

# COMMODIFICATION AND CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA BORDERLANDS

SYNTHESIS ANALYSIS

Tobias Hagmann



March 2026



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# COMMODIFICATION AND CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA BORDERLANDS: SYNTHESIS ANALYSIS

## The author

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## XCEPT programme

This report is a product of the 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.

## Rift Valley Institute

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## Map design

Jillian Beryl Luff (MAPgrafix)

## Cover

Tog Wajaale border area. Julian Circo, CC BY-SA 2.0.

## Layout

Sue MacDonald, SMD Design

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# Summary

This report synthesizes findings from the Rift Valley Institute's X-Border Local Research Network (2019–2025). In the surveyed studies, 25 leading local and international area specialists conducted extensive qualitative fieldwork across borderlands in South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and the Somali territories. Drawing on interviews with hundreds of interlocutors, these studies investigate the causes and consequences of conflict in border areas and how such conflicts connect across borders.

Taking the X-Border studies as its point of departure, this report asks two central questions. First, how do the different borderlands studied by X-Border relate to each other? Second, what do the X-Border studies contribute to the global borderland literature?

To answer these questions, the author positions the Horn of Africa's borderlands within the global borderland scholarship; compares five distinct borderland configurations; analyses six key processes shaping them; and develops an emerging framework linking conflict and commodification, alongside policy-relevant conclusions.

Conceptually, the Horn of Africa's borderland spaces cannot be understood in purely idiosyncratic terms or as expressions of their regional context. The global, including historical, borderland literature brought to the fore that borderlands are comparable, that political violence in borderlands is embedded in global historical forces, and that they are better understood through processes rather than as fixed geographical entities. Conflict and violence at the 'margins of the state' reflect evolving state formation dynamics that involve and are often initiated by the political centre.

As the X-Border studies highlight, this process is omnipresent in the Horn of Africa's borderlands. As central authorities seek to expand or formalize control over 'peripheries', borderland communities resist or adapt in response, resulting in complex interactions between local and national actors. The diversity of the Horn of Africa's many borderlands is reflected in the X-Border studies, which examine contested borderland processes across markedly different empirical contexts.

Horn of Africa Borderlands are configurations of multiple, overlapping boundaries that can be studied and compared empirically as a continuum of 'borderland dynamics' that range from 'static' to 'fluid'. They consist of a set or matrix of interacting geographic, political, demographic, cultural and economic boundaries. A panoply of borderland dynamics becomes apparent when considering the internal boundary dynamics of the Horn of Africa's borderlands. They range

from more to less militarized; from shorter to global cross-border supply chains; from relatively simple, dyadic political contestation to complex, multi-scalar political competition; and from demographically homogenous to more heterogenous boundaries:

- Boundaries in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland are geographically, economically and demographically porous, but politically restrictive.
- While its geographical and political boundaries are restrictive, the demographic, cultural and economic boundaries of the borderland between Sudan's Blue Nile State and Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region are porous.
- Kenya's north-eastern borderland between Mandera and Moyale is marked by geographically fluid boundaries.
- The Gulf of Aden maritime borderland spans between Yemen, the breakaway Republic of Somaliland and Puntland. Its geographical boundary is static as the land-sea divide is fixed. Its political boundary is restrictive, and its demographic, cultural and economic boundaries are porous.
- The Somali transnational borderland—the proverbial 'greater Somali economy'—features porous geographical boundaries, fluid demographic, cultural and economic boundaries and political boundaries that range from restrictive to porous.

All borderlands are not created equal, but many borderlands are animated by comparable causal mechanisms producing an array of different empirical manifestations. Focusing on the Horn of Africa, the X-Border studies represent this expansive borderland diversity, but also the different ways in which *commodification, resource control, logistics, financing, circulation and capture, and revenue generation* operate.

Concomitantly, the studies bring to the fore the contemporaneous and global character of these borderlands and a co-occurrence of various conflict dynamics and supply chain capitalism. As 'transmission belts' they connect supposedly peripheral spaces with political centres and global networks, ensuring the region's—often conflictual—integration into transnational flows. Different actors compete over the governance of these commodity flows and their associated revenue streams in and across borderlands. Borderland actors constantly need to insert themselves into these changing transnational dynamics driven by conflict, inflation, climate change and other macro dynamics.

The policy implications of the report emphasize the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches:

- First, policymakers must understand both the drivers and consequences of commodification and their varied impacts on conflict. Borderland dynamics have far-reaching effects beyond local contexts, as they connect to national economies and political centres through transnational flows.

- Second, interventions should avoid one-size-fits-all solutions and instead engage with the specific boundary configurations and social dynamics of each borderland.
- Third, policies should address the incentives that drive value capture and conflict, including the roles of state and non-state actors in shaping these dynamics.
- Finally, greater attention should be paid to financial systems and their role in enabling exploitation and conflict.

# Introduction

What are the causes and consequences of conflict in border areas and how do these conflicts connect across borders?<sup>1</sup> Between 2019 and 2025 a group of 25 researchers grappled with these questions as part of the Rift Valley Institute's *X-Border Local Research Network* programme (henceforth: X-Border).<sup>2</sup> To find answers, they interviewed hundreds of interlocutors across dozens of research sites in the borderlands of South Sudan, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Somali territories—Somaliland, Puntland, and different parts of Somalia. Data collection focused on the experiences and views of borderland inhabitants, including elders, labour migrants, agricultural workers, female-headed households, displaced persons and refugees, state and informal authorities—such as chiefs, government officials and militia fighters—but also transporters, drivers and business(wo)men involved in cross-border commodity trading. Both individually and collectively, the X-Border studies therefore offer original, empirically informed and policy-relevant insights into contemporary borderland and conflict dynamics in the Horn of Africa.

By and large the studies foreground borderlands—which themselves are often, falsely, perceived as peripheral spaces of the nation-state—as the central locus for socio-political analysis. This research provides a window into complex, understudied processes behind the operations and governance of borderland economies; the influence of conflict, poverty and climate change on mobility; the commodification of land and labour in the process; and the subsequent evolution of gender and intra-generational relations. Written by leading local and international area specialists, the X-Border studies highlight how conflict dynamics—whether competition over local resources, tensions between the political centre and borderland actors, armed conflict between militarized actors or transnational disputes—are deeply embedded in multi-scalar borderland dynamics. These defy reductionist explanations and reject the idea that political instability at the proverbial 'edge of the state'<sup>3</sup> is primarily the result of internal factors or that borderland populations bear the prime responsibility for political violence.

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- 1 I thank Abdirahman Edle, Ahmed M. Musa, Biruk Terrefe, Hannah Stogdon, Hassan Kochore, Jason Mosley, Nicki Kindersley, Pete Chonka, Samantha Gamez and participants at the February 2025 XCEPT Naivasha workshop for helpful comments on earlier versions of this text. All errors of interpretation are my responsibility.
  - 2 The X-Border Local Research Network, a six-year project including research in nine countries, produced more than 50 publications, and focused on four key thematic areas: cross-border trade and checkpoints, food systems and borderlands cultures, resource economies in conflict zones, and gender and displacement dynamics. For more information, please see RVI's XCEPT microsite: <https://xcept.riftvalley.net>
  - 3 M. J. Watts, 'Frontiers: Authority, precarity and insurgency at the edge of the state', *l'espace politique* 32 (2017). <https://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/4336>

Taking the X-Border studies as its point of departure, this paper asks two central questions. First, how do the different borderlands studied by X-Border relate to each other? Second, what do the X-Border studies contribute to the global borderland literature? Given the heterogenous nature of the X-Border studies, this is no easy feat. This paper adopts a twofold analytical strategy to interpret key insights of the studies at a more aggregate level. On the one hand, it positions the X-Border studies in the interdisciplinary literature on borders and borderlands, which peaked in the mid-2000s inspired by debates about whether globalization had created a ‘borderless world’<sup>4</sup> as well as the ‘spatial turn’<sup>5</sup> in the study of borders, which had long been dominant in territorial and geopolitical frameworks. On the other hand, this paper highlights select ‘borderland processes’ across the Horn of Africa region that emerge from the X-Border studies from a comparative perspective. The main objective is abductive theory-building that is based on particularly salient causal borderland processes that are relevant for the Horn of Africa and the broader literature on borderlands. While area studies experts are typically familiar with one or several borderlands in the region, this paper adopts a wider comparative perspective by drawing attention to variation across a diverse set of cases. Given its prominence across the X-Border studies, the intersection of commodification—of labour, land and resources—with political conflict, including armed conflict, in Horn of Africa borderlands is of particular interest.<sup>6</sup>

Several terminological clarifications are required first. Unlike borders, boundaries ‘signify the point at which something becomes something else’.<sup>7</sup> Frontiers are different than borders in that frontiers highlight a dynamic, ongoing process of territorialization—including resource appropriation and cultural amalgamation—that occurs in the border zone.<sup>8</sup> Classic frontier situations correspond to ‘a meeting place of peoples in which geographic and cultural borders were not clearly defined’ and are therefore essentially ‘borderless’.<sup>9</sup> While the border is a ‘linear,

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4 D. Newman, ‘The lines that continue to separate us: borders in our “borderless” world’, *Progress in Human Geography* 30/2 (2017): 143–161.

5 C. Rumford, ‘Theorizing borders’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 9/2 (2006): 155–169.

6 X-Border research carried out in various locations in South Sudan, including in non-borderland spaces, highlights the multi-faceted impacts of commodification of land and labour. See E. Thomas, *Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019; J. D. Majok, *War, Migration and Work: Changing Social Relations in South Sudan’s Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019; N. Kindersley and J. D. Majok, *Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan’s Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020; E. N. Malou, *The Triple Burden: Women Selling their Labour in South Sudan*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024.

7 J. S. Migdal, *Boundaries and Belonging: States and Societies in the Struggle to Shape Identities and Local Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: p. 5.

