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Public Choice Theory and governance implications for the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE)

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ABSTRACT

The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) embodies Malaysia's vision for sustainable development and Sarawak's ambition to achieve developed state status by 2030. This conceptual paper examines SCORE's implications for energy development, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and Indigenous communities. Using Public Choice Theory (PCT), it explores how self-interest, lobbying, and rent-seeking behaviours shape policy outcomes among policymakers and stakeholders. Drawing on observations, media reports, and official publications, the study analyses how individual motivations intersect with public welfare in energy policy formulation and implementation. The analysis also incorporates Critical Race Theory (CRT) and perspectives on the Malaysian Public Service Commission (PSC) to highlight racially embedded institutional features. These frameworks reveal structural tensions between developmental ambitions and equitable governance. As a qualitative study, the paper does not employ statistical datasets or quantitative modelling; instead, it relies on interpretive analysis to uncover institutional dynamics and governance patterns often obscured by numerical approaches. The findings therefore reflect theoretically informed interpretations rather than generalisable conclusions. Nevertheless, this approach provides valuable insights into the governance complexities of large-scale renewable energy initiatives. Most importantly, PCT, CRT, and PSC demonstrate that SCORE's initiatives are embedded within racialised institutional logics, reflecting systemic governance and inequality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the governance of the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) primarily through Public Choice Theory (PCT), focusing on how bureaucratic interests, institutional incentives, and resource-allocation considerations shape governance and decision-making. Critical Race Theory (CRT) complements this perspective by examining the role of the Malaysian Public Service Commission (PSC) and how racialised institutional structures may become embedded within governance arrangements, particularly in relation to the unequal social and environmental consequences of mega-development experienced by Indigenous communities. Social Identity Theory (SIT) further considers how group identities and in-group–out-group dynamics may reinforce institutional practices, perceptions, and differential access to decision-making and development benefits. Strategic Ambiguity Theory (SAT) provides an additional interpretive lens for examining how ambiguous policy narratives and administrative responses may soften, rationalise, or obscure tensions arising from these dynamics. Collectively, these perspectives provide a framework for examining the interaction of political, economic, institutional, and social interests within SCORE governance.

SCORE was launched with the ambition of advancing Sarawak towards developed-state status by 2030 and initially attracted public support. However, its implementation subsequently generated contestation over mega-dams, environmental impacts, and consequences for Indigenous communities. These tensions reveal a governance gap between sustainability commitments and the processes through which development priorities are determined and communicated. PCT helps bring into perspective how institutional incentives may contribute to the persistence of priorities, while SAT provides insight into how ambiguous narratives and administrative responses may manage contestation. CRT and SIT extend this analysis by drawing attention to distributional and identity-based dimensions of governance.

At this juncture, it is imperative to review SCORE's roadmap. The expansion of SCORE was accompanied by a significant enlargement of its institutional structure. Following the extension of the corridor's geographical coverage, RECODA's development responsibilities were supported by a growing number of regional development agencies. By 2023, nine agencies had been established under the RECODA framework. This institutional expansion increased the number of organisations involved in regional development planning and implementation and created a more complex governance structure involving state and federal actors, development agencies, investors, and local communities. From a Public Choice Theory perspective, such institutional arrangements are relevant because organisations and public officials may respond to their own institutional incentives, including organisational growth, resource allocation, administrative influence, and political objectives. These implications are examined in the subsequent analysis rather than assumed from the institutional structure itself.

1.1 SCORE Original Version

When SCORE was first established in 2008, it covered an area of 70,000 km2 in the central region of Sarawak, with a coastline of 320 km long; encompassing urban centres such as Sibu, Sarikei, Kapit, Bintulu, Mukah, Miri, Lawas and Limbang. SCORE was immediately placed under the jurisdiction of the Regional Corridors Development Authority (RECODA) which was entrusted to oversee its overall development strategy. The initial aim of establishing SCORE was to develop the central region of Sarawak, thereby improving the state's economic growth and achieving the national Vision 2020 objective of becoming a developed state.

RECODA subsequently established three agencies - the Upper Rajang Development Agency (URDA), Highland Development Agency (HDA), and Northern Region Development Agency (NRDA) - to administer SCORE's development. A 2011 report noted that while SCORE diversified Sarawak's energy sources away from fossil fuels, it also encountered significant challenges. As Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad later acknowledged, Malaysia, and Sarawak in particular, failed to achieve a developed and industrialised status by 2020 (Xu, 2020). Following its merger with the "Post-COVID-19 Development Strategy" in 2021, RECODA ceased publishing annual reports (op. cit.).

1.2 SCORE Blueprint and the Subsequent Changes in SCORE Vision

The SCORE blueprint identifies socio-economic, commercial, and industrial sectors for development, aiming to benefit local communities and promote more equitable wealth distribution, particularly among rural populations. These are:

(i) Harness Energy Abundance: Sarawak boasts abundant hydropower potential, with vast rivers crisscrossing its terrain. The Bakun Dam, Murum Dam, and the under-construction Baleh Dam are key components of SCORE's energy portfolio.

(ii) Drive Industrialisation: SCORE envisions a series of industrial zones along a 320- kilometre corridor. These zones such as Samalaju Industrial Park (SIP) will attract investments in energy-intensive industries like aluminium smelting, steel production, and palm oil processing.

(iii) Economic Diversification: Beyond energy, SCORE aims to diversify Sarawak's economy reduce dependence on oil and gas revenues, and create jobs for its growing population.

