

# Renewing the border partnership

## THE CONTRADICTIONARY LANDSCAPE

After a decade of integration and cooperation, communities along the US–Mexico border are facing contradictory times. On the one hand, their recent experience has confirmed that the economic health and the sustainability of the region's environment depend on a fluid border that facilitates the interaction of business, people, and ecosystems. On the other hand, US national priorities have transformed homeland security concerns into the driving force of policies that impede such interactions. The result is that, although border communities have accumulated important social capital in the form of collaboration and binational visioning, post-9/11 policies are reinstating the barriers that in the past made transborder planning impractical.

## THE CHANGING BORDER

Because of rapid social transformation during the last decades, as well as existing asymmetries, the US–Mexico border region is one of the most dynamic and complex regions in North America. Recent literature agrees on a number of facts that make the border region particularly challenging from a policy and planning perspective, including the deep ecological footprint of the border area; growing economic disparities between the two nations due to poverty; externally driven growth; transborder externalities; and limited local control and capacity.

Migration and industrialization have transformed the region into a highly urbanized space built on an extremely vulnerable semi-arid environment. In 2005, about 11.8 million people lived in the US–Mexico border area, which includes two of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the United States—Laredo and McAllen—and several of the most rapidly growing cities in Mexico, including Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez. Many border cities are challenged by

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## GROWING DISPARITIES AND POVERTY

The border area in the United States consists of 48 counties in four states, some of which have a high percentage of the population living below the poverty line with substandard housing and unsafe public drinking water and sanitation. On the Mexican side, the border area consists of 36 municipalities, which are generally better off than other municipalities in the country but also tend to have less access to basic water and sanitation services than other border

communities in the United States. Uncontrolled migration and lack of planning have resulted in incomplete cities in the region and have contributed to poor quality of life in most border cities.

Maquiladoras and other export-oriented industries are the most dynamic and frequently the most important economic sector in Mexican cities along the border. In 2004, a total of 2,800 maquiladoras operated in Mexico employing 1.1 million workers, 83 percent of which were located in the border region. Cities south and north of the border are in a constant state of flux because of increasing flows of capital and goods since the beginning of NAFTA in 1994. Cross-border surface trade with Mexico totalled just under \$225 billion in 2004, nearly double the \$115 billion in cross-border trade in 1998.

Interdependence and asymmetries across the border are an important source of uncertainty for local planners and policy-makers. Border towns frequently have to plan for services and infrastructure with local fiscal resources that are insufficient to match a demand that extends beyond jurisdictional boundaries, and many times have to comply with national standards in a setting plagued with transborder externalities.

## LIMITED LOCAL CONTROL AND CAPACITY

Distance and sovereignty issues, including national security and undocumented migration, make the border very susceptible to national political cycles, which often affect the continuity of local policies or overpower local efforts. Over the years, border communities have been forced to reinvent themselves every time Washington and Mexico City have decided to promote new policies or actions that close or open the border to trade, investment, or migration.

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## **COPING STRATEGIES: COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING**

Despite existing complexities and asymmetries, communities along the US–Mexico border frequently embrace collaborative approaches to deal with common problems. Mainly because of their geographical proximity and the strength of existing social and physical linkages, many people and organizations in the region tend to cooperate on a variety of issues ranging from emergency planning to management of shared water resources.

As has been suggested by a number of scholars, NAFTA's parallel agreements created conditions that heightened the incentives for transboundary initiatives. The governance structure embodied by the Border Environment Cooperation Commission, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the US–Mexico Border 2012 Program, and other binational initiatives was the catalyst for an explosion of cross-border efforts involving collaboration between public and private interests. In the San Diego–Tijuana region, for example, the period between 1991 and 1995 registered the highest incidence of cross-border partnerships, and in 2001 the rate of participation in binational activities among environmental organizations in San Diego was 93 percent, while in Tijuana it was 79 percent.

Indeed, the process of reform induced by NAFTA's parallel agreements unlocked a number of opportunities for local communities along the US–Mexico border resulting from (1) a greater level of decentralization and the ensuing

creation of new spaces for regional action; (2) the rise of institutional structures facilitating the intervention of local actors in transborder issues; (3) the acceptance of binational approaches to resolve shared problems and enhance complementarities; and (4) the emergence of optimistic visions embracing shared regional futures. In this scenario, some believed that stepped-up and more organic collaboration was a logical expectation for the border.

## **THE REBORDERING PROCESS**

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, however, marked the beginning of a major shift in border governance in North America. The post-9/11 border regime is, by definition, territorially defensive and dominated by centralized decision making. The focus on defence and control leaves no room for projects to preserve the environment or protect natural habitats using approaches that take into account the interaction among the various elements of cross-border ecosystems. Under the new mentality, the US–Mexico border has become the locus of unacceptable risks and vulnerabilities that require stricter controls to regulate the movement of people, vehicles, and goods.


The impact of hardened border controls on legitimate border traffic is not an actionable concern from the perspective of Washington even when traffic backups and prolonged wait times in most border ports of entry produce severe economic damage and exacerbate congestion and pollution problems in the region. The post-9/11 focus on security has been paralleled by a discursive emphasis on border crime, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration to the point where policy options other than policing and enforcement have lost legitimacy among large segments of the US population. The criminalization of the border is affecting the legitimate traffic of people and goods, and it is also undermining trust and reviving old animosities along the border. The

social costs of this disruption are being felt by border communities in the form of reduced job opportunities, the loss of tax revenue, an increase in traffic congestion and air pollution, and a growing sense of separation.

## **THE END OF AN IRRATIONAL BORDER**

In recent years there has been real progress in eliminating barriers to US–Mexico collaboration, which has resulted in the creation of social capital in the form of skills and resources for consensus building, innovation, and partnership formation. Since 9/11, however, that trend has started to reverse in favour of nationalism and border security. Protecting and advancing pre-9/11 social capital would require actions counteracting the rebordering effect of the post-9/11 regime.

A change in this direction would accomplish the following: It would provide an opportunity for border communities to work on urgent development issues and it would reduce the sense of separation that has been created by the fencing of the border and the disruption of legitimate cross-border interactions. Also, it would decrease the irrational and chaotic functioning of border crossings that have evolved into bottlenecks for trade, tourism, commuting, out-shopping, and other social and economic activities that are important for border communities.

The presumption that border control goes in the opposite direction to border cooperation is clearly wrong. A change in direction would eliminate many of the vulnerabilities to national security created by the post-9/11 regime, including massive concentrations of people and vehicles in protracted border crossings; economic incentives for criminal networks that traffic people and firearms, and a politically charged environment that impedes cooperation among local law enforcement authorities. This alone would benefit both the United States and Mexico, and should inspire a renewed border partnership. 

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