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THINKING ABOUT BORDERLANDS: OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM XCEPT PROGRAMME RESEARCH

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Do the ways in which policymakers and national governments view borderlands reflect how the communities living there experience them? Building on this, can a better understanding of the characteristics of borderlands help in promoting development, improving governance and making more effective policy and programming choices in these contexts? Such are the questions that have informed the work of the Rift Valley Institute, The Asia Foundation and the Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center as part of the XCEPT programme since its inception in 2018. Taking these concerns as its starting point, this think piece offers an overview of the key observations to emerge from this research, and what this implies going forward for research and policy-making around borderlands.

INTRODUCTION

Peripheral borderland areas often lie beyond the central state's full—or even partial—control or sphere of influence, making them sites of negotiation and contestation. Over time, such areas tend to develop their own modes of governance or rules systems. As part of this, longstanding inequalities and lack of access to the (economic and political) centre prompt local communities to seek informal, often cross-border, economies and opportunities.

Outsiders tend to see a vacuum of governance and security in borderlands. In reality, such spaces are subject to longstanding but continually reconstructed (often in relation to centre–periphery dynamics) forms of order, which frequently rely on trust and social networks. Borderlands are also characterized by a lack of predictability, increased or increasing precarity, and often recurrent insecurity. As such, 'local communities with knowledge and access to networks of cross-border movement and exchange become the primary economic agents in borderlands, around which war economies develop and armed groups attempt to tap into'.¹

In many cases, border crossings become indispensable resources, turning the areas around them into sites targeted by international humanitarian efforts. Conflict hotspots also emerge in proximity to new market spaces and attempts to capture trade corridors. Mindful of the armed actors trying to capture territories and revenues, communities find innovative ways of

1 Harout Akdedian, 'Conflict, Borderlands, and the Transnational Flows of People, Goods, and Ideas in the MENA Region: Literature Review', Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, Unpublished.

navigating constrained livelihoods and gaining access to food, although such ‘resilience’ may come at a cost. Thus:

localities are left to their own fate and are forced to seek new devices of organization and government. In borderlands, different power groups compete over strategic resources as the drivers of bounded territorial space (sovereign space) unravel and each constituent layer of sovereign space (military, economic, and socio-political) becomes a site of contestation.²

In capturing the views of those living in borderlands, the programme’s research upends various assumptions concerning the legitimacy of the state and predatory nature of non-state actors. Rather, examining borderlands afresh offers new avenues for understanding how economies, states and conflict function. Certainly, we can observe an ongoing redefining of borders, and thereby the state, in the borderland areas of—among other places—Syria, Sudan, Ethiopia and Myanmar.³

The programme’s research also reveals that communities at the geographic or imagined peripheries may in fact be on the cutting edge when it comes to adapting not only to local circumstances, but wider societal changes. The main task of such communities may be viewed as asserting their agency vis-a-vis other forces, be they local elites, armed actors or central elites.

In summary, borderland processes provide us with deep insights into state formation and centre–periphery dynamics. Moreover, they frequently turn out to be precursors to new forms of social order, acting as a testing lab for alternative constructions of capitalism and labour. Finally, conflicts in borderlands are not the result of flaws inherent to such regions, but rather of contested centre–periphery relations, with multiple centres (on both sides of the border) existing concomitantly.

The following elaborates on these points in the form of five observations derived from the XCEPT programme’s research, followed by some thoughts on the future direction borderlands research might take.

OBSERVATION 1: ON THE CENTRALITY OF BORDERLANDS, CENTRE–PERIPHERY RELATIONS AND THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

The XCEPT research to date has sought to articulate the interplay between the centre and its peripheries in order to help understand the state. In other words, through examining the periphery we can peel back the layers of how the state is made, remade or in some cases unmade.

2 Harout Akdedian and Harith Hasan, ‘State atrophy and the reconfiguration of borderlands in Syria and Iraq: Post-2011 dynamics’, *Political Geography*, Volume 80, 102178 (2020): 1–10.

3 ‘War and the Borderland: Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea at a Time of Conflict’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/war-and-the-borderland-sudan-ethiopia-and-eritrea-at-a-time-of-conflict/>; Kheder Khaddour and Armenak Tokmajyan, ‘Borders Without a Nation: Syria, Outside Powers, and Open-Ended Instability’, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024. <https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Kheder-Armenak-Syria%20report-final.pdf>; Dan Seng Lawn, ‘Myanmar’s northern borderlands: changing power dynamics since the 2021 military coup’, Myanmar’s Northern Borderlands series, The Asia Foundation/Kachinland Research Centre, 2025. <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/myanmars-northern-borderlands-changing-power-dynamics-since-the-2021-military-coup/>.