(iv) Economic Growth and Development: To reduce the poverty gap between urban and rural areas of Sarawak, it hopes to catapult Sarawak into a developed state by 2030.

In 2018, the responsibilities of RECODA expanded significantly when the SCORE boundary was extended to include the Northern Region, comprising Miri and Limbang Divisions. This expansion increased the corridor's coverage from approximately 70,709 km² to nearly 100,000 km² and led to the creation of six additional development agencies (Table 1). The subsequent inclusion of the Southern Region effectively brought the entire state of Sarawak within SCORE's administrative scope. With this enlarged mandate, RECODA has faced internal organisational challenges, including issues related to institutional structure, remuneration competitiveness, performance systems, and talent acquisition (RECODA, 2020). These structural constraints have inevitably generated competing priorities and interests within RECODA and among its associated agencies, while the involvement of a growing number of stakeholders has further complicated coordination and decision-making.

Table 1. 9 Agencies under RECODA

Agencies	Date Established
Highland Development Agency (HDA)	July 2017
Upper Rajang Development Agency (URDA)	July 2017
Northern Regional Development Agency (NRDA)And	March 2018
Sri Aman Development Agency (Sada)	June 2020
Rajang Delta Development Agency (RADDA)	June 2022
Integrated Regional Samarahan Development Agency (IRSDA)	June 2022
Betong Division Development Agency (BDDA)	September 2022

Greater Kuching Coordinated Development Agency (GKCDA)	September 2022
Mid-Rajang Regional Development Agency (MiRRDA)	September 2023

Source: https://dayakdaily.com/nine-agencies-driving-statewide-advancement/

While RECODA established six additional development agencies to support the expanded SCORE framework, the composition of its Board of Directors comprises senior state and federal officials and representatives of key economic, financial and administrative institutions, but remains largely dominated by a single ethnic group (Table 2). From an institutional perspective, such patterns of representation may reflect broader structural characteristics within Malaysia's public sector, including recruitment and promotion pathways associated with PSC, which may in turn influence policy priorities and organisational decision-making. These structural conditions may also contribute to intra-agency competition and differing institutional priorities within the expanded SCORE framework.

Table 2. RECODA Board of Directors (as of 2025)

Name	Role
YAB Datuk Patinggi Abang Abdul Rahman Zohari bin Abang Openg	Chairman (Premier of Sarawak)
YB Datuk Amar Douglas Uggah Embas	Member (Deputy Chief Minister, MANRED)
YB Datuk Amar Haji Awang Tengah Ali Hasan	Member (Deputy Chief Minister, MANRED)
YBhg Tan Sri Rafidah Abdul Aziz	Advisor
Datu Haji Ismawi Haji Ismuni	CEO (RECODA)
Encik Abdul Kadir Bin Zainuddin	Rep. Member – State Financial Secretary
Encik Mohd Saiful Sungkih Bin Abdullah	Rep. Member – Secretary General of Treasury, MOF
Dato Sri Haji Mohamad Abu Bakar Bin Marzuki	Member – Deputy State Secretary (Socio-Economic Transformation)
Dato' Saiful Anuar Bin Lebai Hussen	Member – Secretary General, MEA
Dr. Muhammad Abdullah Bin Haji Zaidel	Member – Director, EPU Sarawak

Source: Board of Directors - RECODA

Changes in SCORE's vision have accompanied this institutional expansion. Originally conceived as an energy-driven industrialisation corridor centred on large-scale hydropower development, SCORE has gradually evolved toward a more diversified and sustainability-oriented development framework. While energy development remains a central pillar, greater emphasis is now placed on economic diversification, including eco-tourism initiatives aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the promotion of smaller-scale renewable energy projects such as rural solar electrification and community-based initiatives. Environmental concerns and criticism over ecological disruption and the displacement of Indigenous communities associated with large dam projects have contributed to policy recalibration, with cascading dam systems and alternative renewable energy approaches increasingly presented as more sustainable options. The latest vision also places stronger emphasis on inclusivity and local community participation, addressing earlier criticisms that the original SCORE framework lacked meaningful consultation and equitable benefit-sharing.

SCORE's development blueprint is grounded in the concept of economic corridors (EC), which serve as the foundation for its growth strategy. Since its establishment, SCORE has generated both support and

scepticism, reflecting its complex and multifaceted nature. Ongoing debates continue to focus on its implications for Sarawak's environment, local communities, and long-term economic trajectory.

Where there are interests, there will be conflicts

As seen from changes in SCORE Vision, SCORE has initiated internal changes. One of them is developing its Organisational Anti-Corruption Plan (OACP) for 2021-2025, which is in line with the state government's commitment to enforce integrity and transparency in its civil service. Suffice it to say, that SCORE recognises the severity of corruption in its organisation. Thus, RECODA held a workshop to evaluate corruption's internal and external risks.

> *"The successful implementation of the OACP and its continuing effectiveness will largely depend on the commitment of leadership. This requires hands-on management, follow-up action and the support and participation of officers at all levels."*
>
> Datu Ismawi Ismuni, RECODA CEO
>
> Source: https://recoda.gov.my/pre-launch-of-recoda-organisational-anti-corruption-plan-oacp-2021-2025/?utm_source=copilot.com

Weak internal controls, poor enforcement, and an acceptance culture within SCORE governance reflect PCT's insight that bureaucratic actors often prioritise self-interest over collective welfare. In RECODA's case, overlapping agencies and limited oversight enable organised interests to dominate development priorities, leading to poor enforcement, while tolerance of inefficiency entrenches systemic weaknesses. In other words, tolerance or acceptance culture becomes the norm. Together, these dynamics illustrate how institutional incentives and governance gaps perpetuate strategic ambiguity in SCORE.

