



# BORDERLANDS IN AFRICA

## LITERATURE OVERVIEW AND KEY TERMS



### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This literature overview provides the theoretical foundation for a borderlands approach at UNDP. It summarizes major contributions to our understanding of African borderland communities – both academic and in policy frameworks – and illustrates their key concepts with real-life, contemporary examples.

**Borderlands are the broader territorial margins of nation states, regions where border contact is a central feature of economic and political life.**

In Africa they include the Virunga territories of Rwanda, Uganda, and DRC, the tri-border Manderu Triangle between Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, the Liptako-Gourma region between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the Chad Basin between Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and the Central African Republic (CAR), and the Karamoja cluster between Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan.

These regions are both (1) sub-national – in that they are made up of provinces of a larger state territory, and (2) international – in that they are comprised of territories within multiple states. This poses a significant challenge for the existing architecture of UNDP, especially its country offices (COs), where the gathering of information and the implementation of programmes are generally confined to one national territory at a time.

The analysis of borderlands calls for a new approach, one that ‘joins up’ sub-regions across international borders and that treats them as distinct political entities, not as vacuums of power. Violence, commerce, and governance in territories close to a border are profoundly influenced by what happens on the other side of it, and the livelihoods of borderland inhabitants are woven into cross-border dynamics of trade and mobility. National initiatives can often be blind to this, resulting in limited coordination and mutual suspicion across borders.

[Section One](#) of this briefing paper provides an introduction to borderlands and practical definitions for key terms – borders, borderlands, frontiers, and brokerage.

[Section Two](#) offers a framework to locate borderland regions in their proper historical context. This is not only essential for understanding the trajectory of particular sub-regions, but it also provides the basis for comparative research that may yield a toolkit for borderland programmes across the continent.

[Section Three](#) focuses on limited state authority, and the practical implications of working in an environment where the state is a distant entity and where other non-state groups can perform many of its key functions independently. Illustrative examples include the territories of North Kivu and Ituri in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Gedo, Middle Juba, and Lower Juba Districts of Somalia.

[Section Four](#) focuses on the prevalence, drivers, and forms of violence common to borderlands. Violence in these regions takes a great many forms, involves state and externally funded militias, and is related to illegal activities such as cattle rustling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, gun smuggling, auto-theft, and terrorism, often involving supply chains that pose a threat to governance throughout the continent and further afield. Examples are drawn from the Liptako-Gourma region and the Chad Basin region.

[Section Five](#) focuses on cross-border trade and unpacks how asymmetries across borders are exploited as resources, how informal trade is essential to the borderland economy, and how informal trade influences demographic patterns and rapid urban growth. Examples are drawn from the extensive cross-border informal economy of the Great Lakes region, where over one hundred thousand traders cross borders between Rwanda, DRC, and Uganda daily.

The Africa Borderland Unit is part of a broad re-programming at UNDP – led by the Regional Bureau for Africa – to support policies in the margins of the state. The aim is to promote an integrated response to the challenges confronting these regions, and to inform, support, and maintain strong partnerships with UN-wide initiatives including UNECA and R-UNSDG Africa, as well as continental and regional partners including the African Union, the Africa CDC, and regional mechanisms such as IGAD, EAC, COMESA, ICGLR, ECOWAS and the Lake Chad Basin Commission.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, territories close to international borders operate differently – politically, socially, and economically – from state capitals and their surrounding hinterlands. These peripheral regions have a lot in common with territories across the border, into which they are networked by personal, familial, and business relationships. A borderlands approach to international development focuses on communities in the margins of adjacent states, rather than on ministries and organizational headquarters at their centers.

Borderland analysis has been understood differently at different points in time and has had only a limited impact on developmental policy to date. This literature overview aims to provide conceptual clarity, to highlight the key issues involved in borderland analysis, and to lay the groundwork for policies targeting African borderlands in the Sahel, the Chad Basin, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes regions. It focuses on themes of stabilization and peace-building, and on how these processes are adopted or resisted in the territorial margins of states. At its core are three recurring themes:

- 1. Borderland blindness and the risk of neglecting border regions:** Development organizations are inclined to ‘think like a state’, dividing the world into national territories, overlooking other forms of social and spatial boundaries, downplaying the autonomy of micro-regions, and engaging in only limited cross-border project work.<sup>1</sup> The neglect of borderland territories can be seen in the state-by-state division of country teams and programmes, the headquartering of offices in capital cities, and the collection and analysis of data on a national level. Borderland regions often do not receive the kind of targeted policies required to be effective, and more needs to be done to meet the core commitment of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda to ‘leave no one behind’.
- 2. Borderland regions as centers of power in their own right, not power vacuums:** Peripheral territories generate modes of governance that rival those of the state. This calls for a significant change in mindset, a move away from the idea of a ‘power vacuum’ in borderlands to a position that highlights the relationships between state capitals and borderland authorities and identifies the brokers who facilitate their interactions. Extending state authority into borderland communities is not guaranteed to bring peace, stability, and economic integration. Too often, it does the opposite, provoking violent backlashes from armed non-state militias, and allowing elite groups to capture state-led stabilization initiatives, diverting them to serve private interests.<sup>2</sup>
- 3. International borders work as resources for borderland communities:** The ability of borderland communities to take advantage of the border depends on certain key factors: (1) how close they are, both politically and geographically, to the power centers of the state; (2) how militarily and economically significant the border is for state authorities; (3) how much social, political, and economic asymmetry exists across the border; (4) how internally organized borderland communities are; and (5) how aligned borderland communities are both to state authorities and to populations across the border.<sup>3</sup>

This literature overview is divided into four sections, each concerned with a different element of borderland analysis: (1) borderlands in historical context; (2) borderland politics; (3) instability and insecurity; (4) cross-border trade. The analysis is informed by UN Sustainable Development Goal Sixteen, which aims to ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.’<sup>4</sup> Supporting materials are drawn from the fields of political science, political economy, human geography, social anthropology, and history.

