



Countries

Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey,
Kenya, Somalia, Tunisia, Libya

Capabilities

Conflict, security, and violence

In depth

A borderland lens on hubs of protracted conflict

Borderlands in vulnerable regions are spaces where the nexus between conflict, crime, and politics are at their most dynamic. They are places of opportunity but also of heightened risk. Borderlands play a crucial role in today's conflicts, whereby communications, finance, crime, and ideas flow constantly across these. Such a complex environment makes these conflicts more resistant to resolution through negotiated settlements.¹

This unique set of characteristics represents a considerable challenge for policymakers, whose current suite of policy responses are ill equipped to deal specifically with borderlands. This is largely because they are confined to state-centred approaches. The very tension that arises from state-centric views that attach importance to the borderline, and the transnational flows that cross it in border areas, epitomise the challenge that we face in solving protracted cross-border conflicts through an international system that is predominantly defined by state borders. Borderland characteristics and the increasingly cross-border nature of conflict defy the traditionally state-centric 'rules of the game' by which most organisations and country structures operate, creating a significant challenge for engagement that has yet to be addressed in a meaningful way.

This paper sets out to meet this challenge by introducing a new epistemological approach to borderlands and hubs of protracted conflict that can enhance our understanding of the dynamics in such contexts. It aims to promote a useful framework for academia, practitioners, and policymakers alike to engage in these particularly complex environments.

About Oxford Policy Management's *In depth* series

Our *In depth* publications aim to share detailed learning and analysis from our practical experiences working with governments, funders, practitioners, and partners to achieve lasting, positive change through policy reform.

Applying a borderland lens

Central to the 'borderland lens' is the idea of adopting an interdisciplinary, people-centred approach that starts from the margins. It goes beyond the securitisation of borders to promote integrated policies and programmes informed by evidence of how cross-border conflict evolves and affects people.

Applying a 'borderland lens' means viewing *borderlands as a transnational unit of analysis* in which various systems of governance overlap. This approach draws on political geography, political science, and international relations. Building further on anthropological and sociological insights, the borderland lens explicitly focuses on the *sense of belonging of 'borderlanders'* to a transnational community and on how we can understand power relations from and across the margins. In doing so, a borderland perspective from the margins often contradicts views from the centre.

Even though such borderland perspectives have been debated in various disciplines, especially anthropology, geography, and peace

studies, conflict and security studies still adopt predominantly state-centric views. Similarly, views from the power centres of policymaking in the security and defence sector typically do not extend beyond the national borderline.² It is in the area of conflict and security however – both in academia and in practice – where a borderland lens can be particularly useful to mitigate human suffering:

Borderlands in regions affected by armed conflict and organised crime are extreme cases of a complex security landscape where violence, crime, and illicit governance converge. Applying a borderland lens on hubs of protracted conflict that starts from the margins thus gives insights into a *magnified version of the challenges that contemporary state-society relations face*, including the exclusion of marginalised communities. On one hand, it reveals how central states deal with those they consider at their margins, fuelling for example horizontal inequalities. On the other hand, the borderland lens can highlight the agency of those who are present in the peripheries, including borderland communities, non-state armed groups, and other actors transiting these spaces.

¹ United Nations; World Bank (2018) 'Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict'. Washington, DC: World Bank.

² Idler, Annette (2018), Preventing Conflict Upstream: Impunity and Illicit Governance across Colombia's Borders, *Defence Studies*, 2018, 18 (1).

Understanding ‘the border effect’³

Borders in vulnerable regions are characterised by the propensity for impunity, weak state governance systems, and a low-risk/high-opportunity environment. The confluence of these factors leads to the ‘border effect’, which intensifies people-centred insecurities, thus contributing to a complex security landscape and an environment that drives the illicit economy.

We can trace the border effect along four dimensions:

- The border is a *facilitator* for violent crime, due to its ‘filter mechanism’. Not just commercial flows, ideas, and everyday life, but also violent non-state actors spill across borders while law enforcement agents are constrained by national sovereignty, increasing the vulnerability of local communities
- It is a *magnet* to those involved in illicit businesses due to the profit to be made from illicit cross-border activities, impacting strongly on people’s local livelihoods and economic opportunities.
- It is a *deterrent* to trust relationships between actors involved in illicit businesses across borders and thus, by extension, between those who provide illicit economic opportunities and local communities who depend on them. This fuels a general environment of mistrust.
- It is a *disguise* for nuanced forms of violence. Contrary to state-centric views that stigmatise borderlands as generally violent spaces, the

transnational borderland lens facilitates the study of how the geography and political economy of borderlands produce distinct forms of insecurities and uncertainties that fuel grievances.

Taking into account the border effect will support programming and policy to become *border-sensitive* and better understood by policymakers and practitioners.

In addition, applying the ‘border effect’ framework suggests a number of ways in which vulnerabilities of borderland communities and other stakeholders can be turned into opportunities, as outlined below.

Addressing the border as facilitator by strengthening cross-border security and judicial cooperation through improved information sharing and accountability measures.