This focus also begs the question: Where is the centre? As the XCEPT research on Somalia⁴ and Syria demonstrates, the centre need not necessarily be a country's capital city. Instead, various factors—from tacit agreement to the impact of conflict sending the state into retreat—may mean it is located elsewhere. Alternatively, there may be multiple centres of gravity.

Regardless of where the centre lies, borderlands are key to making and sustaining the state. In the programme's research, this dynamic is perhaps most visible in the taxation processes taking place across internal and—especially—international borders. Moreover, a periphery is not always peripheral simply in a geographic sense, as in Ethiopia's Oromia region. In some cases, an imagined periphery acts as a stage upon which the state's (read dominant groups') self-perceptions are challenged and reconstructed. National (centre) policies may therefore be upended, appropriated or made irrelevant in the borderlands.

This in turn prompts further questions. Are borders only defined in relation to the centre? And what happens when the periphery becomes the centre—does the periphery bring the centre to it, or vice versa? The uncertainties implied here relate to how agency is exerted in the borderlands. Understanding these dynamics, including how they differ in active conflict arenas compared to non-conflict or post-conflict settings, can provide fresh insight into devising better governance and coping mechanisms.

The programme's research shows that agency, authority and power in the peripheries is relative rather than absolute, producing distinct local political economies with their own elites. These political economies are, however, also part of a larger political economy in which the interests of local elites are often secondary.⁵ In Sudan, for example, the centre came to the periphery without consulting the latter. In such circumstances, the benefits of becoming a new centre may be contingent on meeting the interests of the still dominant central elite.

Elsewhere, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the central state has been forced into retreat, or even collapsed. This trend is apparent in many of the places XCEPT's research has ventured, where the state can be seen to be 'both absent and forcefully present'.⁶ At the same time, 'autonomy is magnified in borderlands, given their strategic location. Entities operating through cross-border networks and with cross-border connections are best positioned to reconfigure and repurpose the regulatory system of borders for their own ends'.⁷

Thus, borderlands may host emerging political centres capable of challenging existing territorial conceptions of the nation state. In this respect, 'The empowerment of the borderlands is the

4 Nisar Majid and Khalif Abdirahman, 'Mobility, Trust and Exchange: Somalia and Yemen's Cross-border Maritime Economy', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/somalia-and-yemens-cross-border-maritime-economy/>; and Mustafe M. Abdi, 'Regularly Irregular: Varieties of informal trading in the Ethiopia-Somaliland borderlands', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/regularly-irregular-varieties-informal-trading-ethiopia-somaliland-borderlands/>.

5 Biruk Terrefe, 'Ethiopia's Red Sea Politics: Corridors, ports and security in the Horn of Africa', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/ethiopias-red-sea-politics-corridors-ports-and-security-in-the-horn-of-africa/>.

6 Benedikt Korf, Tobias Hagmann and Maritn Doevenspeck, 'Geographies of Violence and Sovereignty: The African Frontier Revisited', in *Violence on the Margins*, edited by Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymaekers, 29–54. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

7 Akdedian, 'MENA Literature Review'.

defining feature influencing the evolution of centre–periphery relations in MENA region after 2010’.⁸

Turning to South Sudan, ‘The economic systems and public authorities on the Sudan–South Sudan borderlands are—irrespective of the changing flows of people and trade—relatively stable in terms of their zones of control’.⁹ The outcome of this is that while centre–periphery political settlements have established a degree of stability and predictability for elites, the downstream impacts mean communities continue to face highly volatile local contexts. This uneven outcome created by political settlements is not uncommon—perhaps it is common, with similar impacts felt across borders and in borderlands.

OBSERVATION 2: ON THE IMPORTANCE OF REVENUES

Particularly in times of conflict, most actors capable of doing so will seek to expand their revenue capture. This observation is particularly pertinent to borderlands, where things ‘move’, making them easier to seize.¹⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the XCEPT research on ‘moving towards markets’ shows that borderlands are increasingly being viewed as areas to be harnessed.¹¹

One consequence is that conflict hotspots are emerging due to competing attempts to snatch new market spaces and capture corridors. Examples here include the Rapid Support Force’s attempts to capture routes from Sudan into or out of South Sudan, and similar dynamics highlighted by the programme’s research on the Somali territories.¹²

States are constantly in the process of being remade. This encompasses the ability to generate and capture revenue streams, which can be harnessed to challenge—or more likely reinforce—spatial inequality across the country. In post-conflict settings, such remaking processes are particularly acute.