### Core Definitions

In order to provide a strong conceptual framework for borderland programming, it is essential to establish core definitions and to be consistent in the use of key terms.

## 2.1. Borders and Boundaries

- 1. ‘Border’ refers to the lines used to distinguish between states according to international law.**  
Borders function as both barriers and conduits. They tend to be semi-permeable, allowing certain goods and people to cross while denying passage to others. The physical embodiment of borders varies greatly, and vast stretches of them are unrepresented on the ground, either by natural features or by human infrastructures. Where a physical embodiment of the border does exist, it is not so much the watch towers, fences, and check-points that constitute it. Instead, it is made real by the repeated performances – the borderwork – of actors who either strengthen or subvert it.  
Importantly, borderlines found on maps represent two borders, one for each of the states whose territory they demarcate, and border management tends to be a joint exercise.<sup>5</sup> The so-called Rwanda-DRC border, for example, is actually made up of the outer edge of Rwanda, a small area of no-mans-land, and the outer edge of DRC.
- 2. ‘Boundary’ is a less specific term, used to refer to non-territorial lines of distinction.**  
Boundaries represent societal cleavages between the categories of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ and can be activated by violent entrepreneurs in times of conflict.<sup>6</sup> In many borderlands across Africa, these social boundaries do not line up with the geographical borders of nation states.

## 1.1 Borderlands and Frontiers

3. **'Borderland' refers to the broader territorial margins of nation states, regions where border contact is a central feature of economic and political life.**

The analysis of borderlands, unlike that of borders, focuses on the communities located near states' territorial limits rather than on international relations between nation state governments. Many of the communities are characterised by limited state authority, mobile populations, intractable conflict, and weak public sector infrastructures. Examples of borderlands in Africa include the Kivu provinces of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the tri-border 'Mandera Triangle' between Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, the Liptako-Gourma region between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and the Karamoja cluster between Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan. The map below highlights prominent borderland regions in Africa:

Map 1. African borderlands



4. **'Frontier' describes spaces where territorial and institutional penetration of the modern state has not been completed.**

Borderlands should be distinguished from frontiers, an altogether different concept. The term frontier is tied to a language of state expansion and modernisation. Borderlands represent one sub-geography of a state's frontier, often displaying frontier logics such as limited state capacity and the economic subversion of central authorities by local trading networks.<sup>7</sup> The definition of these terms has been the source of confusion in the development of borderland analysis, not helped by the way they blur across languages - 'frontier' (English), 'frontera' (Spanish) and 'frontière' (French), for example, are not synonymous.<sup>8</sup>

The diagram below offers a simple representation of the borderland-frontier distinction, in which green dots represent political centres and the red line is a border. Note that the frontier space does not require the existence of a border.

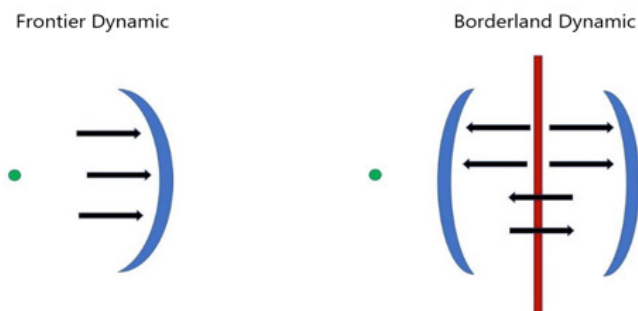


Figure 1. Frontier and borderland dynamics

Borderlands tend to be viewed either (1) from the 'inside-out', looking at the extension of state control outwards from the capital city or (2) 'outside-in', looking at the modes of governance, economic logics, and social structures created by the presence of a border, and how these influence surrounding territories. Those looking inside-out may include areas of limited or contested statehood (frontiers), even where there is no border – the rainforests of central Angola, for example, or violent inner-city neighbourhoods in Bamako, could be considered frontiers, but not borderlands.

## 2.3. Brokers and Brokerage

5. **'Brokers' are network specialists – individuals or organizations who shape how power is imposed, negotiated, and resisted.<sup>9</sup>**

The economy and politics of borderland territories tend to span the local, national, regional, and international scales. At times, groups operating within them circumvent state authorities entirely, for example in the sale of contraband such as ivory or animal trophies to organizations or governments outside of the national territory. Brokers are key to these interactions, and they facilitate negotiations across borders, between the state centre and its margins, and between marginal spaces and international actors and markets. 'Apex' brokers, as those who constitute the spine of a political system, linking the centre to core coalitions and constituencies.<sup>10</sup> They have privileged access to key figures in the central state, to major on-budget or off-budget resources, and to crucial sources of information and intelligence.