More Agencies might lead to Conflict of Interests

Conflicts of interest (COI) are widely understood to arise when diverse actors engage in policy processes, particularly where stakeholder priorities diverge. As Hassan et al., A., Mohamed, A., & Ebrahim, M. (2025) note, such conflicts often reflect deeper cultural differences and power asymmetries, a theme echoed across governance and development scholarship. Paradoxically, government responses to dissent consistently invoke the principle of meritocracy, framing its actions as impartial and justified, as justified by Datuk Armizan Mohd Ali (New Straits Times, 2023).

RECODA expanded SCORE's governance by establishing agencies such as URDA, HDA, NRDA, and six additional bodies (Table 1), alongside state institutions like SEB, SEDC, and BDA. Intended to enhance efficiency, this proliferation has instead heightened areas of conflict and illustrated broader governance challenges. Murray Hunter (2024) observes that Malaysia's administrative state is dominated by powerful, unelected institutions whose recommendations often shape executive policy. In Sarawak, SCORE's institutional layering, now tied to over RM125 billion in investments, 53,000 jobs, and 247 infrastructure projects, has raised concerns among respondents that excessive agency expansion risks dysfunction, echoing the adage that "too many cooks spoil the broth."

Institutional layering, understood as the addition of new rules and agencies to existing structures, is often deployed by politicians to diffuse accountability and deflect criticism (Howlett, Mukherjee, & Rayner, 2014). Within SCORE, overlapping agencies under RECODA coexist with state bodies, reflecting PCT's emphasis on bureaucratic self-interest and organisational survival. CRT further reveals how PSC recruitment practices entrench racial hierarchies, sustaining elite dominance and marginalising Indigenous communities. Together, these frameworks show how institutional expansion and racialised governance structures are strategically used to insulate political actors from responsibility, reframing development narratives as inclusive while ultimately preserving power and privilege.

Nonetheless, in theory, effective public policy outcomes depend on the analytical, managerial, and political capacities of policymakers to design and implement coherent policy instruments, as emphasised in the policy design literature by Mukherjee and Bali (2019). However, when viewed through the lens of PCT, policymaking processes may also be shaped by institutional incentives, bureaucratic interests, and political considerations that do not always align with collective welfare. In the context of SCORE, these dynamics are particularly visible in the interaction between state agencies, investors, and affected communities, where competing priorities often influence development decisions. From a CRT perspective, broader structural features of Malaysia's administrative system, including recruitment and representation patterns linked to the Malaysia PSC, may further shape whose perspectives are reflected in policy formulation. Consequently, SCORE's evolving development trajectory reflects not only technocratic policy ambitions but also the complex institutional and socio-political dynamics that underpin large-scale development governance.

Recent reports reinforce this trajectory. RECODA's PBM Miri (2025) highlights SCORE's continued growth through investments and infrastructure projects, while Sarawak Energy's Greening the Grid (SEB, 2024) frames renewable energy development around sustainability and affordability, reinforcing technocratic narratives. MIDA similarly presents SCORE as a federal–state initiative covering more than 100,000 km². Collectively, these accounts illustrate how SCORE remains broadly justified as a developmental state instrument, yet its governance practices align closely with PCT's insights on bureaucratic expansion, organisational survival, and strategic ambiguity.

More recently, SCORE's trajectory has expanded beyond domestic development objectives toward Sarawak's ambitious aspiration to become a regional energy hub or the "Battery of ASEAN," primarily through electricity exports and participation in the ASEAN Power Grid (APG). This evolving orientation reflects not only changing economic opportunities but also the growing influence of institutional and personnel interests in shaping policy direction. From a PCT perspective, bureaucratic agencies, political actors, and state-linked enterprises have incentives to promote large-scale energy expansion and regional interconnection projects that enhance organisational influence, fiscal resources, and political prestige. At the same time, a CRT perspective highlights how entrenched institutional arrangements within Malaysia's administrative system, particularly recruitment and promotion patterns associated with the Public Service Commission (PSC), may influence whose interests and perspectives are represented in policy formulation. Taken together, these developments illustrate how SCORE's evolving vision reflects both adaptive policy learning and the increasing influence of institutional dynamics and elite preferences in redefining Sarawak's long-term development strategy.

Existing research on SCORE has paid limited attention to how these political, institutional, racialised, identity-based, and communicative dynamics interact within a PCT-informed analysis. This study addresses

this gap by extending PCT to SCORE governance while using CRT, SIT, and SAT as complementary perspectives. Academically, it contributes to SCORE and economic corridor scholarship by providing an integrated account of governance incentives and competing interests. Theoretically, it demonstrates how PCT can be complemented by perspectives that illuminate social, identity, and communicative dimensions of development governance. Practically, the study identifies governance considerations relevant to transparency, accountability, participation, equity, and sustainable development, particularly in relation to affected Indigenous communities.

This gap is particularly significant given the governance challenges that have emerged during SCORE's implementation, where competing development interests, institutional incentives, and contested social outcomes raise important questions about how the initiative is governed.

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite SCORE's distinction as an economic developmental corridor, existing studies have underestimated the dynamics of PCT in revealing how bureaucratic self-interest and institutional incentives distort governance outcomes. Simultaneously, SAT has been strategically manipulated to obscure contestation, allowing vague policy narratives to secure legitimacy while deflecting accountability. These dynamics create governance weaknesses where expectations are managed rhetorically rather than substantively, marginalising Indigenous communities and undermining transparency, equity, and sustainable development. The core problem is that SCORE's governance underestimates Public Choice dynamics and exploits Strategic Ambiguity, producing rhetorical rather than substantive accountability that marginalises Indigenous communities and weakens transparency, equity, and sustainable development.