8 D. Gerhard, ‘The frontier in comparative view’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1/3 (1959): 205–229; B. Korf, T. Hagmann and M. Doevenspeck, ‘Geographies of Violence and Sovereignty: The African Frontier Revisited’, in *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict and Borderlands*, edited by B. Korf and T. Raeymaekers, 29–54, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

9 J. Adelman and S. Aron, ‘From borderlands to borders: Empires, nation-states, and the peoples in between in North American history’, *American Historical Review* 104/3 (1999): p. 815.

static dividing line', the frontier is instead a 'dynamic, fluid zone'.<sup>10</sup> Borderlands encompass various processes related to borders, boundaries and at times frontiers. They are 'regions around or between political or cultural entities where geographic, political, demographic, cultural, and economic circumstances or processes may interact to create borders or frontiers'.<sup>11</sup> Cognizant of the fact that 'border' and 'borderland' mean different things to different people,<sup>12</sup> the following terminology is proposed for the purpose of this paper. Thus, while borders, boundaries, borderlands and frontiers share common traits and often overlap, they are distinct phenomena. Borders are spatial *and* relational, they concomitantly divide and unite people and territories.<sup>13</sup> The border is therefore 'not a line', but 'signifies a relation' between core and periphery.<sup>14</sup> Borders are not static lines of separation, but dynamic spaces of negotiation, contestation and exchange. As Paasi forcefully argued, they function as institutions, discourses and symbols that organize space, identity and power.<sup>15</sup>

A few limitations of this paper can be signaled. They mostly reflect the heterogenous nature of the X-Border studies. Their diverse research questions, varied research design(s) and different units of analysis confine the scope for cross-case comparison and data synthesis. While the X-Border studies all employed qualitative research methods, they differ significantly in terms of their 'borderland' focus. While some studies analyze cross-border dynamics, others are broadly situated in borderlands or do not explicitly engage with border(land)s. The same observation applies to how X-Border studies engage—or rather do not engage—with conflict dynamics and different conflict types. Here again, units and levels of analysis vary considerably. While some studies focus on a particular locality, others cover entire regions (e.g. South Sudan) or a particular state border. X-Border studies also have different timeframes, with most studies focusing on 'current' dynamics. Only four studies focus predominantly on gender dynamics.<sup>16</sup>

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10 B. Parker, 'Toward an understanding of borderland processes', *American Antiquity* 71/1 (2006): 77–100.

11 Parker, 'Toward an understanding', p. 80.

12 Hämäläinen and Truett cautioned that 'Borderlands today signify everything from contact zones, imperial and national peripheries, and spaces of contest and hybridity to generic slippages of categories and identities.' P. Hämäläinen and S. Truett, 'On borderlands', *Journal of American History* 98/2 (2011): p. 349.

13 F. Barth, 'Boundaries and connections', In *Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values*, edited by A. P. Cohen, 17–36, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

14 B. Korf et al. 'Geographies of violence', p. 30.

15 A. Paasi, 'Boundaries as social processes: Territoriality in the world of flows', *Geopolitics* 3/1 (1998): 69–88.

16 S. A. Koshin, *Galkayo's Khat Economy*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2022; Majok, *War, Migration and Work*; Malou, *The Triple Burden*; H. H. Kochore and I. Bagaja, *Informal Trade, Gender and Conflict Dynamics on the new Kenya-Ethiopia Trade Corridor*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025.

Similarly, less attention across the group of studies was given to identity formation and culture in borderlands or on technology and its impacts.<sup>17</sup>

In response to these methodological challenges, this paper engages with the X-Border studies in differentiated ways. The first section proposes a broad analytical strategy to bring the X-Border studies into conversation with the existing interdisciplinary borderland literature. The subsequent section highlights select Horn of Africa borderlands (analysed by X-Border researchers) in terms of their 'boundary sets', providing context and highlighting differences and commonalities between them. The third section unearths variation of key causal processes in these borderlands to give a more differentiated understanding of 'borderland processes'. The final section then delves into the nexus between commodification and conflict, conceptualizing and empirically illustrating different trajectories of how these two variables interplay. Following the analytical detour of the next section, this report thus gradually moves from a more empirical to a more theoretical way of synthesizing the findings of the X-Border studies.

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17 Notable exceptions are P. Chonka, *Social Media and the Transnational Everyday: Mobility, Opportunity, and Risk in Hargeisa, Somaliland*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2022; A. M. Musa, *Transborder Mobile Money Platforms in the Greater Somali Economic Space*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024.

# Understanding Horn of Africa borderlands

Existing scholarship on borderlands in the Horn of Africa is extensive. It includes historical, ethnographic and policy-oriented studies. The literature tends to focus on specific localities.<sup>18</sup> Recurrent themes in the literature include marginalization and poverty, mobility and displacement, insecurity and conflict, identity formation as well as cross-border trading and livelihoods. With few exceptions comparative research that goes beyond single cases or adopts a long-term timeframe remains sparse. Offering one such exception, Khadiagala argued that boundaries in East Africa transformed from products of colonial imposition to durable, significant constructs of power, citizenship and regional identity following their conflictive postcolonial ‘domestication’. In simplistic fashion he distinguishes between ‘frontiers of insecurity’ and ‘borderlands of prosperity’, associating the former with weak state presence, ethnic violence and illicit trade and the latter with successful economic integration.<sup>19</sup> González-Ruibal made the case for a ‘deep-time perspective’ on state formation and state-building—and borderlands—in the Horn of Africa, combining an archaeological and political ecology perspective. Central to his argument is the role of infrastructure and the political entanglements it creates, notably how states lock peripheral societies into patterns of inequality, control and immobility.<sup>20</sup> More recently, Terrefe and Verhoeven drew attention to the central and historical role of infrastructure in producing sovereignty and political order in the region. Competing claims to power are closely associated with competing infrastructural projects as evidenced in Ethiopia’s imperial transport corridors, Djibouti’s sea ports or the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline connecting South Sudan to the Red Sea.<sup>21</sup>

The most prominent multi-local study of Horn of Africa borderlands remains Dereje Feyissa and Markus V. Hoehne’s edited volume *Borders and Borderlands as Resources* published in 2010. Bringing together case studies by leading area studies specialists, the authors criticize the view of colonial era boundaries as being primarily constraining. Instead, they contend that borderland situations—including being divided by an international boundary—afford local inhabitants a set of economic, political, identity and status and rights resources. These range from cross-border

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18 Given the more than a dozen borderlands in the region, a detailed review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper. For an introduction see World Bank, *From Isolation to Integration: The Borderlands of the Horn of Africa*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2020.

19 G. M. Khadiagala, ‘Boundaries in Eastern Africa’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 4/2 (2010): 266–278.

20 A. González-Ruibal, ‘Making and unmaking the state in the Horn of Africa: A deep-time perspective’, *Geforum* 133 (2022): 165–175.

21 B. Terrefe and H. Verhoeven, ‘The road (not) taken: The contingencies of infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa’, *Political Geography* 110 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103070>

trade and smuggling to alternative centres of political power and transnational mobilization, citizenship and protection for refugees.<sup>22</sup> Adopting a more essentialist geographical perspective, Markakis puts forward that much of the region's political history and episodes of violence—particularly in the case of Ethiopia—are explained by the double antagonism between 'highland core' (associated with the Abyssinian state tradition) and 'peripheral lowlands' as well as between central elites—the political centre—and peripheral populations.<sup>23</sup> Clapham's account of state formation in the Horn of Africa echoes this argument.<sup>24</sup>

During the past two decades, with the rising influence of Turkey, the Gulf States, Iran and other outside powers in the domestic politics and economies of the region, a rearrangement of centre-periphery relations at transnational level has taken place. Hence, Marsai and Szalai argue that the Saudi-Iran rivalry and the 2017 Gulf Crisis pitting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt against Qatar turned the Horn of Africa into an 'Arabic-Muslim borderland'. This occurred through a 'borderlandization process' as the region was sucked into these intra-Arab disputes through co-optation and coercion, leading to a geopolitical realignment. This dynamic was also visible in the Tigray war (2020–2022) and the UAE's military support to the Abiy government and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan.<sup>25</sup> Arguably, this type of macro-level 'borderlandization' has a long history in the region, with Ethiopia's and Kenya's containment policies aimed at curbing the spread of political Islam in the Somali borderlands reflecting colonial-era dynamics of 'Islamic-Christian' borderlands.

The Horn of Africa's borderland spaces cannot be understood in purely idiosyncratic terms or as expression of their regional context.<sup>26</sup> The global, including historical, borderland literature brought to the fore that borderlands are comparable, that political violence in borderlands is embedded in global historical forces, and that they are better understood through processes rather than as fixed geographical entities. Three tenets drawn from this literature are instructive to understand the body of work produced by the X-Border studies. They encourage us to move beyond narrow, region-specific interpretations and to identify broader mechanisms that govern life and conflict in these spaces.

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- 22 D. Feyissa and M. V. Hoehne, 'State borders and borderlands as resources: an analytical framework', in *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, edited by D. Feyissa and M. V. Hoehne, 1–26, Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer.
- 23 J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Oxford: James Currey, 2011.
- 24 C. Clapham, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*, London: Hurst, 2017.
- 25 V. Marsai and M. Szalai, 'The "Borderlandization" of the Horn of Africa in relation to the Gulf Region, and the effects on Somalia', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 38/3 (2023): 341–360. See also H. Verhoeven, 'The Gulf and the Horn: Changing geographies of security interdependence and competing visions of regional order', *Civil Wars* 20/3 (2018): 333–357.
- 26 The following paragraphs draw on T. Hagmann, *Making Sense of Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025.