Borderlands vary in their degree of penetrability for external actors, ranging from fortress-like to web-like structures.<sup>11</sup> Working closely with local brokers is often necessary to engage with these regions. It requires a significant degree of discretion in identifying appropriate groups and individuals.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BORDERLANDS IN AFRICA

The historical trajectories of African borderlands drive insecurity and under-development to the present day, and a better understanding of them provides the basis for more locally and politically sensitive interventions. Colonial borders drawn at the time of the Berlin Conference in 1884-85 did not correspond well with pre-existing ethnic, linguistic, social, and political boundaries in Africa, where over forty per cent of the 80,000km land border network is comprised of parallels, meridians, and equidistant lines – purely geographical constructs.<sup>12</sup> In the most absurd cases, such between the border between DRC and Rwanda, no European had set eyes on the 89km long Lake Kivu when a European initiative demarcated a border to run through it. The establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 guaranteed the preservation of colonial borders even when African states came under independent leadership.<sup>13</sup> Since then, historical analyses emphasize how perceptions of African borders have changed over time, and point to new issues arising in an environment of global economic change and re-alignment.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1. The longer a border is in place, the greater the impact it has on the surrounding human landscape.

- The characteristics of particular borderlands are heavily determined by their historical development, and they are not all the same. Choices made by colonial regimes have enduring consequences in these regions, especially in terms of the location of capital cities, of road, railway, and port construction, and of the location of border posts – all of which create limiting path dependencies. After the independence wave in the 1960s, the differing economic strategies adopted by African governments have been important in shaping patterns of cross-border trade, and in how borderland communities engage with the border.<sup>15</sup>
- The impact of borders is most notable not only in the development of transportation networks, urban settlements, and market infrastructure, but also in the social divisions that are produced by different education systems across the border. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to alter borders over time.<sup>16</sup>
- Even borders that were originally ‘arbitrary’ and intra-ethnically divisive, tend to be not only accepted by borderland residents across Africa, but are also reproduced in their social and economic activities.<sup>17</sup> To say that borders are external impositions with no bearing on the social sphere ignores the livelihoods that have come to depend on them. Over one hundred years since the imposition of colonial borders, national identities have been shaped and entrenched across Africa, especially in borderland regions where citizens of neighbouring states interact daily.<sup>18</sup> Understanding the specific trajectories of different borderlands is essential for policies to be effective.

### 2.2. The claim that borders in Africa disregard the underlying social, linguistic, and ethnic maps of the continent implies that these borders could, or should, be moved.

- Moving borders is a potentially explosive idea in hotspots of secessionism and irredentism – Angola’s Cabinda Province, for example, or the Bakassi Region of Cameroon. The emergence of Globalisation theory has led to persistent claims that borders are inconsequential and undesirable and are subverted by movements of people and capital.<sup>19</sup> In fact, depending on their material interests, borderland residents have consistently defended the need for even the most “illogical” borders - there is very little support in Gambia, for example, for closer union with Senegal – despite the extremely unusual appearance and history of the border between them.
- Efforts to redraw national boundaries in general have been met with considerable resistance, and rates of secessionism in Africa are extremely low.<sup>20</sup> Since the independence wave in the 1960s, no border change in Africa has occurred without the consent of concerned states (the enforced consent of Sudan to the emergence of South Sudan in 2011 is the only exception, and was a remarkable event in world history).

## 3. BORDERLAND POLITICS, THE DISTANT STATE, AND ALTERNATIVE MODES OF GOVERNANCE

### 3.1 Borderland governance – core characteristics

The governance of borderland regions has two distinctive characteristics:

- **A situation of limited statehood**, in which central state actors, ostensibly sovereign, are reduced to being merely one actor among many vying for political authority. Although state and non-state competition for political authority is by no means specific to borderlands, these regions provide empowering opportunities that often intensify the contest.<sup>21</sup>

The notorious pronouncement ‘*débrouillez-vous*’ (*fend for yourselves*) aimed at Congolese citizens and civil servants in outlying provinces in the 1970’s, and the subsequent decades of instability within those regions, is a prominent illustration of the problem. In the period since, non-state organizations have been involved in performing some of the most fundamental state roles, including tax collection and the provision of security.<sup>22</sup>

- **A situation in which the presence of an international border shapes economic and social life**, producing a local mode of governance tied intimately to the cross-border movement of people and goods. Over one hundred thousand people cross borders in the Great Lakes Region each day, for example, deriving livelihoods from informal trade that both the traders and their dependents rely on, and centering social life onto the border, its proximity, the ease of passage across it, and the economic opportunities it confers.<sup>23</sup>

The existence of a border gives rise to a variety of roles: border guard, customs agent, smuggler, cross-border trader, and so on.<sup>24</sup> Among these roles, unique relationships are established that organise society and produce hierarchical networks. What results is a hybrid mode of governance, distanced from state control, that emerges in competition with powers at the centre.<sup>25</sup> In extreme cases, the weakened state in borderland regions can be harnessed, or ‘colonised’, to serve the interests of non-state actors.