1.4 Objectives

This article seeks to interrogate the governance of SCORE by pursuing three objectives: first, to examine how Public Choice dynamics, particularly self-interest, rent-seeking, and bureaucratic incentives, influence governance decisions; second, to analyse how Strategic Ambiguity is embedded in SCORE's policy narratives and deployed to manage stakeholder expectations and secure legitimacy; and third, to evaluate the combined implications of these dynamics for balancing economic development goals with sustainability commitments. Simultaneously, the study addresses three guiding questions: how do self-interested behaviours of political and bureaucratic actors shape governance outcomes within SCORE; in what ways are strategic ambiguities embedded in policy narratives used to manage expectations and legitimacy; and how does the interplay between Public Choice and Strategic Ambiguity practices affect the balance between developmental ambitions and sustainability commitments?

To address these objectives and questions, the study employs a qualitative and interpretivist design, drawing on documentary sources, policy reports, academic literature, media materials, and selected primary data, systematically analysed through thematic coding. The findings are interpreted through PCT, augmented by SAT, CRT and SIT, to reveal how SCORE's governance reflects bureaucratic incentives, ambiguous narratives, racialised logics, and identity-driven behaviours.

The article proceeds by reviewing relevant literature and theoretical foundations, outlining the research design and methods, presenting and discussing the findings on how Public Choice dynamics and institutional incentives shape governance contradictions in SCORE, and concluding with implications for theory, practice, and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although existing studies have examined SCORE from environmental, social, economic, and development perspectives, comparatively less attention has been given to the political-economic incentives that may influence decision-making within its institutional and governance arrangements. In particular, the literature provides limited systematic application of PCT to examine how the interests and incentives of political actors, bureaucratic institutions, state-linked organisations, investors, and other stakeholders may shape policy priorities and resource allocation within SCORE. This study addresses this gap by applying PCT as an analytical lens to examine the governance implications of SCORE's development trajectory.

2.1 Economic Corridor Development

The first Economic Corridor (EC) in Southeast Asia was established in 1992 by China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand with the support of the ADB (Ishida, M. 2008). The original concept was economic cooperation and development, particularly cross-border transportation. Suffice it to say, there are economic benefits, notably on spatial dimension development that fits with the characteristics of EC as identified by Brunner (2013). In the context of economic corridors, the spatial dimension refers to the geographical and physical aspects of a region where economic activities are concentrated and interconnected. Most importantly, it involves how geographical locations, infrastructure networks, and regional development interact to shape the flow of economic activities and to ensure that resources, industries, and populations are strategically placed to maximise efficiency and economic growth. Understanding the spatial dimension is key to identifying how infrastructure, resources, industries, and markets are distributed and connected within a particular area. Hence, ECs have become the centre of attention of many planned development initiatives worldwide (Wolf, 2018), and policymakers and administrators are beginning to get deeply involved in every aspect of economic planning. When many players or stakeholders are involved, this inevitably leads to differing opinions and conflicting ideas and interests. This is where the PCT comes in handy enlightening the conceptual ramifications of ECs, and James Buchanan sarcastically defined public choice as “politics without romance (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962). Overall, PCT helps us understand the motivations behind political decisions and how self-interest can influence the outcomes of government policies and actions. In other words, these players, particularly politicians and policymakers, appear to make decisions based on their personal or institutional interests rather than the general "public good" (Shaw, 2002).

2.2 Economic Corridor Concepts and SCORE

The The economic corridor (EC) concept has evolved beyond the provision of transport infrastructure to encompass spatial integration, connectivity, institutional coordination, trade facilitation, investment promotion, and inclusive regional development. Brunner (2013) conceptualises economic corridors as geographically defined networks connecting economic agents and development nodes, while the Asian Development Bank emphasises the interaction between infrastructure, economic activity, institutional arrangements, and spatial development. Thus, an EC is not simply a geographical area containing infrastructure projects but an integrated system linking industries, markets, communities, and regions.

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) provides an example of this broader approach, where corridor development has incorporated transport connectivity, trade and investment facilitation, logistics, border connectivity, and regional economic integration. SCORE shares some characteristics of this model. Established as a geographically defined development corridor, it seeks to utilise Sarawak's energy resources to attract investment, promote industrialisation, create employment, and stimulate regional development. The development of industrial areas such as Samalaju Industrial Park demonstrates the linkage between energy infrastructure and industrial production.

However, SCORE's development trajectory appears to place greater emphasis on energy generation, large-scale infrastructure, and investment attraction than on some broader dimensions of the EC concept, particularly local economic integration, institutional coordination, inclusive participation, and the distribution of development benefits. This does not mean that SCORE does not constitute an economic corridor, but rather raises questions about the extent to which its implementation reflects the multidimensional objectives associated with the EC approach. Concentrating infrastructure and investment in selected industrial locations may generate economic growth without necessarily producing equivalent integration of rural communities, small businesses, local supply chains, and surrounding regions.

This distinction is relevant to Public Choice Theory (PCT), as large-scale corridor development creates significant economic and institutional opportunities for political actors, bureaucratic agencies, state-linked organisations, and investors. Examining their respective incentives and interests provides a basis for understanding why particular development priorities may receive greater emphasis and how these choices may influence governance outcomes within SCORE.