When adapting to conflict or other changing circumstances, actors subject to taxation will proactively find ways to avoid payment—often to multiple authorities. Countering this, state and non-state actors constantly look to refine or innovate their tax collection methods. In the

8 Akdedian, ‘MENA Literature Review’.

9 Nicki Kindersley, ‘“The Fuel is Us”: Water, oil and debt on the Sudan–South Sudan borderlands’, Rift Valley Institute, 2025. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/the-fuel-is-us-water-oil-and-debt-on-the-sudan-south-sudan-borderlands/>.

10 Tobias Hagmann, ‘Trade, taxes and tensions in the Somali borderlands’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/trade-taxes-and-tensions-somali-borderlands/>.

11 Edward Thomas, ‘Moving Towards Markets: Cash, commodification and conflict in South Sudan’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019. <https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Moving-towards-markets-by-Edward-Thomas-RVI-X-border-Project-2019.pdf>; Hassan H. Kochore, ‘Restructuring the Margins: Emerging political orders in Kenya’s borderlands’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/restructuring-the-margins-emerging-political-orders-in-kenyas-borderlands/>; Ahmed Nagi, ‘Yemeni Border Markets: From Economic Incubator to Military Frontline’, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/09/yemeni-border-markets-from-economic-incubator-to-military-frontline>; and Cedric Barnes and Nathan Shea (eds), ‘Border Towns, Markets and Conflict: A joint report from The Asia Foundation, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, and the Rift Valley Institute’, XCEPT, March 2022. <https://www.xcept-research.org/publication/border-towns-markets-and-conflict/>.

12 Peer Schouten, ‘Paying the Price: The political economy of checkpoints in Somalia’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/paying-the-price/>.

borderlands, these dynamics are heightened due to the considerable movement of people and goods characteristic of such areas.

OBSERVATION 3: ON BINARY THINKING

Order and disorder; formality and informality; licit and illicit; continuity and rupture; hard and soft borders; legitimate and illegitimate authorities; the state as protector and as predator—the overlapping binaries found in borderland areas challenge the rigidly delineated categories invented, propagated and popularized by the nation state.

Governance is often understood and practiced differently in borderland spaces, many of which operate ‘in-between’ the formal and informal spheres (what we understand as ‘hybrid’ governance) or simultaneously navigate both. While the mechanics of borderland governance—which often involve multiple actors, sometimes with tacit or more formal agreements regarding the outsourcing of some roles—are generally well understood by local communities, such processes may look disordered to outsiders or policymakers. Addressing this shortfall in understanding requires in-depth knowledge of local and transnational political economies, including how they relate to higher levels of decision making.

As part of this, the programme’s research has sought to introduce nuance to how we understand ‘illicit’ and ‘informal’, and the overlap between the two.¹³ Curbing illicit flows or imposing formalities can exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly for women and other marginalized groups. As such, it is crucial to consider what alternative livelihoods people may turn to, as in practice this may end up being other forms of illicit activity, such as smuggling.

OBSERVATION 4: ON THE FLUID, MULTIFACETED NATURE OF BORDERS

One of the programme’s key starting points is that borders are fluid and multifaceted, encompassing internal boundaries, international borders, resource zones, maritime borders and de facto borders.¹⁴ Here, encouraging policymakers to think and work across borders in different ways is crucial, as the alternative—clinging to a notion of the nation state as the only legitimate means of providing governance and security—means viewing borderland areas in ways that fail to correspond with the perceptions of local communities. Most concerningly, state-centric approaches reduce ‘society to a merely reactive entity without autonomous capacity’.¹⁵

13 Dalia Ghanem, ‘Algeria’s Borderlands: A Country Unto Themselves’, Washington, DC: Malcom H. Kerr Middle East Center, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/09/algerias-borderlands-a-country-unto-themselves>; Hassan H. Kochore and Insene Bagaja ‘Informal Trade, Gender and Conflict Dynamics on the New Kenya-Ethiopia Trade Corridor’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/informal-trade-gender-and-conflict-dynamics-on-the-new-kenya-ethiopia-trade-corridor/>.