Distanced from state control, what emerges is a complex form of governance, in competition with state authorities. The extension of state control into borderland regions tends to be both difficult and expensive. Often it is not a high priority, and governments are content to consolidate their authority over internal urban centres and capital cities.<sup>26</sup> To interpret the structures of power specific to borderland regions, it is necessary to examine in detail the points of contact between different political spheres, between central, municipal, religious, and traditional authorities, and their interactions with violent actors such as armies, police forces, militias, and vigilantes.

### 3.2 Relationships between central and municipal authorities

Territories close to state borders tend to be administered by decentralised, municipal authorities. These can provide the administrative infrastructure to improve economic opportunities, bring services closer to people, and include borderland communities in decision-making. However, decentralisation also produces common fault-lines based on:

- **State expansion:** Policies of decentralisation are often regarded as Trojan horses, appearing to support local autonomy, while in fact extending state bureaucracy into borderland areas. Due to their adherence to state bureaucratic procedures, decentralised authorities can appear to be puppets controlled by the state. Where the state’s legitimacy is contested, the result is instability. The effects range from situations where municipal central authorities are deeply suspicious of one another, such as in Goma, DRC, to those where municipal authorities are violently rejected by borderland communities and armed actors, as in the Gedo District of Somalia.
- **Rents and gatekeeping revenue:** Controlling border posts is a lucrative business. Local elites can capture municipal power and deploy the symbols of centralised statehood to advance their private agendas.
- **Rival state agencies:** Central authorities maintain a presence at the border, in the form of customs agents, security

personnel, and other national agencies involved in the management of national borders. Their relationship with municipal government is often strained, especially if they are in competition to extract rents from the borderland community.

Close to the border, gatekeeping revenue can be extracted, among other means, through formal and informal tariffs, visa expenses, negotiated customs duties, and outright extortion. In contexts where both the authority and the economy of neighbouring states are weak, the emphasis is on performance rather than control, gate-keeping and taxation rather than service provision. This can produce competition, not only between different security, healthcare, and administrative organisations present at the border, but also between their agents and the national entities they claim to represent. For example, police and military representatives may compete both with each other, and with higher ranking members of the own service based elsewhere. The resulting fragmentation of state authority that results from this is a common feature in African borderlands.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.3 Overlapping authorities – chieftaincies, religious authorities, militias, and vigilantes

The relationship between central and municipal state authorities and powerful borderland groups ranges from violent confrontation to a complex form of inter-dependency.<sup>28</sup> Border regions often question the legitimacy of the states that claim to govern them, and tend to ignore, contest, or subvert state power. The fact that state officials generally do not perceive their role from the perspective of the border region, but rather make proposals that apply to the nation as a whole, is a key source of conflict.

- **Contested state authority:** In many borderlands, the state is a distant presence, and its sovereign authority needs to be constantly reasserted. Interactions between officials and borderland inhabitants can be problematic. Different power holders, militias, vigilantes, religious authorities, traditional authorities, and others, struggle over controlling the allegiance of what are often scattered and ethnically diverse populations.<sup>29</sup> In the face of these unpredictable configurations of power, claims to sovereignty are extremely difficult to uphold.
- **Sub-regional autonomy:** The fragmentation of state authority is often accompanied by a high degree of sub-regional autonomy, driven by (1) a history of failed state intervention and attempts to manipulate regional affairs; (2) the formation of borderland political movements based on economic concerns that result from long periods of marginalisation by the central government; (3) the strength of ethnic or regional identities among borderland residents, and; (4) the internal cohesion and effectiveness of groups claiming to represent the sub-region.<sup>30</sup>

When all of these conditions apply, borderland regions can function with close to total autonomy, and local groups may take on functions intimately tied to statehood, notably taxation, the provision of security, and the arbitration of local disputes.<sup>31</sup>

- Performing governance: state operations at the border are often more performative than practical.<sup>32</sup> Border guards and customs officials prominently display symbols of the state – presidential portraits, epaulets, and government insignia, among others – using these as a currency that they trade for social and material benefit.<sup>33</sup> It is not uncommon to see what should be functional items reduced to mere symbols: computers that are disconnected; thumb and fingerprint scanners with no recording database; and slanting piles of unread immigration forms.<sup>34</sup> Many borders are effectively policed simply because most border crossers find it advantageous to play along, at least most of the time, with the legal regime of control imposed by the bordering states and their agents.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.4 Negotiated governance and borderland brokerage

Borderland districts provide a wealth of opportunities for mediators, traders, and other go-betweens, and a growing literature focuses on non-state brokers as pivotal actors in the margins of the state.<sup>36</sup> Brokers live in a shadowy world of sub-state governance.<sup>37</sup> They form key links in borderland networks that connect markets, different parts of government, and substate actors on both sides of international borders.<sup>38</sup> They have the ability to navigate the kinds of border and boundary synapses characteristic of these regions. A range of actors perform this function: community leaders, mid-level politicians, businessmen, administrators, and religious leaders.

Influencing change in borderlands requires the brokering of alliances among the national media, political parties, international non-governmental organizations, and elements of civil society. International and multi-national organizations need to develop the appropriate procedures to identify, coordinate with, and where appropriate remunerate brokers. This involves first seeking out intersections and disagreements between groups, and then identifying the individuals who can bridge gaps, build connections, and ensure that people and goods continue to flow.