Since its establishment in 2008, SCORE has attracted substantial attention because of its ambition to use Sarawak's renewable energy resources to promote industrialisation, investment, employment, and regional development. The vision of leveraging Sarawak’s abundant renewable energy resources to drive economic growth and industrialisation resonated with many. Investors, industry players, and policymakers welcomed the idea of creating an energy hub in Sarawak, attracting energy-intensive industries and generating employment. However, as SCORE’s projects progressed, opposition emerged. First was the environmental impact. Critics raised concerns about the sustainability and ecological consequences of large-scale hydropower dams, such as Bakun and Murum (Sovacool and Bulan, 2012(1), 2012 (2), Lau, C.Y. 2015, Alamgir et. al., 2020). These projects disrupted ecosystems, displaced indigenous communities, and altered river flows. Second was social displacement (Adilla, 2014), where the forced relocation of indigenous communities due to dam construction sparked protests and legal challenges. This was also related to their concerns about the impact on their cultural heritage sites and traditional ways of life (BMF, 2012). Third, this inevitably led to political debates. Opposition parties and civil society groups questioned the economic viability of SCORE. Some argued that the focus on heavy industries might not yield the desired benefits for local communities. Political debates centred on good governance, particularly on transparency (Save Rivers, 2014), corruption (BMF, 2013), accountability, and the allocation of resources. The fourth scene is media coverage and public discourse. Media outlets covered both sides of the debate. Some highlighted the potential economic gains, while others emphasised environmental and social costs. Public discourse included discussions on balancing development with sustainability. What could be the reasons behind these different opinions? This can only be discovered through the lens of PCT.

SCORE’s development blueprint is grounded in the concept of economic corridors (EC), which serves as the foundation for its growth strategy. Since its establishment, SCORE has generated both support and

skepticism, reflecting its complex and multifaceted nature. Ongoing debates continue to focus on its implications for Sarawak's environment, local communities, and long-term economic trajectory.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) is both an economic development initiative and a complex governance process shaped by political incentives, institutional structures, and socio-economic considerations. Understanding these dynamics requires more than technical or economic analysis; it calls for theoretical frameworks that explain how decisions are made, whose interests are prioritised, and how outcomes emerge. This study adopts a mixed approach, drawing on PCT to analyse how self-interest, incentives, and institutional behaviour influence energy policy and infrastructure development. At the same time, CRT highlights how institutional structures, particularly within the Malaysian PSC, embed racial hierarchies and shape governance outcomes. SAT further reveals how policymakers deploy vague or contradictory narratives to reconcile expectation gaps, sustain legitimacy, and deflect contestation. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that SCORE's governance is not simply a matter of balancing growth and sustainability, but a negotiated process where self-interest, structural inequities, and deliberate ambiguity interact to produce contested development outcomes with broader implications for sustainable governance.

This study applies PCT to examine how political incentives, bureaucratic behaviour, and stakeholder interests influence decision-making in the implementation of SCORE, particularly in relation to energy policy and large-scale infrastructure development.

2.3.1 Public Choice Theory

"Public Choice Theory is the application of economics to the study of political science and government decision-making, where it describes decision-making in politics in which players may not always act in the public interest" (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). As mentioned earlier, Buchanan defined PCT as "politics without romance" may sound sarcastic, and PCT assumes that people are mainly guided by self-interest, including politicians, bureaucrats, and government officials. Instead of viewing politicians, bureaucrats, and voters as purely altruistic public servants, Buchanan used this phrase to describe a realistic approach that applies the principles of market economics, specifically individual self-interest, to political decision-making. In this context, decision making under SCORE is not totally absolved of such suspicion. However, a concept, nonetheless, can still be a vague idea on the surface, and that being the case, it is not easy to comprehend, argue or accept wholly, unless it has been proven and accepted by the vast majority.

PCT assumes that political actors are guided by self-interest, but several scholars highlight its limitations. Amartya Sen (1977) argued that PCT overlooks ethics and social values, noting that individuals may act from justice or fairness rather than personal gain. Elinor Ostrom (1990) criticised its portrayal of individuals as selfish maximisers, showing instead that cooperation often emerges in managing shared resources. March and Olsen (1989) emphasised the role of institutional norms and identities, while Herbert Simon (1972) introduced bounded rationality, stressing that decisions are often "good enough" under limited information. Despite its critics, PCT continues to shape debates on governance and policy by offering an influential economic lens for analysing political behaviour.

In general, players in the government and public sector behave quite similarly to the market, as described in conventional economic theory. "Public choice economists make the same assumption - a

concern for themselves" (Shaw, 2002). Mancur Olson's The Logic of Collective Action (1965) established the rational choice foundation of PCT by explaining the free-rider problem: individuals often avoid contributing to public goods, leaving small, organised groups more capable of influencing policy outcomes than large, diffuse publics. However, from a theoretical standpoint, perspectives differ and continue to evolve. Olson's work helps explain these dynamics, yet from a broader perspective, PCT alone cannot fully justify its assumptions, as other scholars have shown.

As we delve into the intricacies of SCORE, it's not wrong to assume the goal of the state government as one of providing the best for society, in contrast to the goals of totally self-interested economic agents, such as corporations. However, this view created a contradiction, as it is possible to be self-interested in some areas while being altruistic in others. Moreover, these stances may change. In reality, the view projected by PCT sees SCORE or RECODA, besides pursuing the public interest, might act to benefit themselves. The scenario is murkier, with many conflicting factors, and no behavioural theories can convincingly explain it.