The first tenet challenges the notion that African borderlands are exceptional or defined by distinctively African characteristics. For example, a resource frontier in the Horn of Africa may share more causal similarities with a comparable frontier in South Asia than with another type of borderland within Africa.<sup>27</sup> This perspective critiques the Africanist area studies tradition for being overly local and empiricist and insufficiently comparative and theoretical.<sup>28</sup> Similar critiques have been addressed to borderland studies in other regions of the world. For comparativists, the main motivation is to identify recurrent patterns and causal variation that manifest across different geographies, allowing scholars and policymakers to better situate a particular borderland within a broader set of borderland cases. The idea that borderland dynamics are uniquely African, European or Asian is rejected in favour of cross-regional comparison and generalization.

The second tenet concerns the key role of global historical forces—especially state formation and capitalist expansion—in shaping conflict and governance in borderlands. Summarizing the historical literature on the American frontier, Adelman and Aron argued that fluid and inclusive intercultural zones gradually evolved into ‘bordered’, rigid spaces as imperial and later national interests took hold.<sup>29</sup> During the eighteenth century, borderlands in North America featured extensive interaction between settlers and indigenous communities, often allowing the latter a degree of autonomy. In the nineteenth century, with nation-states striving for ‘exclusive domination over all territories within their borders’, these social relations and hierarchies ‘hardened’ and ‘rigidified’.<sup>30</sup> State formation dynamics driven by a a political ‘core’ are intimately linked to borderland processes and vice versa.<sup>31</sup> In other words, conflict and violence at the ‘margins of the state’ reflect evolving state formation dynamics that involve and are often initiated by the political centre.<sup>32</sup> As the X-Border studies highlight, this process is omnipresent in the Horn of Africa’s borderlands. As central authorities seek to expand or formalize control over ‘peripheries’, borderland communities resist or adapt in response, resulting in complex interactions between local and national actors. Concomitantly and further complicating the picture, political centres at times have an interest in maintaining economic informality and exceptional rule in their borderlands.

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27 M. B. Rasmussen and C. Lund, ‘Reconfiguring frontier spaces: The territorialization of resource control’, *World Development* 101 (2018): 388–399.

28 D. Coplan, ‘Introduction: From empiricism to theory in African border studies’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25/2 (2010): 1–5.

29 Adelman and Aron, ‘From Borderlands to Borders’.

30 Adelman and Aron, ‘From Borderlands to Borders’, 816–817.

31 R. Braun and O. Kienitz, ‘Comparative politics in borderlands: Actors, identities, and strategies’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 303–321; J. C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

32 V. Das and D. Poole, eds., *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2004.

Integration into global markets is the other key historical force shaping borderlands. Borderland regions may be excluded from—or partially or fully integrated into—global trade, supply chain and financial networks. While national governments often serve as prominent intermediaries in these processes, they are not the only actors involved. Transnational companies, armed groups, diaspora networks and humanitarian organizations shape licit and illicit borderland economies. Present-day conflicts in borderlands thus occur at the intersection of local livelihoods and global political and economic interconnections.

The third tenet moves away from viewing borderlands as geographically bounded ‘containers’ and instead focuses on ‘borderland processes’. This means paying attention to the dynamics that operate within and across these regions—such as migration, cultural interaction, economic exchange, and contestation over resources and authority—rather than on the borders themselves. Borderland processes are inherently multi-scalar and liminal, shaped by both inclusion and exclusion. They often reflect a dual logic, with borders functioning simultaneously as conduits and barriers. Understanding borderlands as a set of processes allows for a more nuanced analysis that captures their complexity. Four recurrent borderland processes in particular stand out.

The *first* is the paradox of state formation, in which borders both assert the authority of the nation-state and reveal its limitations.<sup>33</sup> Borderland communities may seek inclusion into the nation-state, for instance, by claiming citizenship, or they may resist incorporation when faced with coercive or extractive state practices. This creates cycles of resistance, negotiation and partial integration that characterize many border regions. The *second* process is territorialization, the ongoing reconfiguration of space through bordering and re-bordering.<sup>34</sup> Territorialization involves the division of territories into ‘complex and overlapping political and economic zones’, the rearrangement of ‘people and resources within these units’, and the delineation ‘how and by whom these areas can be used’.<sup>35</sup> The *third* process concerns the interplay between flows and frictions as borderlands connect rural with main markets, highlands with lowlands, consumers with producers, conflict zones with safe havens. This duality is taken advantage of by actors who generate revenue and gain authority by facilitating, overseeing or taxing the flow of ‘values’ (labour, commodities, capital) across boundaries. The social, political and economic organization of both the ‘circulation’ and ‘capture’ of cross-border flows therefore constitutes a key borderland process.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Braun and Kienitz, ‘Comparative politics in Borderlands’, 307.

34 R. D. Sack, ‘Human territoriality: a theory’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73/1 (1983): 55–74.

35 P. Vandergeest and N. L. Peluso, ‘Territorialization and state power in Thailand’, *Theory and Society* 24/2 (1995), p. 387.

36 T. Hagmann and F. Stepputat, eds., *Trade Makes States: Governing the Greater Somali Economy*, London: Hurst, 2023; P. Schouten, F. Stepputat and J. Bachmann, ‘States of circulation: Logistics off the beaten path’, *Environment and Planning D* 37/5 (2019): 779–793.

*Fourth*, borderlands often act as laboratories of techno-political experimentation. This can be observed in phenomena ranging from the use of new weapons and surveillance, state-of-the-art resource extraction including prospecting and drilling, humanitarian interventions or telecommunication and finance. With these novel forms of capitalism ‘from the margins’, peripheral spaces not only insert themselves into global commodity and finance flows, but produce idiosyncratic forms of capitalism as is the case with the Somali finance and telecommunication sector.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the fusion of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ rules, ‘contracts’ and ‘trust’—as well as global and local norms, procedures and regulations—are all part of this experimentation, producing governance arrangements that ‘work’ in the borderlands.<sup>38</sup>

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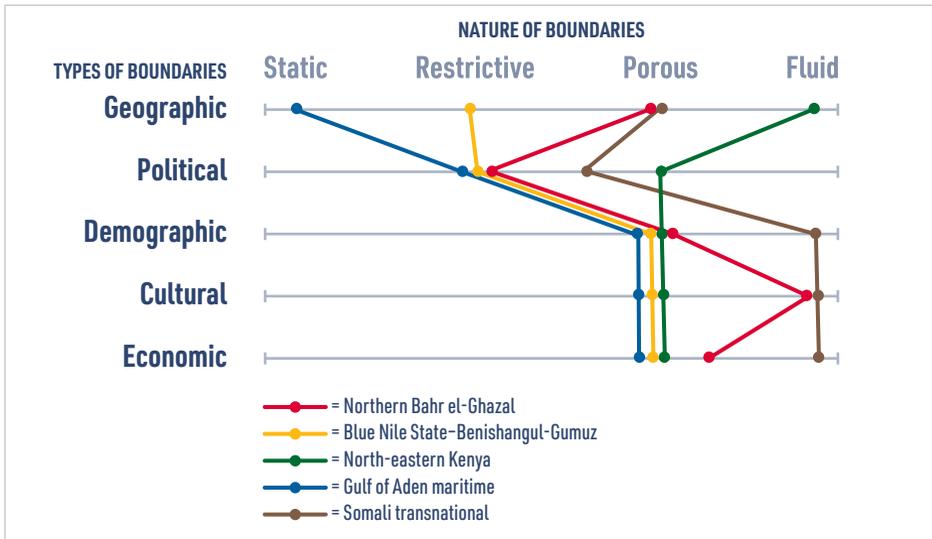
37 P. Chonka, G. Sahgal and M. Wasuge, ‘Mobile money, (dis)empowerment and state reconstruction in Somalia’s digital economy’, *International Affairs* 101/1 (2025): 117–136; Musa, *Transborder Mobile Money Platforms*.

38 Hagmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*.

# From fluid to fixed: Borderlands as 'boundary sets'

The diversity of the Horn of Africa's many borderlands is reflected in the X-Border studies, which examine markedly different empirical contexts. To contextualize the studies' main findings, a short review of the particularities of the analyzed borderlands is necessary. The variety of borderlands studied by the programme becomes apparent when considering their internal dynamics. To draw a comparison, Parker's taxonomy of borderlands and borderland processes is helpful (Figure 1).<sup>39</sup> Reviewing existing definitions of 'border', 'borderlands' and 'frontiers' as well as their overlapping meanings and dynamics, he argues that borders and frontiers exist both as opposites and in a continuum. He further defines and operationalizes borders and frontiers as 'boundary sets',<sup>40</sup> consisting of distinct geographic, political, demographic, cultural and economic boundaries.

Figure 1. Parker's taxonomy of borderlands and borderland processes<sup>41</sup>



39 Parker, 'Toward an understanding'. See also B. Parker, 'At the edge of empire: conceptualizing Assyria's Anatolian frontier ca. 700 B.C.', *Journal of Anthropological Archeology* 21/3 (2002): 371–395.

40 Parker, 'Toward an understanding', p. 81.

41 Adapted from Figure 2 in Parker, 'Toward an understanding', 81.

Borderlands are thus not simply territorial spaces at the margins of the state. Rather they are configurations of multiple, overlapping boundaries that can be studied and compared empirically as a continuum of ‘borderland dynamics’ that range from ‘static’ to ‘fluid’.<sup>42</sup> Parker operationalizes borderlands as a set or matrix of interacting geographic, political, demographic, cultural and economic boundaries.<sup>43</sup> Identifying these internal boundaries and their interplay draws our attention both to different boundary configurations within borderlands and to specific borderland processes that emerge between these boundaries. These borderland processes can then be further scrutinized, compared and theorized, which the following section of this report attempts to do. Applying this framework to the X-Border studies, the following ‘boundary sets’ stand out in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, Blue Nile State–Benishangul-Gumuz, northern Kenya, Gulf of Aden maritime and Somali transnational borderlands, i.e. the main borderlands clusters studied by the X-Border programme.

## Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland

Boundaries in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland (Map 1, Appendix 1) are geographically, economically and demographically porous, but politically restrictive. They are heavily influenced by the borderland’s proximity to Sudan and competing claims between Dinka communities on the South Sudanese side and Sudanese pastoralist groups including the Rizeigat and Misseriya. Geographically, the area features rivers, floodplains and savannah grasslands, with the Lol and Kiir rivers serving as ecological and administrative boundaries. This geography fosters both agricultural potential and competition over resources. Flooding and drought cycles have forced many borderland inhabitants into wage labour. Economically, the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland has transitioned from a subsistence-based system to a commodified, cash-driven economy. Trade with Sudan dominates, with goods such as grain, livestock and fuel flowing across the border at crossings like Kiir Adem and Majok Nyinthiou—despite challenges such as illegal taxation and checkpoints. Main commodities exported to Sudan are cattle, sorghum and millet while sugar, tea, cooking oil and manufactured products are imported. Labour migration to Sudanese agricultural schemes and urban centres sustains many families, although these workers face significant exploitation. Demographically, the borderland is home to the Malual Dinka, alongside Luo-speaking communities and nomadic groups from Sudan. On the South Sudanese side, the population includes returnees from Sudan and internally displaced persons (IDPs), creating a complex mix of identities and livelihoods. Traditional kinship networks have been eroding as younger generations migrate for wage labour, disrupting established social hierarchies. Shaped by colonial agreements, Sudan’s independence and South Sudan’s

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42 Parker does not provide a causal explanation for the emergence of a particular type of border or frontier nor does his framework account for causality in centre-periphery dynamics. Instead, it allows us to characterize and qualify borderlands inductively, a key requirement for comparison and external validity.

43 Geographic boundaries include topographic features, physical character, climate, flora and fauna, and natural resources. Political boundaries include political, administrative and military boundaries. Demographic boundaries consist of ethnic, population (density and movement), health and gender dynamics. Cultural boundaries are primarily linguistic, religious and evidenced in material cultures. Economic boundaries include agricultural production, commodity trading, resource extraction and local industries.

secession, the political boundary is militarized and governed by (former) officials belonging to the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and local militias. Traditional chiefs compete for control of taxation and trade. Northern Bahr el-Ghazal remains a politically sensitive area due to its proximity to Darfur and Kordofan, regions with overlapping cultural and economic ties but often divergent political and religious affiliations.<sup>44</sup>

## Blue Nile State–Benishangul-Gumuz borderland

While its geographical and political boundaries are restrictive, the demographic, cultural and economic boundaries of the borderland between Sudan's Blue Nile State and Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region are porous (Map 2, Appendix 1). This historical frontier region is marked by longstanding infrastructural neglect, cultural exchange and a thriving cross-border gold trade.<sup>45</sup> The borderland is shaped by the Blue Nile, Yabus and Tumat rivers, which are vital sources for irrigation and fishing, and by highland forests in Ethiopia transitioning to savannah and grasslands on the Sudanese side. Local livelihoods are dominated by pastoralism, cultivation of sorghum, sesame and maize along riverbanks, and gold mining in and around Qeissan and Kurmuk. Colonial-era boundaries split communities—in particular the Berta and Gumuz—who straddle both sides of the international border, while maintaining strong cultural and trading ties. Sudan's (formally) centralized governance—with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) controlling most of Blue Nile State and heavily involved in gold extraction—contrasts with Ethiopia's decentralized ethnic federalism. Domestic conflict on both sides of the border, cross-border rebel alliances between the SPLA/M and the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) in Ethiopia and disputes over farmland, in particular the Al-Fashaga triangle, intensified instability during recent years.<sup>46</sup> Cross-border ties between Gumuz, Berta and Ingessana communities shape trade, migration and labour patterns across the border. Large-scale displacement as a result of civil war in South Sudan after 2013 has further complicated the demographic makeup of the borderland, which suffers from severely limited health care and public services. Multiple linguistic groups coexist, including Arabic, Amharic, Tigrinya, Berta, Gumuz and Nuer speakers. Sudan's border communities follow Sunni Islam, while Benishangul-Gumuz is dominated by Animist and Christian populations. Economically, the borderland serves a trade corridor for artisanal gold, textiles and livestock while sorghum, millet and sesame are cultivated under rainfed and small-scale irrigation. Pastoralism is vital

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44 Majok, *War, Migration and Work* (2019); Kindersley and Majok, *Monetized Livelihoods*; N. Kindersley and J. D. Majok, *Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; J. D. Majok, *War, Migration and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross-border Migration from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2022; J. D. Majok, *War and the Borderland: Northern Bahr al-Ghazal during the Sudan Conflict*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024.

45 B. Zewde, 'Relations between Ethiopia and Sudan along the Western Ethiopian Frontier, 1898-1934', PhD thesis, London: SOAS, 1976.

46 A. Soliman and A. A. Demissie, *The 'conflict economy' of sesame in Ethiopia and Sudan*, London: Chatham House, 2024.

among the Berta, Gumuz and Nuer, who migrate seasonally for grazing.<sup>47</sup> Given that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) sits on the Blue Nile River, Benishangul-Gumuz is central to Ethiopia's state-building and economic policies.<sup>48</sup>

## Northern Kenya borderland

Kenya's north-eastern borderland between Mandera and Moyale is marked by geographically fluid boundaries (Map 3, Appendix 1). Its political, demographic, cultural and economic boundaries are predominantly porous. Bordering Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regional states to the north, the topography ranges from low-lying, arid zones to semi-arid ecological zones in higher elevations. The development of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor, part of which connects Moyale with Isiolo, has led to disputes over land and resource access.<sup>49</sup> Politically, the borderland has been militarized with the presence of Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and Kenyan border patrol units who seek to contain incursions by al-Shabaab and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). The increasing securitization of the border has impacted trade and mobility, with growing surveillance and border closures disrupting commerce and local livelihoods. Increased local government autonomy on the Kenyan side, the result of post-2010 devolution, has led to more localized competition over territory and public resources. On the Ethiopian side, competing national and regional state forces, at times following divergent political goals, complicate borderland governance. Local communities such as the Borana, Gabra, Somali, Oromo and Burji interact through trade, pastoral networks and political alliances that shift between competition and cooperation. Seasonal migration and population movements are defining features of the borderland, with refugees, IDPs and economic migration shaping demographics. Conflicts in Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regions have displaced thousands, with many seeking refuge in Kenya. Dominant languages include Borana (a dialect of Afaan Oromoo), Somali and Swahili. The latter serves as lingua franca in commercial hubs like Moyale. The borderland is defined by trade flows connecting local livelihoods, including livestock and agriculture, to broader regional markets. Major tradable commodities include livestock, grains and khat, with cattle,

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47 M. Salah and E. Ille, *How Sudan's Gold Boom is Changing Labour Relations in Blue Nile State*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020; E. Ille, M. Salah and T. Birhanu, *From Dust to Dollar: Gold mining and trade in the Sudan-Ethiopia borderland*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; Anonymous, *Resistance in the Peripheries: Civil War and Fragile Peace in Sudan and Ethiopia's Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Anonymous, *War and the Borderland: Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea at a Time of Conflict*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024.

48 T. Lavers, *et al.*, *Dams, Power, and the Politics of Ethiopia's Renaissance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

49 A. J. Browne, *LAPSSET: The History and Politics of an Eastern African Megaproject*, Nairobi & London: Rift Valley Institute, 2015; J. Mosley and E. E. Watson, 'Frontier transformations: development visions, spaces and processes in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 10/3 (2016): 452-475.

goats, camels, maize and beans imported from Ethiopia and a broad range of manufactured goods exported to Ethiopia.<sup>50</sup>

## Gulf of Aden maritime borderland

The Gulf of Aden maritime borderland spans between Yemen, the breakaway Republic of Somaliland and Puntland (Map 4, Appendix 1). Its geographical boundary is static as the land-sea divide is fixed. Its political boundary is restrictive, and its demographic, cultural and economic boundaries are porous. Situated between the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden borderland connects the coastlines of the Somali Plateau—consisting of coastal cliffs, sandy beaches and mountain ranges—with the Arabian Peninsula. Its prime local natural resources are fish, livestock, frankincense and minerals, which are shipped from Somali seaports along the coast. Multiple, fragmented and heavily internationalized political boundaries shape the Gulf of Aden as one of the world's foremost shipping lanes and a critical chokepoint. Since the end of the 2000s, US, European, Chinese and regional powers have patrolled international waters to protect commercial ships from piracy and arms trafficking and, since 2023, from Houthi attacks. The Yemeni shores are predominantly controlled by the Sana government while the Somali coast is governed by the Somaliland and Puntland administrations. Contested concessions of and investments in the main northern Somali ports Berbera (Somaliland) and Bosaso (Puntland) to DP World involve the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia in governing the Gulf of Aden 'land-sea network'.<sup>51</sup> Demographically, the maritime borderland is home to diverse ethnic and lineage-based communities including the Isaaq in Somaliland and the Majerteen and Warsangeli in Puntland. Since 2014, Yemeni refugees have settled on the Somali coast. Many arrived through Bosaso, which has seen rapid demographic growth over the past decade.<sup>52</sup> Somali coastal communities maintain important religious and cultural connections with Yemen.<sup>53</sup> These build on longstanding *dhow* trade and migration networks that blend cultural influences across the sea. The borderland's economic boundary is dominated by voluminous livestock exports—particularly goats, sheep and camels—to the Arabian Peninsula as well as small to medium-scale fisheries.<sup>54</sup>

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50 H. H. Kochore, *Restructuring the Margins: Emerging Political Orders in Kenya's Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025; Kochore and Bagaja, *Informal Trade, Gender and Conflict Dynamics*.

51 J. Dua, *Bosaso and the Gulf of Aden: Changing Dynamics of a Land-sea Network*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020.

52 T. Hagmann et al., *Commodified Cities: Urbanization and Public Goods in Somalia*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2022.