14 Jatin Dua, ‘Chokepoints and Corridors: Ordering maritime space in the Western Indian Ocean’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/chokepoints-and-corridors-ordering-maritime-space-western-indian-ocean/>; Starjoan Villanueva, Nathan Shea and Kathline Anne Tolosa, ‘Trade in the Sulu Archipelago: Informal Economies Amidst Maritime Security Challenges’, San Francisco, CA: The Asia Foundation, 2019. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/trade-in-the-sulu-archipelago-informal-economies-amidst-maritime-security-challenges/>.

15 Akdedian, ‘MENA Literature Review’.

Also important in this regard is a fuller understanding of the relevant centre–periphery dynamics, whereby states depend on their peripheries to define the limits of their territory, as well as for the capture of significant revenue streams. As such, states are often driven to secure their borders and limit the movement of people.

At the same time, a failure to acknowledge the porous nature of borders means overlooking the interconnectedness of areas that straddle nationally drawn lines, and thus the potential of borderland community networks to respond to conflict and other shocks.

OBSERVATION 5: ON UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The XCEPT research spotlights the importance of anticipating the unintended consequences of policy and programming efforts in borderland areas. For instance, attempts at reforming the ‘illicit and informal’ usually mean increased competition between actors over the control of revenues and distribution of new rents. Vulnerable and marginalized groups are, however, often excluded from these spoils, while bearing the brunt of any negative outcomes.

State-centric and security-led policy responses also risk undermining local coping mechanisms and cohesion. Here, poorly considered political settlements may paper over grievances without resolving the underlying structural challenges faced by local communities.¹⁶ Meanwhile, borderland residents—vulnerable groups particularly—must constantly adapt to conflict, climate and livelihood shocks.¹⁷ As recent XCEPT research from Kenya’s borderlands observes: ‘in the midst of a situation where the state acts unofficially as a “co-producer of illicit practices”, small-scale women traders must therefore find viable means of securing their livelihoods, damping down conflict and navigating shifting political sands’.¹⁸

THINKING FORWARD: ‘RESILIENCE’, POTENTIAL AND LIVELIHOODS

As the research makes clear, borderland communities are increasingly reliant on local networks and community support systems. These, though, are coming under intensifying stress due to recurrent climate shocks layered on top of existing instability. Going forward, the concern is that at some point, local communities will run out of coping mechanisms. Here, it is important not to over-emphasize resilience, which risks underplaying the stresses associated with constantly living under pressure. Regardless of the innovative resource potential of borderlands, precarity, volatility and insecurity can—if allowed to continue unchecked—erode a community’s ability to cope.

All of this raises further questions about how conflict, contestation and climate shocks impact trust-based relationships and transactions. In this respect, it is important to keep track of

16 Samira Manzur and Tasnia Khandaker Prova, ‘Governing at the Margins: A Patchwork of Policies and Practices in the Rohingya Refugee Response in Bangladesh’, Centre for Peace and Justice/The Asia Foundation, 2023. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Bangladesh_Governing-at-the-margins_EN.pdf.

17 Tasnia Khandaker Prova, Era Robbani and Humaun Kabir, “‘We no longer know of the peace we once had’: Fragilities and dispossession in the climate-affected borderlands of south-west Bangladesh’. XCEPT: Online, 2025.

18 Kochore, ‘Restructuring the Margins’.

how cross-border cooperation evolves, including how such dynamics respond to positive and negative drivers.

The research also highlights the potentials arising from marginalization. In Somali-speaking territories, for example, ‘the borderlands are not peripheral to technological innovation and change, but are centres of connection, experimentation and development due to their embedded and historical cross-border connections’.¹⁹

When thinking about the (re)making of states through their borderlands, the research is unequivocal that meaningful consideration of spatial differentiation and inequality is key. Thus, any future investigation needs to take account of what the likely impacts will be—including for programming and policy-making—of this ongoing differentiation across and within borders.

In sum, XCEPT’s research has cast light on just how layered and complex borderlands are, whether from an economic, social or (in)security perspective. It is only by acknowledging and embracing these often conflicting strands that we can gain true insight into the dynamics at play, and in turn begin to construct effective policy-making.

19 Peter Chonka, ‘Digital governance and insecurity in the Horn of Africa’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025. <https://riftvalley.net/publication/digital-governance-and-security-in-the-horn-of-africa/>.

CREDITS

This think piece is a product of RVI's Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. XCEPT brings together leading local and international experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The programme carries out research to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace, and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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