### 3.5 Cross-border migration, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Borders act as conduits as well as barriers and encourage large movements of people and goods as much as they stop them.<sup>39</sup> Cross border migration can take several distinct forms (below), and depending on conditions, it can facilitate cross-border integration, but also act as a source of political instability.

- **Daily labor migration:** there is a wide range of economic activities that drive traders, resellers, and other economic actors to cross borders, for example an estimated one hundred thousand Congolese, Rwanda, and Ugandan women cross borders in the Great Lakes region each day to trade in foodstuffs. Activities such as these often form the basis of a survival economy, not only for the traders, but also for their dependents.

Cross-border labor migration may also involve both informal and illegal practices, as discussed in Section 6.1, below.

- **Urban cross-border migration:** across Africa, there are countless examples of twin cities, such as Goma-Gisenyi in DRC and Rwanda, and Aflao-Lomé in Ghana and Togo. These cities merge together across the border running through their densely populated neighborhoods. In this kind of urban arrangement, there are often movements of people taking advantage of asymmetries in market prices, living costs, and employment prospects. Over fifty thousand people cross the border between Goma and Gisenyi every day, one of the highest rates of daily cross-border migration in the world.<sup>40</sup>
- **Migration driven by services:** cross-border asymmetries in services are also a significant driver of cross-border mobility. Borderland residents cross borders to access financial institutions, educational and healthcare facilities, sport venues, bars and nightclubs, hairdressers and other basic services, or to visit friends and family. These drivers of cross-border mobility are often overlooked in economic analyses that focus narrowly on economic features of the borderland environment (e.g. labor markets, salaries, and the cost of living).
- **Long distance migration:** Running alongside and often overlapping with shorter-distance regional migration patterns, there are long distance migration routes that involve migrants crossing a great many borders. This can be done legally, with the appropriate visas and paperwork, or illegally with the help of human traffickers. In many African borderlands, human trafficking is big business, and can involve organized criminal networks that work simultaneously in other areas of the black market. Long distance migrants are extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by these groups.<sup>41</sup>
- **Refugees and IDPs:** The idea of crossing borders is inherent in the term refugee. Refugees can be driven across borders by a range of factors, most notably conflict, political repression, public health crises, and natural disasters.<sup>42</sup> Often they are unable to travel further than the immediate borderlands adjacent to their country of origin, and large refugee camps such Dadaab in north-west Kenya are a common feature of borderland regions. Unrecorded refugee populations can often be found in informal settlements surrounding border towns, especially in regions prone to conflict. For similar regions, IDPs may also cluster in borderland regions and border towns, either waiting for permissions to cross the border, or seeking safety in urban centers close to it.
- **Nomadic communities:** In borderlands such as those in the Sahel, the Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa, nomadic, pastoralist communities make up a significant component of the population. The mobility of these groups creates unique challenges for borderland programming, especially when seasonal migration patterns involve crossing unmarked sections of international borders.

## 4. BORDERLAND INSTABILITY AND INSECURITY

### 4.1 Forms and prevalence of borderland violence

A combination of their historical, political, and economic characteristics have left African borderlands rife with insecurity.<sup>43</sup> Violence in these regions takes a great many forms. Civil conflicts involving state and externally funded militias may be related to illegal activities such as cattle rustling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, gun smuggling, auto-theft, and terrorism. Some of the continent's most notoriously violent groups, including regional branches of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Liptako-Gouram Region, Boko Haram in the Chad Basin, the Lord Resistance Army in Central Africa, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in West Africa and the Maghreb, and Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, take advantage of the socioeconomic context of border regions.

- **Inter-state wars and civil conflicts:** Inter-state wars such as those between DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda in the late 1990s, while extremely destructive, have been a relatively rare occurrence. Low grade civil conflicts are much more common in borderlands, often involving loose coalitions of actors. Conflicts of this sort spread inward and outward throughout inter-state regions and often endure for long periods without resolution. Flare-ups of insecurity in peripheral regions are never completely spontaneous or independent of past cycles of exclusion, unrest, and violence. They need to be understood in the context of each region's specific history.
- **Divisive narratives and structural violence:** Narratives focused on cultural, religious, and political differences between borderland residents and their co-nationals can simmer in the background, provoking dangerous unrest even in the absence of outright violence. Rather than being alleviated, these narratives can become entrenched by traditional peace-building and transition processes, especially where they involve a national conversation about whether borderland communities are dedicated to the national project. Any evaluation of security or attempt to reduce violence needs to begin with a vernacular understanding of the day-to-day experience of borderland inhabitants who are often poor and politically excluded.<sup>44</sup>

### 4.2 Drivers of conflict and violence

Widely different violent groups can be mobilized in similar ways. A recent study of Boko Haram (in Nigeria), and the Lord's Resistance Army (in Uganda and DRC) highlight similarities in (i) the sub-national variations of political inclusion that leave the territories controlled by these groups heavily marginalised; (ii) the concentration of a range of historical, political, and economic local grievances; (iii) the mobilisation of young men under a broad narrative of identity and victimhood.<sup>45</sup> The study argues that these two violent groups share similar geographic profiles. They have spread into marginal areas that are difficult to access due to limited infrastructure, and that offer avenues of retreat across borders. Both groups sustain themselves through violent strategies of recruitment and the victimization of civilians, which work best when the groups operate in territories outside their original support base.<sup>46</sup> Although each conflict must be understood in its own context, comparisons highlight certain characteristics that are common to violence in borderlands.