53 Including between Harti of Somalia and the Hadrami of Yemen.

54 N. Majid and K. Abdirahman, *Mobility, Trust and Exchange: Somali and Yemen's Cross-border Maritime Economy*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019; J. Dua, *Chokepoints and Corridors: Ordering Maritime Space in the Western Indian Ocean*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; Dua, *Bosaso and the Gulf of Aden*; B. Terrefe, *Ethiopia's Red Sea Politics: Corridors, Ports and Security in the Horn of Africa*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025.

## Somali transnational borderland

The Somali transnational borderland—the proverbial ‘greater Somali economy’<sup>55</sup>—features porous geographical boundaries, fluid demographic, cultural and economic boundaries and political boundaries that range from restrictive to porous. It encompasses the predominantly Somali inhabited territories of the Horn, which were separated by colonial boundaries, including parts of Djibouti, eastern Ethiopia, Somaliland, Puntland and the Federal Republic of Somalia with its capital Mogadishu and northeastern Kenya (Map 5a, Appendix 1). The transborder geography comprises arid and semi-arid landscapes, riverine ecosystems, rugged terrains and rapidly growing urban centres along the coast and inland. Animal husbandry dominates in arid areas where communities rely on camels, cattle, sheep and goats, while agriculture concentrates in riverine regions, where cash crops are cultivated. Transport corridors along major roads interconnect this borderland – as well as the Ethiopian and Kenyan highland and the Somali lowlands – across political entities. The Berbera, Galkayo, Baidoa-Mogadishu and Garissa-Kismayo corridors are prominent examples (Maps 5b-c, Appendix 1). A mosaic of *de facto* and *de jure* international, national and sub-national boundaries and competing claims to territorial control stand out. National and local authorities, military forces including KDF, ENDF or al-Shabaab compete over the control of economic hubs and the taxation of commodity flows deriving from trading livestock, agricultural produce and consumer goods. Considerable parts of south-central Somalia are governed and taxed by al-Shabaab. Conflict over trade derived revenues—for example between Somaliland and Puntland (Lasanod) or between Puntland and Galmudug (Galkayo)—regularly disrupts and reroutes commodity flows. Despite rural-urban and genealogical divides, kinship and translocal family ties, shared (Somali) language and Sunni Islam constitute the ‘social infrastructure’<sup>56</sup> that underpins the flow of people, goods and ideas within this Somali transnational borderland. This transnational economic space extends to Eastleigh, Dubai and the global diaspora where Somali capital and persons concentrate. Livestock exports to Kenya and the Gulf states and commodity trading—including textiles, electronics and fuel—link local economies with international markets. A distinctly Somali digital financial infrastructure, consisting of mobile money, telecommunications and

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55 Hagmann and Steputat, *Trade Makes States*.

56 N. Carrier and H. Elliott, ‘Trust as social infrastructure in Somali trading networks’, in *Trade Makes States*, 35–56.

remittances, has enabled seemingly borderless economic transactions within and beyond the borderland.<sup>57</sup>

## Internal logics of borderlands

A panoply of borderland dynamics becomes apparent when considering the internal boundary dynamics of the Horn of Africa's borderlands. They range from more to less militarized; from shorter to global cross-border supply chains; from relatively simple, dyadic political contestation to complex, multi-scalar political competition; and from demographically homogenous to more heterogenous boundaries. The five borderland clusters studied by X-Border represent an important, but by no means exhaustive sample of the region's borderlands.<sup>58</sup> Even with this proviso in mind, considerable empirical variation exists between the X-Border borderlands. While the summary depictions of their boundary sets above are schematic, lack local nuance and do not account for changes over time, they point to complex interactions between—in particular—geographic, political and economic boundary logics. If most borderlands studied have politically restrictive boundaries, this primarily reflects attempts by state authorities to govern, control or tax cross-border flows—in turn a reflection of state-builders' efforts to impose 'exclusive territorial control'.<sup>59</sup> If these efforts fail or remain incomplete—with cross-border smuggling and security threats continuing—this is precisely because geographic, demographic, cultural and economic boundaries are often porous and fluid, undermining state control. Moreover, one could argue, it might be both rational and cost-effective for states and political centres to allow for informality and legal ambiguity in their peripheries, given the vital economic and security functions the latter play at national levels. Arguably, the hardest and most restrictive political boundary of the borderlands studied is not one between nation-states, but in areas controlled by al-Shabaab.

Parker's taxonomy (Figure 1) illustrates the need to compare borderlands in reference to their internal dynamics and differences.<sup>60</sup> Much of the applied Africanist borderlands literature has 'flattened' borderlands by highlighting broadly shared trends—for example the prominence

57 K. Abdirahman, *Contested Commerce: Revenue and State-making in the Galkayo Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; A. M. Musa, *Las Anod: City at the Margins. The Politics of Borderland Trade between Somaliland and Puntland*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; M. M. Abdi, *Regularly Irregular: Varieties of Informal Trading in the Ethiopian-Somaliland Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; T. Hagmann, *Trade, Taxes and Tensions in the Somali Borderlands*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; S. A. Koshin, *Galkayo's Khat Economy*, M. M. Abdi, *Fixing the Price: The Politics of the Khat Trade between Ethiopia and Somaliland*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2022; A. Edle, *Brokering Trade Routes: The Political Economy of Checkpoints along the Baidoa Corridor*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024; J. Mohammed, *Navigating Trade Controls: The Political Economy of Checkpoints along Somalia's Garissa Corridor*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024; P. Schouten, *Paying the Price: The Political Economy of Checkpoints in Somalia*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024; A. M. Musa, *Transborder Mobile Money Platforms*.

58 Most notably leaving aside borderlands that feature 'hardened' political and demographic, including ethno-linguistic, boundaries, for example the Ethiopian-Eritrean borderland.

59 Adelman and Aron, 'From borderlands to borders'.

60 Parker, 'Toward and understanding'.

of cross-border trading, the importance of transboundary cross-border social ties or the existence of displaced communities—with little consideration of the fact that these dynamics, while similar in appearance, are embedded in and driven by very different boundary sets and interactions. The X-Border studies offer rich empirical details highlighting borderlands' internal dynamics. They illustrate how each borderland represents a particular constellation of overlapping geographic, political, demographic, cultural and political perimeters, which not only interact but are influenced by economic and political decisions and interests in far-away places including national and international capitals and private actors.

# Comparing borderland processes

The Horn of Africa borderlands studied by X-Border authors differ not only in terms of their internal ‘boundary sets’. They also showcase dissimilar empirical outcomes of similar causal mechanisms that animate borderland processes and conflict dynamics. When considering the forementioned borderlands as paradigmatic or ‘most different’ cases, various intermediate variables that shape conflicts in borderlands become apparent.<sup>61</sup> Table 1 attempts to capture this variety by contrasting the five borderlands in terms of a selected number of ‘master’ processes, i.e. dynamic features of the five border regions as highlighted by the X-Border studies. For comparative purposes, this juxtaposition is deliberately reductionist and does not do justice to case specific complexities. It focuses on select characteristic processes in the five borderlands with the aim of highlighting how broadly similar causal processes take on distinct empirical manifestations.

The main points for comparison chosen in Table 1 draw both on the global borderland literature and on recurrent themes in the X-Border studies: commodification, resource control, logistics, financing, circulation and capture, and revenue generation. *Commodification*, in the Marxian sense, refers to the transformation of ‘use value’ to ‘exchange value’. It encompasses land, labour, production, material and symbolic assets as well as mobility—for instance of people and of commodities moving across borders.<sup>62</sup> *Resource control* highlights the main material assets—both renewable and non-renewable—whose appropriation and accumulation is contested between local, national and transnational actors in the borderland studied. *Logistics* denote ‘the art and knowledge of organizing circulation’.<sup>63</sup> It includes infrastructural, technological and political components and is central to how commodities and people move across borders. The item *financing* draws attention to the different ways in which access to capital, savings, risk management, insurance and transactions are organized across borderlands. *Circulation and capture* refer to the twin causal process of the facilitation and disruption of commodity flows—and, more broadly, of different types of values—in borderland economies.<sup>64</sup> Finally, *revenue generation* sheds light on the main strategy by which dominant groups in the borderland

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61 It is important to note that the five borderlands were not initially sampled based on a ‘most different’ case study strategy. Studies for each borderland vary considerably in terms of their approach, empirical scope, geographical extent and temporality.

62 C. Hermann, *The Critique of Commodification: Contours of a Post-Capitalist Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

63 D. Cowen, *Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

64 F. Stepputat and T. Hagmann, ‘Introduction: Trade and state formation in Somali East Africa and beyond’, in *Trade Makes States*, 1–34.

**Table 1. Borderland processes in the Horn of Africa**

	Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland	Blue Nile State - B. Gumuz borderland	Northeast Kenya borderland	Gulf of Aden maritime borderland	Transnational Somali borderland(s)
<b>Commodification</b>	wage and 'militarized' labour	'gold rush'	'corridor-making' (LAPSSET)	livestock export boom	mobile money platforms
<b>Resource control</b>	land; labour; markets	minerals (gold); cross-border trade	pastoral land; commodity flows	freight; marine resources; port concessions	commodity flows
<b>Logistics</b>	dirt roads; bicycles, bikes and trucks	metal detectors; mercury; mobile crushers; dirt roads	OSBP; highways; high-capacity trucks	ports; dhows; containers	paved roads; checkpoints; trucks and light vehicles
<b>Financing</b>	wages and debt	local credit; barter	loans and grants; 'economy of anticipation'	'franca valuta'; insurance	remittances; translocal credit
<b>Circulation and capture</b>	checkpoints	licensing; formalization; smuggling	formal and informal checkpoints	chokepoints; 'protection economy'	checkpoints
<b>Revenue generation</b>	extraction; taxation	taxation; militarized protection	formal and informal taxation	internationalized protection economy	taxation; protection; licensing

produce revenue streams by inserting themselves into commercial and political transactions across space.

