

Application Small Grants Global Consortium on Security Transformation



# Security in the Tri-Border Region: top-down polices, responses from below

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# Project outline

Since 2001, the Brazilian government has launched a number of plans to improve surveillance and control of goods and people crossing at the Tri-Border region, the area spreading across the national borders of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. This enclave is known for cross-border trafficking, where transnational actors smuggle with electronics, drugs, weapons and humans. The so-called Operação Foz Segura (Campaign Safe Foz) is a project of state intervention to sanction informal trade, and has produced an ambiguous impact on the smuggling routes and livelihood of the region's inhabitants. The programme can only be understood within the context of security policies and anti-terrorism programmes launched worldwide by the US government after the attacks of 9/11; ever since, the Brazilian state has reclaimed its presence in the Tri-Border region. These policies are based on a top-down perspective, and overlook the complex net of loyalties and interests in which smugglers, sellers and law-enforcement agents are entrenched.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national governments of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay have fought wars and set military bases to delimitate and protect their shared borders (Ferradas 1998; Lewis 2006), so as to prevent neighbours from claiming land or natural resources. By the 1960s three municipalities were founded at each side of the border that now conform the tri-national urban conglomerate known as Triple Frontera: Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), Ciudad del Este (Paraguay) and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina). The area experienced a relevant growth in the 1970s, when the works for the Itaipu Dam started at the Brazil-Paraguay border; the building of the dam induced a demographic and economic boom. About 800 thousand people and a relevant number of undocumented migrants live nowadays in the three cities, from which Ciudad del Este is the largest with a population above 350 thousand.

The area developed a strong tourism industry thanks to the Iguaçu falls. In 1995, 4 million tourists visited Foz de Iguazú (El Territorio, 23<sup>th</sup> June 1996), becoming the second tourist destination

in Brazil just after Rio de Janeiro. The region also profited from its position as a trading post. During Stroessner's dictatorship (1956-1989), Paraguay's national economic policy was to stimulate trade in Ciudad del Este, and most of it was smuggling. Immigration to this city was encouraged; Lebanese, Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean communities soon settled, developed transnational trade networks, and ultimately built a number of shopping centres, which became consumption paradises for Brazilians who enjoyed from Paraguay's taxing advantages (Rabossi 2004). By the mid-1990s, the Tri-border region was identified as the third most important trade post in the world, just behind Hong Kong and Miami (Ferradás 2004). However, this development has a controversial side.

Tax evasion is a rule. Up to 60% of the region's economy is informal. Networks of smugglers make use of the area to transport and distribute illegal merchandises, mostly weapons, drugs, and stolen cars (Lins Ribeiro 2006). The flows of illegitimate goods move in all directions: stolen cars from Argentina to Brazil and Paraguay; counterfeit, drugs and weapons from Paraguay to Brazil; agricultural and dairy products from Brazil to Argentina and Paraguay. Youth violence and homicide rates in Foz de Iguazu are the second highest in Brazil, just after Rio de Janeiro, and these killings are mostly related to drug trafficking (Waiselfisz 2007). Military intelligence units from the US have described the Triple Frontera as a regional threat to the stability of the Southern Cone and the world (Bartolomé 2002). Incoming financial flows would be financing international terrorist networks; reportedly, Hezbollah and Hamas have sleeping cells at the border area (Bartolomé 2002; Lewis 2006). Although none of these claims was proved with actual detention of terrorists, these discourses helped to ease the introduction of a 'law and order' perspective in the policing of the three cities.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 on the US marked a turning point in the control of the Triple Frontera. At the Brazilian side, new programmes have been introduced during the administration of president Luz Ignacio 'Lula' Da Silva. In 2006 a new customs office was opened at Foz do Iguazu financed by IIRSA (Iniciativa para la Integración de la Infraestructura Regional Suramericana) and the Inter-American Development Bank. Residents of Foz de Iguazu and Ciudad del Este face check-ups and seizures that hinder their daily activities and undertakings. The international bridge Puente de la Amistad joining Brazil and Paraguay has turned into a space of state performance and deployment of police power; travellers wait up to 5 hours to cross the Brazilian border, and are often again stopped on the roads by police and army controls. These policies affect *sacoleiros* (baggers) who introduce small amounts of goods, but do not seem to hit large smuggling networks, which accordingly shift to different routes.