Amidst these debates, findings from published articles, journals, and publicised official government documents, support this observation. This is no different from what was rooted in the work of Buchanan and Tullock, who challenged the idealised view of policymakers as purely selfless actors, and that self-interest might influence the choices. Likewise in politics, there are various players and stakeholders, each with their own motives and self-interests. Thus, the choice is intertwined with the reasons or circumstances at that point in time. Viewed through the lens of PCT, SCORE's activities reveal several notable elements of political behaviour and governance:

1. Self-Interest and Decision-Making in Energy Policy

Within the framework of PCT, politicians and bureaucrats are assumed to behave as rational actors who pursue their own interests within institutional constraints. This dynamic is particularly evident in policy decisions under SCORE, where balancing public welfare objectives with political and institutional incentives can be complex and contested. For instance, the late James Masing once remarked, "No dam, no road" (The Borneo Post, 2017), highlighting the perceived developmental trade-offs associated with large infrastructure projects. Notably, while the proposed Baram Dam was eventually cancelled, the Baleh Dam, located within his constituency, proceeded with approval. Although such decisions may be justified on developmental grounds, they also illustrate how political incentives, institutional interests, and strategic considerations can shape governance outcomes within SCORE, consistent with the analytical perspective offered by PCT.

2. Lobbying and Rent-Seeking

Within PCT, rent-seeking describes how organised groups influence policy to secure economic advantages without contributing to productive activity. In SCORE, energy-related investments, particularly in hydropower development, such as Bakun Dam, and energy-intensive industries, like Samalaju Industrial Park (SIP), create significant economic opportunities that may attract lobbying by business groups, investors, and other stakeholders. Large projects involve significant financial stakes, encouraging advocacy that shapes policy priorities and resource allocation. Policymakers must balance these pressures with broader development goals, promoting growth and welfare while keeping the investment climate attractive to private capital. Policy outcomes thus reflect both public objectives and stakeholder interests, illustrating PCT's insight that governance decisions are shaped by incentives and strategic behaviour. Studies of major

energy projects confirm that lobbying and rent-seeking often arise where financial interests meet government discretion (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Sovacool, 2021).

3. Tender Awards and Cronyism

PCT illustrates how politicians and their associates derive benefits from public projects. Skewed tender awards, where contracts favour business partners, cronies, or family members, highlight the pervasive role of self-interest in governance. Balancing self-interest and the greater good is like choreographing a delicate dance for policymakers, especially within the context of SCORE. These decisions may not always align with genuine public interest. Politicians often shift positions depending on their role: advocating open tenders while in opposition, but defending direct negotiations when in government. In such contexts, limited information and reliance on intermediaries create opportunity for middlemen to influence decisions, leaving outcomes clouded by suspicion over accountability and fairness.

The presence of intermediaries or middlemen seeking financial gain is evident. Syndicates, labelled "black treasurers" by the MACC, target corrupt civil servants, manage illicit funds, and arrange pay-offs within agencies. According to MACC deputy chief commissioner Datuk Seri Ahmad Khusairi Yahaya, their rise has entrenched systemic corruption across public institutions (Malay Mail, 2026).

4. Budgetary Trade-offs

As SCORE channels major resources into infrastructure, policymakers must weigh short-term economic gains against long-term fiscal sustainability. Large hydropower projects demand substantial investment, yet studies show megaprojects often face cost overruns and uncertain returns. When financed through public spending or borrowing, they risk shifting financial burdens to future generations. These pressures intensify as Sarawak pursues its "Battery of ASEAN" ambition through the ASEAN Power Grid, where success depends on sustained demand and regional coordination. From a PCT perspective, highly visible projects may be prioritised despite uncertain long-term fiscal implications.

5. Intergenerational Equity and SCORE

SCORE represents an ambitious effort to drive industrialisation, economic growth, and regional competitiveness, but its reliance on large hydropower projects raises significant sustainability and equity concerns. Mega-dams reshape ecosystems, land use, and socio-economic structures, creating impacts that span generations and require policymakers to balance short-term gains with long-term environmental and social responsibility. Ensuring equitable benefit distribution is central, as major infrastructure projects involve substantial financial commitments and multiple stakeholders. Aligning SCORE with global sustainability frameworks, including the UN 2030 Agenda, reinforces accountability and inclusivity. Ultimately, SCORE's legitimacy depends on delivering sustainable energy while safeguarding environmental integrity and ensuring development outcomes are shared fairly.

6. Calibrating or Adjusting Expectations

PCT helps citizens interpret political behaviour by highlighting the role of self-interest in policy implementation. Political leaders operate within complex institutional environments where competing interests, administrative constraints, and electoral considerations shape decisions. Foundational works by Buchanan and Tullock, Olson, and Mueller show that political promises often reflect incentives rather than pure public welfare. In Sarawak, this aligns with the saying "Dengar boleh, percaya jangan", as pre-election pledges are frequently altered or unfulfilled. PCT reframes these shifts not simply as inconsistencies but as

strategic responses to pressures from voters, investors, and administrative institutions. This interplay shapes development projects under SCORE, revealing how promises are filtered through self-interest and institutional constraints.