The following sections draw heavily on the empirics of the X-Border studies to describe and analyse these themes. Direct quotations are referenced. Please see Appendix 2 for the full list of studies.<sup>65</sup>

65 Please see also <https://xcept.riftvalley.net> for a timeline of the studies.

## Commodification

In Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, commodification of labour and agricultural lands following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 reconstituted the borderland around an increasingly market-based economy. The search for income pushed inhabitants—especially youth and women—into wage labour, often across the border in Sudan, and led men to join armed groups. Commercialization of vast tracts of fertile land in regions like Alel led to a rise of cash-for-labour arrangements, sharecropping and landlessness. In the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland, a veritable ‘gold rush’ since the 2000s has led to a shift from communal gold mining to profit-driven artisanal and semi-mechanized mining. This transformed gold from a supplemental income source to a central livelihood pillar. In the northern Kenya borderland, commodification of cross-border trading by small-scale female traders has intersected with LAPSET corridor development, trade formalization and devolution. In the Gulf of Aden maritime borderland, multiple commodification dynamics have set in since Somali state collapse in 1991—including competition between Berbera and Bosaso sea ports.<sup>66</sup> The most significant change has been the dramatic rise of Somali livestock exports to Arab Gulf states following the lifting of livestock bans and the establishment of quarantine controls.<sup>67</sup> In the transnational Somali borderlands, commodity flows have expanded both in volume and geographical scale—reaching places such as Eastleigh, Addis Ababa, Dubai and others—during recent decades. Digital financial platforms and mobile money wallets such as Zaad and EVC+, which emerged out of the Somali telecommunication industry and *xawala* remittances, have enabled and intensified this process.

## Resource control

In the South Sudan–Sudan borderland resource competition centres predominantly on agricultural lands and water access, labour and markets. Control over territory provides political-military actors an opportunity to tax, resettle populations and expand patronage networks.<sup>68</sup> Gold and its derivate revenue streams—fees paid to local communities, cross-border smuggling and trading in fuel, consumer goods and weapons—are the most coveted resource over which local communities, miners’ associations, Sudan’s Military Industrial Corporation and RSF and Ethiopian officials compete in the Blue Nile State–Benishangul-Gumuz borderland. In and around Moyale at the Kenya–Ethiopia border, resource control is most contested regarding pastoral lands, as their value increased because of investments in the LAPSET corridor and the tarmacking of the Isiolo-Moyale road. In the Gulf of Aden maritime borderland resource competition has centred on marine resources, pitting local Somali fishers against industrial trawlers, with the mobility of freight passing through the sea involving *dhows*, container ships and tankers, alongside the sub-contracting of strategic sea ports to international companies and powers. Finally, from the Somali parts of Ethiopia to southern Somalia, resource control

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66 F. Stepputat *et al.*, ‘The revival and re-embedding of Somali ports’, in *Trade Makes States*, 77–100.

67 P. D. Little, *Somalia: Economy without a State*, Bloomington and Oxford: Indiana University Press and James Currey, 2003.

68 A dynamic that is also at play in other parts of the South Sudan–Sudan border. See N. Kindersley, ‘*The Fuel is Us: Water, Oil and Debt on the Sudan-South Sudan Borderlands*’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2025.

crystallizes around trade corridors and market centres given that customs revenues—both formal and informal—constitute the main source of public and political finance.<sup>69</sup>

## Logistics

While the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland is a highly fragmented ‘low-tech’ logistics frontier that is easily interrupted by seasonal floodings, it is nevertheless a key node in regional trade—with markets in Gok Machar, Warawar and Nyamlel. Traders and labourers move on unpaved roads using various means of transport, including bicycles, motorbikes, pickup trucks and animal carts. In the Sudanese–Ethiopian ‘gold’ frontier, transport infrastructure is equally underdeveloped, relying on footpaths and dirt roads, as well as river transport. Arguably, changes in mining logistics—including the use of metal detectors, mercury, crushers and heavy machinery—have been a key driver of conflict and commodification in this borderland. In the Kenyan–Ethiopian borderland, the establishment of the One-Stop Border Post (OSBP) as part of the LAPSET and the tarmacking of the Isiolo–Moyale–Hawassa road represent the most important logistical development.<sup>70</sup> This upgrade facilitates transport for high-capacity trucks to move grain, fertilizers and other industrial products in bulk. At the same time cross-border trade in the Moyale area continues across informal routes, as the logistical upgrade further bifurcated ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ trade. In and around the Gulf of Aden, logistics and infrastructure entail a mesmerizing combination of local (often socially embedded) and international (very much standardized) technologies.<sup>71</sup> They include non-containerized shipping, namely Indian and Pakistani dhows operated by Somali and Yemeni traders, container ships and Somali port infrastructures ranging from the very rudimentary to the state-of-the-art operating systems of Berbera port managed by DP World. Somali transnational trade borderlands exhibit an adaptive logistics shaped by historical trade routes, political fragmentation, kinship relations and mobile money flows. They include more and less formalized trade corridors and rely heavily on mobility, including of livestock, and on trucks and light vehicles for transport.

## Financing

Seasonal and migrant wage labour are the most prominent income-generation strategies in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland. Short-term credit systems such as *jurula*, a debt arrangement, have become widespread as traders, small business owners and subsistence vendors rely on daily or weekly loans to sustain operations.<sup>72</sup> The financial landscape of the Blue Nile State–Benishangul–Gumuz borderland is marked by a combination of informal credit systems, gold related barter and monetized social capital that facilitate cross-border flows. In

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69 Haggmann, *Trade, Taxes and Tensions*.

70 One of seven OSPB’s in Kenya, the Moyale OSPB was finished in 2018 and inaugurated in 2020. Highway upgrading as part of the ‘Trans-African Highway’ has been co-funded by the African Development Bank.

71 In addition to X-Border studies see also J. Dua, *Captured at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

72 Majok, *War, Migration and Work* (2022).

northern Kenya, at the Ethiopian border, the financing of cross-border trading relies on similar informal lending, group-based credit and barter schemes. Importantly, grants and loans by the Kenyan government, the African Development Bank and international donors are a main financial source for investments in the trade corridor, sparking an ‘economy of anticipation’ that undergirds competition over local land and livelihoods.<sup>73</sup> A different set of financial modalities is at play in the Gulf of Aden maritime borderland. It includes, first, the use of *franco valuta*, allowing Somali importers to ship goods from the Gulf using foreign currency that is either earned abroad or wired via money transfer by bypassing the formal (Somali) banking system.<sup>74</sup> Second, formal insurance and risk management mechanisms protect global shipping from kidnapping and ransom by Somali pirates while the latter are ‘insured’ through clan-based *diya* payments. Translocal kinship-based remittances and credits, including from the diaspora, are the main financial mechanism across the Somali transnational borderlands. They facilitate financial transactions and investments in the import-dependent and dollarized ‘greater Somali economy’.

## Circulation and capture

The Northern Bahr el-Gazal borderland has seen a proliferation of checkpoints manned by various government affiliated forces, including the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF), National Security Services (NSS), former ethnic militias and local administrations. While traders and communities seek open borders for economic survival, multiple layers of taxation and revenue capture by state and non-state actors on both sides of the border force them to navigate predation along trade routes.<sup>75</sup> In the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland, military actors, informal traders and transnational smugglers compete over the circulation and capture of gold flows. Mining regulatory bodies like the Sudanese Mineral Resources Company (SMRC) and Ethiopia’s Ministry of Mines and Petroleum attempt, but often fail, to license, regulate and tax gold streams. In the northern Kenya borderland, circulation and capture follows a dual logic: While large-scale, formal trade transits through the OSPB governed by the national government—the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) in particular—the bulk of small-scale informal cross-border trading avoids the OSPB and is taxed by the county government. In the Gulf of Aden maritime borderland ports, quarantine stations and maritime corridors are the main sites where the circulation and capture of livestock and consumer goods intersect. Export licences and health certificates issued by the Somaliland and Puntland authorities are key state strategies to formalize the circulation of transregional maritime trade. Finally, in the transnational Somali borderland, checkpoints manned by various state and non-state actors (national and local) as well as by al-Shabaab are ubiquitous in capturing commodity flows.

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73 J. Cross, ‘The economy of anticipation: Hope, infrastructure, and economic zones in South India’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35/3 (2015): 224–237.

74 For historical context see V. Jamal, ‘Somalia: Understanding an unconventional economy’, *Development and Change* 19/2 (1988): 203–265.

75 Political and military elites like Hussein Abdel Badi or Tong Aken not only levy (informal) taxes on goods moving through their areas of control, but benefit from trade through direct investments in transport, warehouses, and fiscal structures.

## Revenue generation

In the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland revenue generation is mostly extractive and predatory as military and paramilitary actors control transport, migration routes and resource extraction sites. Landowners and investors exploit poor returnees and migrants as wage laborers and militias recruit young men. In the Blue Nile State–Benishangul-Gumuz borderland, taxation along main trade routes and gold markets such as Belguwa—where a doubling of levies imposed by the SMRC led to widespread protests in 2018—and militarized protection by paramilitary groups and local militias are main sources of revenue generation. In the northern Kenya borderland formal taxation of cross-border trade co-exists with informal extraction of state and county officials who allow the movement of goods across borders in exchange for bribes. Political elites offer protection in exchange for allegiance or payments. In the Gulf of Aden maritime borderland a host of local and international actors—ranging from local fishermen, sailors, traders, private security companies, international naval forces and insurance firms—generate revenues from maritime trade. The resulting protection economy operates both within and alongside formal state structures, blurring the lines between legal and illegal, formal and informal.<sup>76</sup> In the transnational Somali borderland taxation, gatekeeping and protection are main revenue generation strategies and they predominantly revolve around commodity trading.