Capacity building on conflict management and conflict sensitivity is one way in which organisations are promoting information sharing and cooperation amongst actors in borderlands. Such an approach has been used for over a decade at the Kenya-Somalia border, where police officers working in border towns like Mandera are at the forefront of violent actions involving groups like al-Shabab.⁴

³ For a detailed discussion of the border effect’s four dimensions see Idler, Annette (2019) *Borderland Battles. Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia’s War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ For more information on this project and the work of DDG on the Kenya–Somalia border, please refer to <https://danishdemininggroup.dk/danish-demining-group/where-we-work/kenya>

Addressing the border as deterrent by countering environments of mistrust with cross-border social cohesion programming and cross-border dialogue

Dialogues between communities and security providers in border areas are proving to be a successful way to build trust and common ground, with the aim of facilitating cooperation. An example of such an approach is found in southeast Tunisia, where dialogue in border towns addresses community security and resilience, aiming to improve relationships between communities and security providers. One of the priorities identified through the dialogue is the need to mitigate the risks faced by local youth across the borders. This initiative has now expanded to the sister towns in Libya, to respond holistically to historical and existing socio-economic and security dynamics.⁵ Community and security provider feedback on the dialogue fora is very positive, and there are indications that relations – and security – have improved. Dialogue has effectively brought stakeholders together to identify and discuss cross-border issues, opening up great potential for informing policies and initiatives to reduce, prevent, and mitigate insecurity arising directly from the borderlands.

Addressing the border as magnet by promoting legal economic cross-border activities, cross-border trade frameworks, and local economic development to curb the illicit economy.

Social protection measures for refugees living in camps across border areas, such as cash transfers, highlight the dynamics of borders as magnets. Evidence from Oxford Policy Management's research shows that in places like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, where refugees are faced with limited economic opportunities in their place of refuge, such households adopt mixed

livelihood strategies. As with most post-conflict and fragile settings, economic recovery often leads to greater economic opportunities. However, what lags behind is the provision of basic social services. Conversely, refugee camps offer social services and protection but no economic opportunities. Hence, refugees move back and forth across borders for economic opportunities and protection, on one side, and access to social services, on the other.⁶ Cash transfer programmes are therefore building on these dynamics to promote legal economic activities within camps and across borders, in many cases working with the private sector. However, legal barriers (such as lack of work permits) have a detrimental effect in fuelling the illicit and informal economy.

Addressing the border as disguise by transforming our view of borderlands as ungoverned to partly illicitly governed spaces and thereby enhancing understanding of risk and resilience at the border.

Organisations working in borderlands are increasingly using needs assessments at borders as a tool for more effective programming. For instance, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and DDG developed a Border Security Needs Assessment (BSNA), which provides a succinct and comprehensive summary of the needs and challenges faced by (cross-border) border communities and security providers.⁷ The BSNA identifies security risks, relationships, attitudes, and perceptions of border communities and security providers towards each other, factors that influence community–security provider relationships, as well as levels of trust and conflict between communities and other actors in border areas in a country and across borders. In addition to ensuring a context- and needs-based programme design, the BSNA helps facilitate national and local ownership and buy-in, and provides a common vision of challenges and ways forward.

⁵ For more information, please refer to

<https://danishdemininggroup.dk/danish-demining-group/where-we-work/tunisia>

⁶ Oxford Policy Management (2014) 'The Impact of Cash Assistance on Reducing Negative Coping Mechanisms among Syrian Refugees in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon'. Oxford.

⁷ An example of the latest BSNA for the Sahel is available at

<https://danishdemininggroup.dk/media/1309834/Border-Security-Needs-Assessment-2014-ENG.pdf>

Border-sensitive programming

Adopting a borderland lens in practice means that programming in hubs of protracted conflict needs to be informed by *transnational evidence* rather than evidence limited by state boundaries. Under a people-centred approach, this requires integrating the perspectives of individuals across borders, as such individuals often feel a stronger sense of belonging to a transnational community rather than the central state. Such an approach also allows researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to highlight different voices that help unpack power relations at borders.

Border-sensitive programming seeks to achieve positive change by strengthening the capacity of local communities and their security providers to ensure community safety and effective border management; enabling the building of trust between community members, security providers, and local authorities; and channelling key local-level perceptions, experiences, and priorities on conflict and security into national policymaking and security governance fora.

Border-sensitive programming can be promoted through communities of practice on borderlands, where evidence is accessible. Such spaces represent an opportunity for national and local-level interests around people-centred border security to converge. There is a growing recognition of the issue, which is permeating other development agendas. More than 15 programmes are operating across borders in the Horn of Africa, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Sahel regions, which demonstrates that cross-border programming is currently integrated under larger development programmes targeting livelihood creation, climate change, resilience, or peacebuilding. Donors such as the US and the EU support such integrated approaches to tackle borderland issues, often highlighting the importance of coordination as a key programming challenge and opportunity. Nonetheless, this work is still incipient, and much more needs to be done to change policymaking that stops at the borderline into policymaking that accounts for dynamics in transnational borderlands.



Mainstreaming border sensitivity

Mainstreaming border sensitivity in policymaking on protracted conflicts is essential in order to address the most pressing security challenges of the 21st century. Cross-border dynamics in protracted conflicts are at the heart of policy agendas such as forced migration, radicalisation, and global security.

Governments already recognise that addressing transnational challenges requires transnational, rather than national, solutions, but this is not enough. Balancing the needs of governments' domestic security agendas and promoting peace abroad requires an additional effort to focus on those regions that are most vulnerable – borderlands. Highlighting the vulnerabilities of borderland communities that arise from the border effect across the globe – not just in specific locations – allows us to demonstrate to international communities that greater awareness of borderlands is beneficial to everyone.

A borderland lens in policymaking also adds value more broadly. State–society relations are at stake across the globe. There is an increasing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', the ones at the centre and the excluded. Understanding these challenges in a magnified way in borderlands in protracted conflicts can be an innovative starting point to move towards a more secure world.

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