indonesia. From the perspective of smugglers, maritime space is not experienced as a strict national boundary. It is experienced as a connected mobility corridor. This creates a mismatch between state sovereignty and practical movement.

This finding aligns with Bueger and Edmunds' (2017) argument that maritime security requires governance beyond conventional territorial thinking. Maritime threats cross institutional and jurisdictional boundaries, which means that national enforcement alone is insufficient when illicit mobility operates through regional seascapes.

The implication is direct. Sabah's drug smuggling problem cannot be resolved solely through domestic enforcement escalation. It requires regional intelligence exchange, coordinated patrols, shared maritime domain awareness, and cross-border cooperation with neighbouring jurisdictions. Without regional cooperation, enforcement action in one jurisdiction may simply displace smuggling activity to another route, landing point, or maritime corridor.

Inter-Agency Cooperation and the Limits of Fragmented Enforcement

The findings show that drug smuggling in Sabah cuts across multiple institutional mandates. The Royal Malaysia Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia, PDRM) focus on narcotics investigation and criminal enforcement. The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Agensi Penguatkuasaan Maritim Malaysia, APMM) handles maritime patrol and interdiction. The

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

Royal Malaysian Customs Department (Jabatan Kastam Diraja Malaysia, JKDM) addresses customs control and smuggling-related movement. The Malaysian Armed Forces (Angkatan Tentera Malaysia, ATM) supports border defence and surveillance. The Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) coordinates security within the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE).

This distribution of roles is necessary, but it also creates coordination challenges. Smuggling networks move across sea, land, communities, and jurisdictions, while enforcement agencies operate through distinct mandates, procedures, and information systems. This finding aligns with collaborative governance theory, which argues that complex public problems require joint decision-making, shared resources, trust, and institutionalised coordination (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

Economic and Business Implications of Maritime Drug Smuggling

Although drug smuggling is often framed as a security issue, the findings show that it also has economic and business implications. Sabah's maritime routes support fisheries, small trade, transport, tourism, and local enterprise. When the same routes are exploited for drug smuggling, legitimate economic activity becomes exposed to enforcement disruption, reputational risk, criminal influence, and reduced investor confidence.

This finding is important for a business, entrepreneurship, and SME-focused journal. Border insecurity affects the operating environment of small and medium enterprises. It increases uncertainty, raises transaction costs, disrupts logistics, and weakens confidence in formal market regulation. In coastal and border districts, SMEs often depend on predictable mobility, safe routes, and local trust networks. Drug smuggling undermines these conditions by inserting illicit capital and criminal risk into the local economy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that drug smuggling in Sabah is not adequately explained by enforcement weakness alone. The persistence of smuggling is shaped by structural, geographic, institutional, and regional conditions that continuously generate opportunities for illicit maritime mobility. Sabah's vast maritime space, fragmented coastline, dispersed island settlements, informal landing points, and socially embedded maritime routes create an enforcement environment where illicit movement can repeatedly re-emerge even after successful interdiction. The findings therefore reposition drug smuggling as a problem of spatially constrained governance, where geography limits the reach, continuity, and predictability of enforcement control.

A key contribution of this article is its argument that geography is not merely a background condition. Geography actively structures smuggling opportunity. Informal routes, small-vessel mobility, weather conditions, night movement, and dispersed coastal access collectively create a maritime environment in which smuggling is adaptive, resilient, and difficult to eliminate through conventional enforcement escalation. This finding contributes to maritime security, border governance, and drug policy scholarship by demonstrating that effective border control in archipelagic and coastal regions requires spatially informed strategies rather than uniform enforcement responses.

The findings also carry wider economic and business implications. Drug smuggling affects not only state security but also the operating environment of coastal communities, fisheries, small traders, logistics actors, tourism-related businesses, and maritime-dependent SMEs. Illicit movement can distort local markets, weaken investor confidence, increase enforcement costs, disrupt legitimate mobility, and expose border communities to criminal influence. Strengthening maritime drug control is therefore also part of protecting local economic resilience, market integrity, and sustainable borderland development.

Recommendations

Adopt Spatially Differentiated Enforcement Strategies

Enforcement agencies should move beyond blanket patrol coverage and prioritise high-risk maritime corridors, recurring informal routes, landing points, and known movement clusters. Sabah's maritime geography makes full coverage unrealistic. A more effective approach is to classify routes according to risk level, frequency of use, proximity to cross-border movement, history of interdiction, and community intelligence. This would allow enforcement resources to be deployed more strategically rather than evenly but thinly across vast maritime space.

Strengthen Persistent and Unpredictable Maritime Presence

The study shows that smugglers exploit predictable enforcement patterns. Agencies should therefore strengthen persistent but flexible presence in selected maritime zones through rotational patrols, joint deployments, mobile sea checkpoints, and irregular monitoring schedules. The purpose is not only to increase patrol frequency, but to reduce smugglers' ability to anticipate enforcement timing and location. Persistent presence must be combined with unpredictability to increase the perceived risk of detection.

Develop an Integrated Informal Route Mapping System

Informal maritime routes such as *laluan tikus* should be systematically mapped using enforcement records, local knowledge, historical seizure data, patrol observations, and community reporting. These routes should not be treated only as illegal passages because many also support legitimate fishing, trading, and community mobility. An integrated mapping system would help agencies distinguish between ordinary livelihood movement and suspicious movement patterns. It would also support targeted surveillance without unnecessarily disrupting local economic activity.

Integrate Technology with Intelligence-Led Enforcement

Technology should complement, not replace, field intelligence. Given the difficulty of continuous human patrol, enforcement agencies should strengthen the use of drones, coastal radar, satellite imagery, vessel-tracking analytics, night-vision equipment, and maritime domain awareness systems. However, technology will be most effective when integrated with human intelligence, local route knowledge, and inter-agency information sharing. The aim is to extend surveillance reach, improve detection accuracy, and reduce blind spots in remote maritime areas.

Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SME's
AIJBES
EISSN: 2682-8545
Volume: 8 Issue: 29 (September 2026) PP. 320-343

Institutionalise Real-Time Inter-Agency Coordination

Drug smuggling in Sabah cuts across multiple mandates involving the Royal Malaysia Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia, PDRM), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Agensi Penguatkuasaan Maritim Malaysia, APMM), Royal Malaysian Customs Department (Jabatan Kastam Diraja Malaysia, JKDM), Malaysian Armed Forces (Angkatan Tentera Malaysia, ATM), and Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). Coordination should therefore be institutionalised through shared databases, joint intelligence cells, common risk indicators, and real-time communication channels. Joint operations must move from episodic cooperation to continuous operational integration.

Strengthen Regional Maritime Cooperation

Because smuggling routes extend across Malaysia, southern Philippines, and eastern Indonesia, regional cooperation must be operational rather than merely diplomatic. Malaysia should strengthen intelligence exchange, coordinated patrol planning, joint risk assessment, and communication protocols with neighbouring countries. Smuggling networks exploit jurisdictional gaps. Regional enforcement must therefore reduce the space between national systems.

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