# Theorizing commodification and conflict in borderlands

The juxtaposition of causal processes in the five borderlands studied by X-Border highlights the degree to which ‘the margins’ of the Horn of Africa have been ‘monetized’.<sup>77</sup> In South Sudan, the rise of cash-based economies has led to risky labour migrations as impoverished borderland inhabitants turn to agricultural and manual labour for survival. On the Sudan–Ethiopia borderland gold mining ‘shifted from a long-term, family- and community-based livelihood strategy to a short-term entrepreneurial pursuit’ driven by ‘military-backed actors and external investors’<sup>78</sup>—creating new types of labour relations and resource governance that exclude local communities. In the northern Kenyan borderland, commodification is not merely the transformation of goods into tradeable items. It also encapsulates the regulation, gendering and politicization of trade practices as a result of the OSBP in Moyale.

As the Gulf of Aden maritime studies show, commodification is layered and expansive, thriving in liminal spaces where legality, informality and kinship intersect. The leasing of port facilities to entities such as DP World illustrates how maritime infrastructure itself becomes a commodity subject to international investment, rivalry and conflict. Across the Somali inhabited borderlands, commodification is shaped less by formal state institutions than by a patchwork of actors that include local elders, militia, police forces such as the Liyu Police in eastern Ethiopia, and traders themselves. Commodities such as livestock, khat and consumer goods flow through ‘micro-routes’ where state presence is variable and where actors negotiate fees, permits and protection on a case-by-case basis. One of the starkest examples of commodification can be seen in the role of checkpoints, which convert mobility itself into a commodity. Along trade corridors such as Baidoa and Garissa, traders pay taxes not to centralized state authorities, but to a multitude of checkpoint operators—al-Shabaab, federal member states, clan militias and sometimes even bandits—each extracting value from goods in transit.

All of the above illustrates how borderlands are critical sites of commodification, acting as transit points where subsistence goods—such as grain or livestock, but also land and labour—enter market systems. This process is not unique to or limited to borderlands, nor is it new. Yet the X-Border studies highlight how borderlands in the Horn of Africa are often where the transition from subsistence systems to monetized markets occurs most visibly.<sup>79</sup> Analyzing the relation between commodification and conflict dynamics in Horn of Africa borderlands invites

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77 Kindersley and Majok, *Monetized Livelihoods*.

78 Ille, Salah and Birhanu, *From Dust to Dollar*, p. 5 and 39.

79 Thomas, *Moving Towards Markets*.

us to move from single case observations to spelling out recurrent patterns at a more abstract level. Theorizing findings from the X-Border studies,<sup>80</sup> the following four propositions deserve highlighting in view of formulating an (emerging) theory of commodification and conflict in borderlands.

## Borderlands connect ‘value’ across space

At the most abstract level, borderlands ‘connect’ the extraction, appropriation and marketization of ‘value’—whether natural resources, labour or other physical assets—across borders and locations both near and far, bringing them into ‘circulation’ with each other. This occurs through economic, logistical and social processes that include economic exchange, the transportation of commodities and a broad range of financial mechanisms—including credit, insurance, protection and social trust between producers, brokers, middlemen and consumers. Borderlands thus act as multi-scalar transmission belts that allow for the circulation and capture of goods in a constant interplay between flow and friction. This process is accompanied by a (re-)distribution of revenue streams—‘gains’ and ‘losses’—that are derived from these commodity flows. Depending on economic and political macro-events elsewhere trade networks and associated commodity flows either ‘expand’ or ‘contract’. Value chains and commodity flows react to conflict and insecurity, constantly adapting routes as producers, traders and transporters seek to minimize capture and associated loss of profits.

## Commodity flows are governed competitively

Different actors compete over the governance of these commodity flows and their associated revenue streams in and across borderlands. They have diverse means available to capture revenue streams from commodity flows at different stages of the value chain. This includes resource control and appropriation at the initial site of production (e.g. gold mining in Sudan, fishing off the Puntland coast); the generation of revenue streams and extraction of value, usually based on taxation, once commodities are in circulation;<sup>81</sup> and, finally, the capture of profits in marketplaces where commodities are sold—this can be final markets, intermediary markets or simply an additional level of brokerage. Coercion used by different actors—whether local communities, militia, armed forces or other—is very much spatial and focuses on neuralgic infrastructural sites. The key intervening variables that shape these processes include the materiality of commodities transacted within and across borderlands; the type of logistical infrastructure in place; the type and number of actors competing over the ‘governance’ of these

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80 In addition to the X-Border studies this section draws on the work by Peer Schouten, Finn Stepputat and the author, which in turn is inspired by state formation theory. P. Schouten, *Roadblock Politics: The Origins of Violence in Central Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022; T. Hagmann and F. Stepputat, ‘Tilly in the tropics: Trade and Somali state-making’, in *Trade Makes States*, 171–200.

81 Taxation can be more ‘sporadic’ as in the case of the green border between Ethiopia’s Somali region and Somaliland or more ‘systematic’ along al-Shabaab-controlled trade routes, depending on the bureaucratic capacities of political and military actors involved in taxation.

commodity flows; and the geographical features that allow or make it difficult to impose capture and chokepoints.<sup>82</sup>

## Borderland actors mobilize ‘boundary sets’

Borderland communities and small and medium size traders typically have an interest in and depend on the free, uninterrupted flow of commodities across borders. In all the borderlands studied by the X-Border project, local communities, traders, and political and military entrepreneurs insert themselves within commodity flows to capture revenues. Importantly, borderland actors along the value chain are not passive agents. Instead, they mobilize or make use of the borderland’s internal geographic, political, demographic, cultural and economic boundaries—Parker’s ‘boundary sets’ (Figure 1)—to move goods and persons, to maintain social relations or to benefit from price differentials. Borderland actors constantly need to insert themselves into changing transnational dynamics driven by conflict, inflation, climate change and other macro dynamics happening elsewhere. It is by mobilizing these ‘boundary sets’ specific to each borderland that this insertion takes place. For example, having shared ethnic ties with groups across the border is but one way to mobilize the ‘demographic border’ and to circumvent ‘capture’ by other actors. This is how borderland actors of different stripes make the borderland ‘productive’ in the sense of Feyissa and Hoehne’s ‘borderlands as resources’.<sup>83</sup>

## Borderlands as sites of class formation

By definition—and as the South Sudan X-Border studies emphasize—the interplay between commodification and conflict in borderlands accentuates social differentiation in those borderlands.<sup>84</sup> Militarized rent economies, declining subsistence livelihoods, and restructured mobility deepen the social division of labour, gender relations and inter-generational dynamics. Developments in digital finance and communication technologies that build on historical connections and transborder communities intensify circulatory flows. They provide both economic opportunities—for livelihoods, survival and accumulation—and at the same time accentuate socio-economic inequalities and vulnerabilities. Borderlands are thus not merely sites of smuggling or conflict but also resource and labour reserves where populations are disciplined into precarious, low-wage work under difficult conditions.

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82 Stepputat and Hagmann, ‘Introduction: Trade and state formation’.

83 Feyissa and Hoehne, ‘State borders and borderlands’.

84 Thomas, *Moving Towards Markets*; Kindersley, *The Fuel is Us*.

# Conclusion and policy implications

All borderlands are not created equal, but many borderlands are animated by comparable causal mechanisms producing an array of different empirical manifestations. Focusing on the Horn of Africa, the X-Border studies represent this expansive borderland diversity, but also the different ways in which commodification, resource control, logistics, financing, circulation and capture, and revenue generation operate. Concomitantly, the studies bring to the fore the contemporaneous and global character of Horn of Africa borderlands and a co-occurrence of conflict dynamics and supply chain capitalism. As ‘transmission belts’ they connect supposedly peripheral spaces with political centres and global networks, ensuring the region’s—often conflictual—integration into transnational flows.

Given their complexity and variety, no one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions should be formulated for borderlands. Instead, the following policy relevant insights coming out of the X-Border studies are worth noting.

First, policy-makers need to understand both the drivers and outcomes of commodification dynamics and their variegated impacts on conflicts in borderlands. Commodification not only reinforces unequal development, poverty and destitution, but has consequences for the ‘hinterland’—including political centres—given that borderlands operate as ‘transmission belts’ that connect values across far-away distances.

Second, commodification is not limited to the capturing of revenue streams or the generation of ‘political finance’<sup>85</sup> for political elites. Instead, it shapes the very nature of conflicts, intensifies grievances at local level and makes peace harder to achieve. Communal conflicts over land—often portrayed as ‘ethnic’ or ‘local’—are a case in point. They are the combined outcome of unchecked commodification of land and labour and inadequate state laws and policies governing property rights.

Third, the policy agenda of formalizing (cross-border) trade or property rights in response to what is seen as predominant informality in borderlands is misplaced. As the X-Border studies underline, governments are often the driving force in licensing private—including armed—groups who produce the very informality that states seek to end. This observation extends to official customs rules in the region, which produce informality because they are out of sync with the real-life economy and trading.

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85 A. de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

Fourth, a considerable part of the political violence observed in borderlands is initiated by military entrepreneurs—both state and non-state—who make strategic use of coercion, extraction and predation to generate revenues by appropriating or (re-)orienting—or both—the circulation of values in and across borderlands.

Finally, financing modalities including credit, lease and debt play crucial and so far, underappreciated roles in driving the twin process of commodification and conflict in borderlands. They allow dominant groups situated both within and beyond the borderland to create, exploit and extract exchange value to the detriment of weaker segments of society—including women, youth and elderly borderland inhabitants. Future research and policy interventions are needed to consider and closely follow these dynamics.