- **Violence and state-building:** Security is a heavily politicized issue, and development practitioners. They have been reluctant to confront the relationship between developmental policy and security head-on. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, for example, contain no reference to security. There is a persistent narrative in much of developmental literature, in which the provision of security is considered a self-evident public good, violence is regarded as 'development in reverse', inseparable from state fragility. The situation in borderlands suggests a counter-narrative.<sup>47</sup> In these regions, state-building often follows a coercive, rather than a capital intensive path, and states attempting to consolidate control over their territories tend to encounter the most resistance in borderlands.<sup>48</sup>
- **Weak and predatory state security forces:** Despite their relative weakness in borderland regions, state authorities tend to be heavily implicated in violent activities relating to state-building and resource extraction. Competition between state police and military, non-state militias, and other dissident armed groups can result both in direct armed confrontations and in the targeting of rival civilian populations seen as partisans or informants.<sup>49</sup> In many regions, including the Horn, the Sahel, the Great Lakes, and the Chad Basin, state authorities generally lack the capacity, funding, and at times the political will to assert the government monopoly of violence and police their borders.
- **State security personnel in borderlands are often recruited from elsewhere in the country:** When armed personnel are seen to represent different religious, ethnic, clan, or regional identities from the populations they are charged with policing, mutual suspicion may arise. These different group affiliations may limit the state's ability to gather information, and may even provoke violent resistance. In situations of limited state authority, governments may attempt to impose their will on borderland districts by franchising legitimate violence to non-state actors such as militias, bandits and others.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the use of violence may shift from targeted to indiscriminate, from policing to ethnic cleansing.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, situations of limited statehood provide space for armed non-state actors to supply services commonly associated with the state. These may include taxation, road fees, and protection, and the enforcement of payments is often established through violent means.
- **Power and violence in borderlands tend to be intimately tied to patterns of trade and networks of traders.** African is prone to so-called 'new wars' (also known as 'hybrid wars' or 'wars of the third kind')<sup>52</sup>, where resource extraction is a greater priority to combatants than outright victory. Conflicts of this sort can become protracted, producing low grade violence over the course of years or even decades, blurring the distinction between acts of crime and acts of war. They are characterized by: (1) attempts by all sides to achieve political, as opposed to physical, control of the population, often through fear and terror; (2) violence funded by local predation rather than national budgets; and (3) an emphasis on identity rather than ideology as a recruitment and mobilising force.<sup>53</sup>

Importantly, the violent actors involved in this form of conflict tend to have strong regional, international, and global connections that involve markets, funders, and providers of the key materials that are required to sustain their activities. It is important to approach these groups at different scales of analysis, focusing from the broadest to the narrowest. For example, asking what would need to change at the global or national level to protect women cross-border traders caught up in ongoing conflict in North Kivu, DRC.

- **The physical embodiment of international borders – border-scapes – often involves the signs and symbols of violence.** These include barracks and other military facilities, watch towers, check points, and barbed wire fences. Borderland infrastructure such as roads and settlement patterns, has often been developed according to the logic of security, leaving it poorly equipped to service the day-to-day needs of the population, and making these features targets if violent conflict breaks out.<sup>54</sup>

A security based infrastructure is catered to dealing with violence and appears to anticipate it, creating an atmosphere of unease.

- **Women in borderlands are especially vulnerable to violence and abuse.** With little protection from state institutions and courts, and only limited monitoring by NGOs and human rights organizations (due to their limited access to borderland regions and wider security concerns) women are especially vulnerable to violence in borderland regions. This ranges from high profile abuses such as the abduction of 276 female secondary students in Chibok, allegedly by Boko Haram, to the habitual abuse of female cross-border traders by both state and non-state armed actors in the Great Lakes.<sup>55</sup> National studies and statistics on gender-based violence can mis-represent the extent of these abuses in sub-regions, where data is less available, and where women have fewer outlets to speak out and report offenses.

## 5. CROSS-BORDER TRADE, SMUGGLING, AND ECONOMIC REGULATION

### 5.1 Formal and informal, legal and illegal

Typically, African borderland communities trade less with their own interiors and capital cities and more with neighbouring borderland communities and foreign countries.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the customs charges imposed on these cross-border economic systems are an essential source of government revenue and tend to make up a significant proportion of the national budget. The pursuit of this revenue is one of the key drivers of state involvement in border cities and at border crossings. It is manifest in tariffs and regulations that label some existing economic activities as crimes, while at the same time they create opportunities to commit lucrative breaches of the law.<sup>57</sup>

- **Informal vs illegal trade:** In approaching cross-border trade, it is important to distinguish between *informal* and *illegal* practices. Informal, in this case, refers to trade that is untaxed, while illegal refers to unlawful practices that go beyond tax evasion, and to trade in contraband, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, human trafficking, livestock rustling, poaching, the arms trade, and trade in high-value minerals which are often accompanied by violence. State representatives frequently turn a blind eye to informal trade, especially when it is considered low value (defined as under \$100 USD per day). Across much of Africa, it would be too costly to police these transactions, and efforts to do so have generally proven unsuccessful.<sup>58</sup> State representatives face considerable logistical challenges in monitoring thousands of miles of open borders, and their own involvement in informal cross-border trade disincentivises them to crack down on it. In the Great Lakes, the Horn, and the Sahel regions, controls tend to be kept strict and visible enough that traders can make informal payments to evade them, but also lax enough to allow that evasion to go on unimpeded.
- **Trading networks:** all forms of cross-border trade tend to involve networks of individuals that span the border.