7. PCT and SCORE: Challenges and Complexities in SCORE's Decision-Making

Within PCT, rent-seeking refers to organised groups influencing policy to secure economic advantages without contributing to productive activity. In SCORE, major energy investments—such as the Bakun Dam and energy-intensive industries in Samalaju Industrial Park—create lucrative opportunities that attract lobbying from investors and business groups. These large projects involve substantial financial stakes, shaping policy priorities and resource allocation. Policymakers must balance these pressures with broader development goals, illustrating PCT's insight that governance outcomes reflect incentives and strategic behaviour. However, SCORE's policymaking extends beyond PCT's scope. Diverse stakeholders, agencies, investors, and communities create competing interests that complicate coordination. Sarawak's ambition to become a renewable-energy hub requires reconciling growth, sustainability, and equity across governance levels. As a result, decisions often represent pragmatic compromises shaped by political, economic, and social realities. In short, SCORE's decision-making process is marked by challenges and complexity.

2.3.2 Institutional Power, Critical Race Theory and the Malaysian Public Service Commission

To complement the Public Choice perspective, this study draws on CRT to analyse how institutional structures, particularly the Malaysian PSC, shape representation, policy priorities, and governance outcomes within SCORE. Applying PCT together with CRT provides a more comprehensive explanation of governance outcomes: while PCT highlights how incentives, organisational survival, and self-interest influence policy decisions, CRT exposes the institutional and socio-political structures that determine who benefit from development policies and who remains marginalised. Viewed through these combined perspectives, SCORE's initiatives often reflect the interaction of political incentives, bureaucratic expansion, and structural inequalities rather than collective welfare objectives.

The expansion of RECODA and its multiple agencies illustrates how institutional interests and organisational survival influence development priorities. Institutional layering or adding new committees or plans without replacing existing structures, appears in initiatives such as the Organisational Anti-Corruption Plan (OACP) 2021–2025 and the "Special Committee" overseeing regional development agencies. While acknowledging governance weaknesses, these measures often serve as mechanisms of adaptation rather than reform, blurring lines of authority and duplicating oversight roles already performed by the Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak Implementation Monitoring Unit, ministries, and technical agencies. Such layering complicates governance outcomes by slowing coordination and diffusing accountability.

CRT strengthens this analysis by showing how institutional structures reproduce inequalities. The PSC's recruitment practices entrench Malay dominance in the civil service, with Bumiputera groups comprising nearly 90 per cent of civil servants. Despite official narratives of meritocracy, parliamentary debates and civil society critiques highlight systemic exclusion of minorities. In SCORE, this intersects with PCT's emphasis on self-interest and organisational behaviour, especially where large-scale projects displace Indigenous communities. Ultimately, SCORE's governance reflects compromises between growth

imperatives, sustainability concerns, and institutional constraints, filtered through self-interest, structural inequities, and contested narratives—a process neither wholly desirable nor undesirable.

3. RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven and narrative approach to examine the governance implications of SCORE. Rather than relying on surveys or interviews, it draws on document analysis and conceptual interpretation to construct a contextual account of SCORE's development and governance, guided by the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3. Public Choice Theory (PCT) is applied as a critical lens to examine how incentives, institutional behaviour, and stakeholder interests may shape policy decisions, particularly in relation to energy development and large infrastructure projects. Critical Race Theory (CRT) complements this analysis by examining how institutional structures, particularly the Malaysian Public Service Commission (PSC), may influence representation and governance outcomes.

The decision to avoid surveys or interviews is intentional, as governance dynamics such as self-interest, lobbying, and policy discretion are often difficult to capture through direct responses constrained by political sensitivities or lack of official documents. Instead, the study draws on publicly available sources, including policy documents, government reports, academic literature, and media coverage, to provide verifiable evidence. By combining qualitative document analysis with theory-based interpretation, the study offers a critical understanding of how governance incentives operate within SCORE, particularly in relation to energy policy, institutional power, and broader development objectives.

While this approach enables a critical and interpretive understanding of institutional incentives, stakeholder interests, and governance structures, it may also introduce a degree of subjectivity inherent in qualitative policy analysis. In addition, publicly available sources may not fully reveal internal decision-making processes within agencies such as RECODA. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as analytical insights into governance dynamics rather than definitive causal explanations. Nevertheless, this conceptual approach provides a useful framework for understanding the political economy and institutional complexities surrounding SCORE's implementation and its broader development implications.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of SCORE's governance reveals four interrelated themes: equity, autonomy, legitimacy, and sustainability rhetoric. Promoted as a catalyst for economic growth and industrialisation, SCORE has produced persistent expectation gaps between what the stakeholders proclaimed and actual results. Indigenous communities, NGOs, and local actors often demand equity, autonomy, and environmental management, yet these expectations are only partially addressed, resulting in uneven benefit distribution and displacement.

Governance implications emerge in the form of elite capture, procedural consultation, and legitimacy-securing rhetoric. Consultation processes frequently operate as symbolic exercises designed to secure compliance rather than enable realistic participation. Sustainability rhetoric, while prominent in official narratives, often functions as a legitimising device that obscures contradictions between development ambitions and social equity.

Integrating PCT and SAT provides sharper insight into these dynamics. PCT highlights how bureaucratic incentives, rent-seeking, and organisational survival shape governance decisions, while SAT explains how ambiguity in policy narratives is strategically deployed to manage expectations and deflect accountability. Together, these perspectives show that SCORE's governance is not simply about balancing development and sustainability, but about navigating self-interest, institutional incentives, and ambiguous rhetoric.

Ultimately, SCORE's governance reflects negotiated compromises rather than clear "win-win" outcomes. Political survival often requires acquiescing to investor demands, while legitimacy depends on rhetorical commitments to sustainability and equity. This interplay underscores the good governance conundrum: development ambitions pursued through institutional layering and ambiguous narratives obscure accountability, complicate coordination, and reproduce structural inequalities.