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# Appendix 1: Maps

## Map 1: Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland

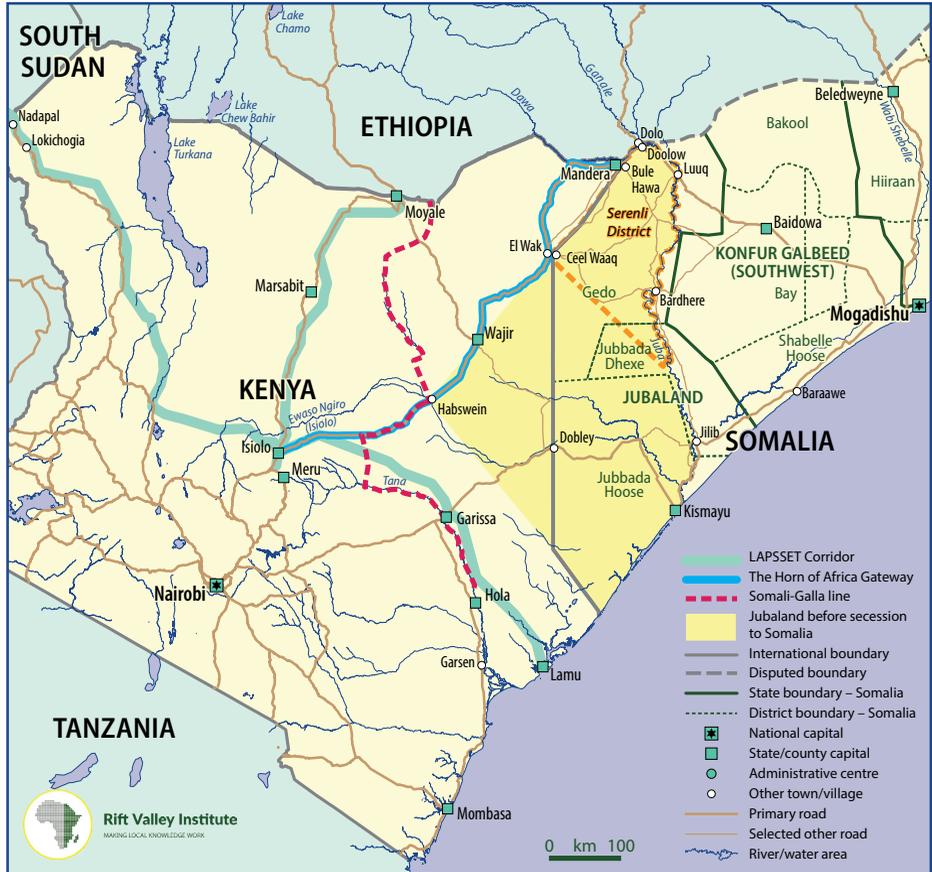


Base map data source: OpenStreetMap  
© MAPgraphix 2019

## Map 2: Blue Nile State–Benishangul-Gumuz borderland

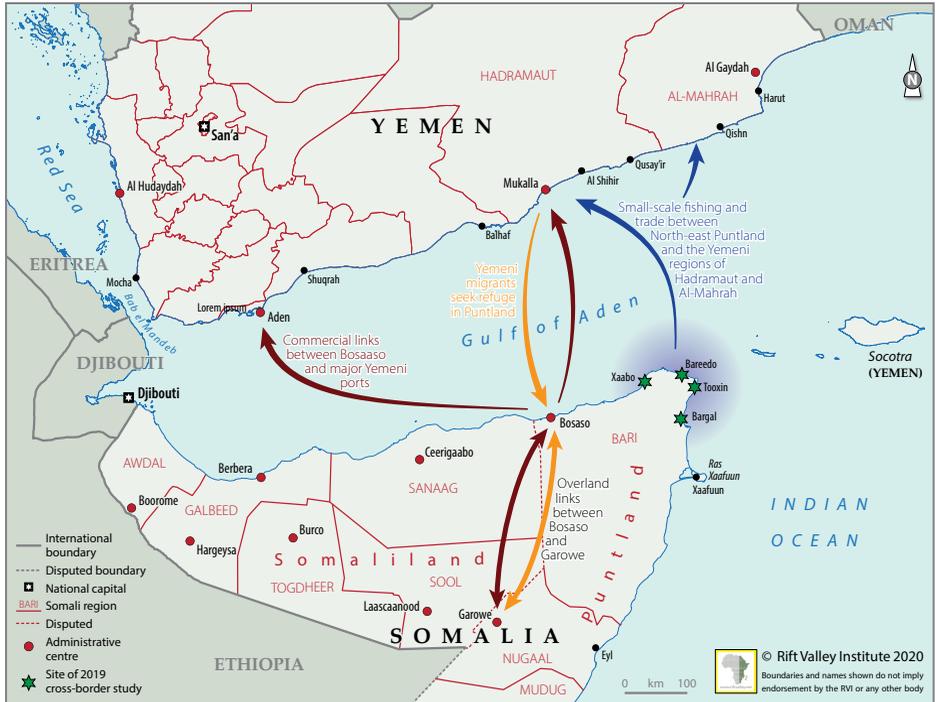


### Map 3: Northern Kenya borderland



Base map data source: OpenStreetMap  
© MAPgrafix 2025

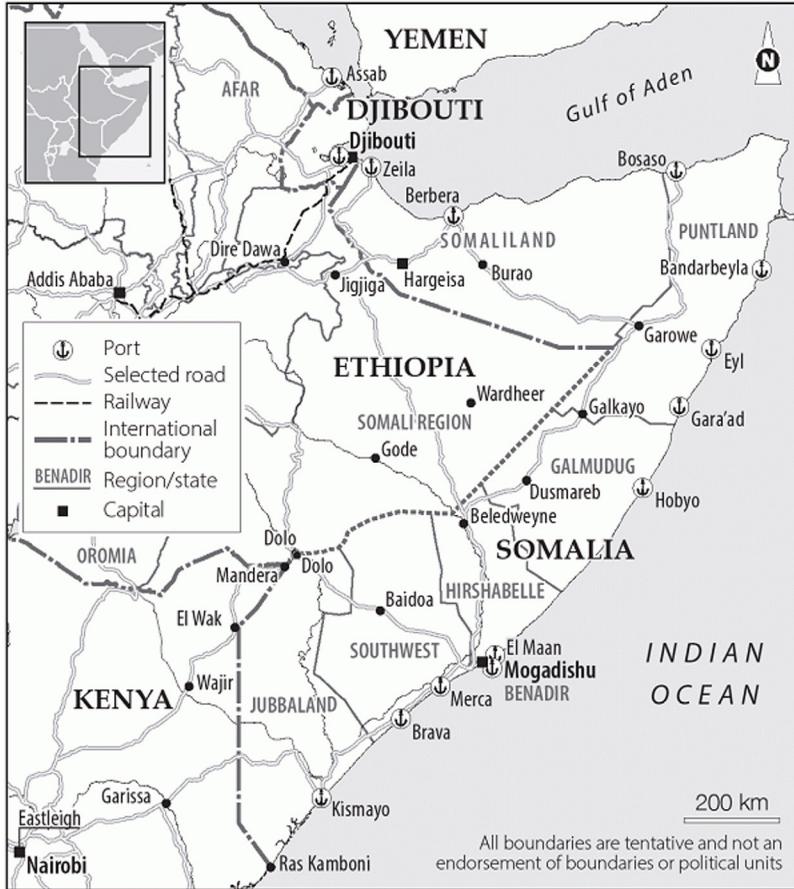
### Map 4: Gulf of Aden maritime borderland



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Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

### Map 5a: Somali transnational borderland – Horn of Africa

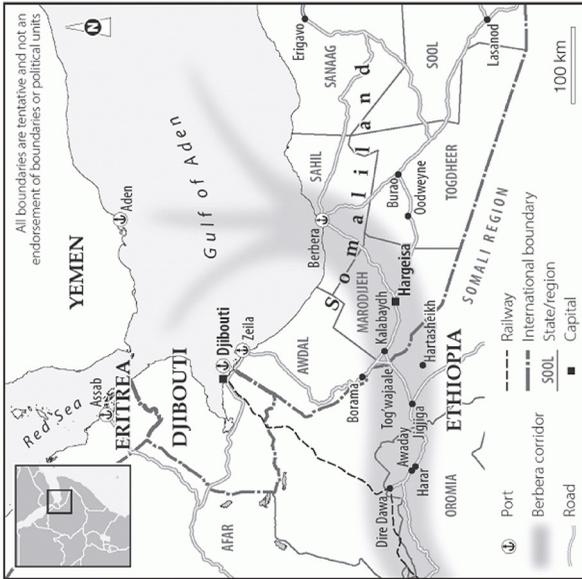


Base map data source: OpenStreetMap

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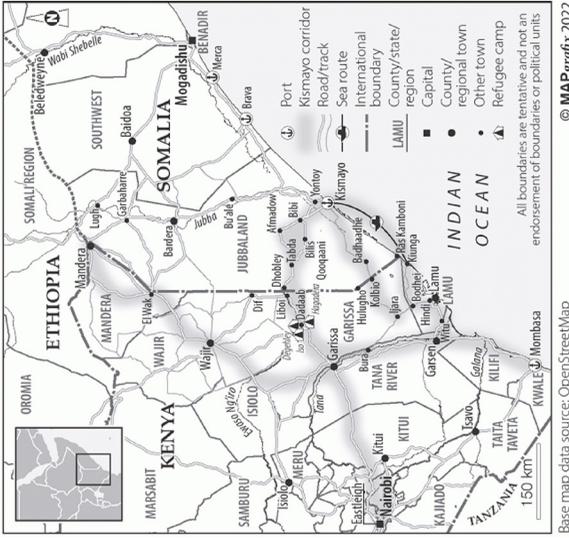
Source: Haggmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*, p. xviii.

Map 5b: Somali transnational borderland – The 'Berbera corridor'



Source: Hagmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*, p. xix.

Map 5c: Somali transnational borderland – The 'Kismayo corridor'



Source: Hagmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*, p. xx.

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More information and links to all publications can be found on RVI's XCEPT microsite: <https://xcept.riftvalley.net>

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