Economic exchange in these regions is very rarely based on arm's-length ties with no prior social bond. Rather, it takes place within a complex set of social interactions, and produces cross-border networks that can act either as the basis of stronger cross-border integration, or as a means to subvert state authorities and conduct business that cannot be monitored or controlled.<sup>59</sup>

- **Smuggling:** Smuggling and informal trade share common features and are often lumped together in analysis.

The distinction between them depends on what is being traded and the practices and technologies involved. Despite strong condemnation by governments, smuggling in Africa is a creative process, in which borderland regions act as laboratories for both new forms of evasion, and new technologies of enforcement. Smuggling activities are often integrated into wider networks of transnational trade both within the continent and overseas. Criminal trade in such things as ivory and minerals routinely by-passes state regulation and control.

### 5.2 Transport corridors and Regional Economic Communities (RECS)

Long-distance trade is a central feature of borderland economies. Truck drivers and their freight vehicles have a significant impact on the borderland environment, even if they are only transiting through it:

- **Freight infrastructure:** despite recent large-scale investments in Standard Gauge Railways (e.g. Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania), African railways have for the most part declined over the last four decades. Instead, many regions, and landlocked states in particular are heavily reliant on trucking routes from the coast to the African hinterland.



Long distance trade shapes the borderland infrastructure (in, for example, paved roads, petrol stations, weigh bridges, truck stops, hospitality facilities, among other things), even where border areas are not the final destination of freight vehicles. On the one hand, the passage of these vehicles through particular districts provides a range of economic opportunities for borderland residents, including servicing vehicles and providing food and facilities for drivers, on the other, it provides municipal authorities with the opportunity to levy unofficial charges on passing freight, and these routes can increase tensions between central and municipal government actors, especially if trucks incur costs such as road repairs that are not subsidized by the state.

- **Supply chain security:** Even when security capacity is weak elsewhere in the borderland, central states may invest in increasing security along freight routes to protect supply chains. This can result in pockets of security and of government authorities along key thoroughfares and can inform the logics of (in)security in the border region more broadly.
- **Criminal trading networks:** The patchy and contested nature of state authority in borderlands creates opportunities for criminal networks engaged in illegal mining, human trafficking, poaching, weapons and drugs smuggling, and other crimes that make use of the long distance infrastructure that connects borderlands to international markets and foreign powers.
- **Corridors of development and Spatial Development Initiatives (SDIs):** Various initiatives have attempted to make use of transport corridors as a means of investment in borderlands. These include the Northern Corridor in Kenya and Uganda, and the Abidjan-Lagos and Ouesso-Bangui-N'djamena Corridors in West Africa. In an effort to stimulate the private sector in the sub-regions along these routes, governments and regional authorities have employed strategies of economic streamlining: constructing One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), reducing tariffs, and enforcing multi-lateral agreements to reduce non-tariff barriers such as weigh-bridges and police roadblocks, especially where they have been the sites of extortion. Many of these agreements are formed at the regional level through Regional Economic Communities such as the East African Community (EAC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Markets, civil societies, and external actors are deeply involved in processes of regionalization on the continent. These groups do not always act in support of the regionalizing agendas of states, since regional integration in general may not always be in the best interest of borderland inhabitants, especially where it reduces the economic asymmetries that sustain local cross-border trade.<sup>60</sup>

### 5.3 Cross-border asymmetry, arbitrage economics, and borders as resources

**Cross-border asymmetry:** The everyday operation of borderland regions is driven primarily by asymmetrical conditions on either side of the border. This crucial feature of the environment that can be obscured by analysis focused narrowly on state capacity. These asymmetries give advantage to one side over the other, and provide borderland residents a variety of opportunities to exploit the differences.

These asymmetries include:

1. **Safety and security** – where one side of the border is significantly less prone to insecurity than the other.
2. **Living expenses** – most notably land and housing costs, as well as the basic price of foodstuffs and other essential commodities.
3. **Employment prospects** – the relative labor markets on either side of a border.
4. **Economic regulation** – where one side of the border imposes and enforces stricter economic rules, especially in market and import tariffs.
5. **Political repression** – where basic freedoms are more available on one side of the border than the other.
6. **Physical infrastructure** – such things as road quality and the presence of critical infrastructures such as hospitals on one side but not on the other.

Making use of detailed local accounts of cross-border asymmetries to reconceptualize the border as the balancing point for contrasting social and economic characteristics, can indicate: (1) what drives cross-border interaction in different settings; (2) how contrasting characteristics develop over time and relate to one another; (3) which particular asymmetries shape the lives of borderland inhabitants.