Similar governance contradictions are evident in other renewable energy corridors globally. Brazil's Amazon projects have displaced Indigenous communities while deploying sustainability rhetoric to secure legitimacy. Likewise, India's hydroelectric corridors reveal how bureaucratic incentives and ambiguous narratives complicate accountability and equity. These parallels underscore that SCORE's challenges are part of a broader global pattern where state-led development, institutional incentives, and strategic ambiguity intersect to produce contested governance outcomes.

5. IMPLICATION

These findings carry important implications for governance reform in Sarawak. First, addressing expectation gaps requires moving beyond procedural consultation toward genuine stakeholder inclusion, particularly Indigenous communities. Second, institutional layering must be replaced with clearer accountability structures to reduce duplication and improve coordination. Third, sustainability rhetoric should be matched with substantive policy commitments, ensuring that legitimacy is secured through transparency and equity rather than ambiguity. Together, these reforms would strengthen SCORE's governance by aligning development ambitions with social justice and long-term sustainability.

PCT suggests that politicians and bureaucrats are not only public servants but also actors motivated by personal and institutional interests such as electoral support, reputation, and career advancement. In SCORE's context, this perspective helps explain why policy decisions are often shaped by competing incentives rather than purely collective welfare. Although PCT is not without criticism, particularly its assumptions of rationality and self-interest, it remains a useful analytical tool for exposing governance dynamics that are often overlooked in official narratives. As Murray Hunter noted, "These administrative state institutions are the most powerful piece of government today, and this is rarely studied in depth by academics and political analysts." (FMT, 2024).

The expansion of SCORE from 70,709 km² to approximately 100,000 km², together with the growth of RECODA and its associated agencies, has created a more complex administrative structure involving multiple actors with differing interests. In such an environment, competition for resources, project approvals, and institutional influence becomes inevitable. Large-scale infrastructure initiatives, especially hydropower development, therefore reflect not only development objectives but also political agendas, institutional incentives, and the involvement of private business interests.

At the same time, the implications of these policies extend beyond administrative structures to local communities, particularly those affected by major projects such as the Bakun Dam and the Baram Dam. While these projects were initially justified as benefiting the wider population, they also raised important questions regarding land use, social equity, and long-term sustainability. In this sense, PCT does not provide definitive solutions but highlights the need for stronger governance mechanisms and further research to better understand how self-interest and public welfare interact in large-scale development programmes such as SCORE.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The implementation of SCORE demonstrates that self-interest is not merely an abstract academic concept but a central element shaping real policy outcomes. Viewed through the lens of PCT, policy decisions are influenced by the interaction of political incentives, bureaucratic structures, and stakeholder interests. However, PCT should not be treated as a universal explanation. Instead, it should be understood as a critical framework that helps reveal how governance decisions are negotiated in practice rather than designed in an idealised manner.

In this context, greater transparency in decision-making processes is essential so that citizens can better understand the rationale behind policy choices. Stronger accountability mechanisms are also required to balance private incentives with broader public welfare, particularly in long-term projects such as hydropower development where the consequences extend across generations. At the same time, public expectations of policymakers should remain realistic, as decision-makers operate within complex institutional and political constraints. Large development initiatives are rarely shaped by purely altruistic motives but by a combination of strategic interests, institutional pressures, and development ambitions.

Ultimately, the creation and evolution of SCORE reflect a pragmatic development strategy rather than a perfect policy model. Major projects, including those such as the Bakun Dam and the Baram Dam, illustrate how political, economic, and institutional considerations can lead to delays, revisions, or cancellations. While such outcomes may generate criticism, they also highlight the importance of continuous scrutiny and institutional reform. Future research should therefore continue to examine how self-interest and public welfare interact within SCORE, as understanding this relationship remains essential for improving governance and achieving more sustainable and equitable development outcomes in Sarawak.

In light of the governance challenges identified, the implementation of SCORE should place greater emphasis on transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Strengthening institutional oversight, improving transparency in procurement and project evaluation, and ensuring more balanced representation within key public institutions, particularly the Malaysian PSC, would help address some of the governance tensions highlighted through the lens of PCT and CRT. At the same time, future energy planning under SCORE should give greater priority to long-term sustainability, equitable benefit distribution, and meaningful stakeholder engagement, especially for local and indigenous communities. By aligning development ambitions with stronger governance practices, SCORE can move closer to achieving both economic growth and socially inclusive, sustainable development outcomes.

SCORE's ambition to emerge as a regional energy leader must be aligned with shifting global geoeconomic and geopolitical developments. Such alignment not only enhances Sarawak's competitiveness

but also reinforces governance accountability and sustainability, ensuring that development agendas serve both local communities and broader international imperatives. In summary, future research should not overlook PCT as a critical lens for analysing SCORE, particularly its capacity to reveal how elite interests, institutional self-interest, and ambiguous policy narratives may shape governance outcomes and undermine transparency, accountability, equity, participation, and sustainable development, including their racialised dimensions. This includes the critical aspects of geoeconomics and geopolitics.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with any parties.

9. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Timoti Chundi: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; **Tuan Nooriani Tuan Ismail**: Conceptualisation, methodology, and formal analysis; **Asiyah Kassim**: Conceptualisation, formal analysis, and editing.

10. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used **Grammarly** to check the grammar and improve the phrases and sentences. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

11. ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (Approval No: REC/08/2023 (PG/MR/295). All procedures involving human participants/animal subjects were in fulfilment of the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study.

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