**Cross-border economic arbitrages:** One of the most prominent cross-border asymmetries can be found in the market values of commodities carried across the border by hand, such as clothes, foodstuffs, and mechanical parts.<sup>61</sup> Asymmetrical market prices in these goods are sustained by the regulatory environments on either side of a border. This arbitrage effect benefits local traders, who can profit from the purchase and sale of commodities with no transactional costs other than the time and money required to cross the border. For informal traders who circumvent formal state tariffs on their goods, arbitrage arrangements offer a source of livelihood. Importantly, the cross-border differentials can endure for months or years despite constant trade across the border that might be expected to level them.

**Borders as resources:** Owing to these asymmetries, borderland residents can also make use of borders in ways that go beyond material or financial benefit. In a recent analysis of borderlands in the Horn of Africa, Feyissa and Hoehne, identify:

- a. Economic resources – such as cross-border trade and smuggling.
- b. Political resources – such as alternative centers of political power, trans-border political mobilization, sanctuary for rebels who strive to alter national structures of power, and the strategic cooption of borderland inhabitants by competing states.
- c. Identity resources – such as the control of the state borders as a means to legitimize claims to statehood.
- d. Status and rights resources – such as use of the border to make claims to citizenship and refugee status, and to gain access to social services such as education available on the other side.<sup>62</sup>

The ability of borderland communities to take advantage of the border depends on certain key factors:

- a. Proximity – how close they are – politically and geographically – to the power centers of the state.
- b. Significance – how strategic and economically significant the border is for state authorities.
- c. Asymmetry – how much social, political, and economic asymmetry exists across the border.
- d. Organization – how entrepreneurial and internally organized the borderland communities are.
- e. Alignment – how aligned borderland communities are to state authorities and groups across the border.<sup>63</sup>

A 'borderlands as resources' approach provides a practical framework for understanding how borderland inhabitants may engage with the border, and how effectively they are able to do so.

#### 5.4 Border towns and rapid urban growth

Border towns tend to exaggerate the borderland characteristics that are outlined in this document. They play host to large populations in immediate proximity to international borders, and to municipal authorities that are often hostile to central government.<sup>64</sup> Africa is experiencing extremely rapid urban growth, with the population of the continent living in towns and cities set to approach one billion by 2050.<sup>65</sup> A recent comprehensive study of urban growth in West Africa shows the following trends:

- a. Border cities are on average somewhat smaller than cities in the interior, especially when compared with those large capital cities that are set back from border areas.
- b. Urban density close to borders is higher than urban density in the interior. The finding suggests that border cities differ significantly from those in the interior. This is attributed to border town specializing in commercial activities that stimulate rapid growth.<sup>66</sup>
- c. Border cities are growing significantly faster than other urban areas in Africa. Small and mid-size 'boom towns' in proximity to international borders are among the continent's fastest growing urban spaces.<sup>67</sup> In West Africa, cities located less than 20 kilometers from a border were home to only 260 000 people in 1950. Their population has grown to 16 million by 2020, 62 times higher. The number of urban dwellers living less than 50 kilometers from a border grew by a factor of 60 in the same period, going from just over half a million to 33 million people.

There is a great deal of variation between Africa's border towns, which range from vast conurbations such as Kinshasa and Brazzaville, to small settlements that are little more than administrative posts, such as Gatuna (Rwanda) and Katuna (Uganda). In between are a host of mid-size trading partners, such as Busia (Kenya) and Busia (Uganda). There are numerous 'twin cities' made up of towns that have grown in tandem with one another. Twin towns are 'outward facing', heavily integrated into the urban spaces across the border. Within these pairings, changes on one side of the border often give rise to changes on the other.

Commonly, the economic booms that give rise to large urban spaces close to borders are felt unevenly across them, with one side growing faster than the other. This process gives rise to further cross-border asymmetries that border town residents can adapt to and exploit in their economic activities.

#### 5.5 Gender and cross-border trade

Adopting a gendered approach helps to highlight social inequalities are intensified in borderland regions. Different groups in society interact differently with the border, and analysis must be sensitive to the different constraints imposed on, and opportunities available to, men and women. A gendered approach also helps to highlight how and why certain groups – such as rural women and men, ethnic minorities, and young people – are left out of national development and peacebuilding processes in borderlands. This approach highlights resistance, in particular how those excluded at the margins of the state resist agents and systems of domination, and the spaces that open up to transform structures that perpetuate the exclusion of particular groups.

##### Case Study:

**DRC/Rwanda** Close to one hundred thousand people cross the borders between Rwanda, Uganda, DRC, and Burundi each day. The majority are women involved in cross-border trade, and their concerns are different from those of other groups. The region provides a clear example of why the analysis of borderland spaces must make use of a gendered lens that focuses attention on identities (gender, ethnicity, race, and class), and how these identities intersect and influence borderland politics and trade.

A recent World Bank study found that approximately 85 per cent of traders between Goma (DRC) and Gisenyi (Rwanda) were young women, with almost half of them having worked as traders for more than five years. Most traders sold foodstuffs, in small quantities carried by head. Start-up capital was very low and generally obtained from within the family. For close to 80 per cent of traders, cross-border trade was their main source of income, and on average each trader has approximately three dependents. Most (82 per cent) of the officials who regulate the border are men, and physical harassment and extortion are major sources of concern for women crossing the border.

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