Retailers in Ciudad del Este speak about a decline in trade, arguing that indeed the implementation of programmes at the Brazilian border has discouraged shop owners and consumers to come to Paraguay. Local actors and the Paraguayan government oppose to the *operações* (raids)

at the Brazilian side, and manifest against these policies. The border, both the geographical borderline between the countries, and the legal distinction between legal and illegal trade, is a contested object.

At a first glance, the Tri-border region seems to be a 'governance void', or show signs of a failed state, where structures of criminal governance have arisen and taken over the space previously controlled by the national state (Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Sverdlick 2005). Yet, although this territory was paramount in the consolidation and delimitation of these three countries, the scholarly separation between state and illegal actors renders here many difficulties. Certainly, the Paraguayan state has never really fully controlled this corner of the nation; state revenues are extremely low in Ciudad del Este and the local government cannot provide basic services such as schooling, health care and public infrastructure to the inhabitants; smuggling networks criss-cross various membranes of political authority, economic and de facto power. Yet, it is due to the structures of governance promoted by global neoliberalism (Morales Moreno 2005) that national states currently reclaim the borders, and interact with the informal actors they previously overlooked.

## Relevance

Security has been described as the major challenge to the democracies of the Latin American continent (Silva 2003; Dammert and Bailey 2006), and borderlands are a critical element that put the security of these democracies at risk. The regulation on the transnational flows of people and goods between countries is perceived as a key factor of the security agendas, and it will only play an increasingly more important role.

Borders result from the geopolitical development of national states. In the formation of nations, governments have implemented various kinds of mechanisms and technologies to identify and secure borders and, ultimately, define their national economy and population (Crang and Thrift 2000; Johnston 2002). The border is the epidermis of nation-states; their outermost layer. Borders work as political devices that filter fluxes of people, goods, and ideas, they are thus spaces of mobility but also enclosure (Cunningham and Heyman 2004). But beyond the display of power and performance of objective discrimination, borders, as much as the epidermis is, are thin, sensitive and porous.

Border theory in the social sciences has addressed borders as social boundaries, cultural divides, or geopolitical spaces (Hennessy 1978; Heyman 1994; Donnan 1999; Vila 2000). Research on borders is often based on the notion of movement and crossing through a national boundary, which may produce some impact on the identity or culture of actors (Cohen 1965; Cole and Wolf 1974); scholars also define borders as classificatory spaces of synthesis where the illegal and licit combine (Flynn 1997; Kearney 2004; van Schendel 2005). In the case of Latin America, the borderline between the United States and Mexico has gained much attention (Herzog 1990; Spener and Staudt

1998; Villa 2003; Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007). Yet, the scholarship on borders in Latin America is far from adequate. Outer regional borders have been privileged over inner borders; the overwhelming political relevance of the US-Mexico borderline has overshadowed research on other locations. The Triple Frontera remains practically undocumented.

Although the processes of state formation are mostly completed around the world (with the remarkable exception of the Israel and Palestina states), in the context of global neoliberalism new tension and conflicts appear at the borders in different regions of the world (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; van Schendel 2005; Alden 2008). Here, it is not the national border itself what is contested, but the legal systems introduced by global neoliberalism that reorder the relationship between the state, space and market (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Brenner 2004). By looking at the implementation and responses to security programmes from both 'top-down' and 'from below' perspectives, this project seeks to contribute to the development of new approaches on security at bordering regions in Latin America, and assess the extent neoliberal state practices create new models for the definition and surveillance of national borders.

## Objective

The research will deepen into the question of what has been the impact of the Operação Foz Segura at the Tri-border region. With other words, how do the different state, local and illegal actors claim and define the border?

The secondary objectives are as follow:

- I. This project will document the surveillance of the international bridges at the region, namely the Puente de la Amistad and Puente Internacional Tancredo Neves.
- II. Attention will be given to the responses and strategies local actors develop, with particular attention to transnational actors. Here, there are a number of NGOs, organisations, mobilisations, disobedience or open opposition.
- III. A description of the (international) layers of power and mechanisms visible in the programmes implemented by national governments to secure the region.

## Methodology

By collecting first-hand information with ethnographic methods, this research will render relevant data on the cross-border activities and mechanisms carried out by state and no-state actors embedded in the Tri-border region. A number of interviews will be arranged with state as much as private/illegal

actors in the area. The research employs a cross-border perspective, that is, to capture the movement of actors, objects and ideas across national borders.

## Budget outline

The project includes one fieldwork stay of seven weeks in South America, and participation in an international conference, where preliminary research results will be discussed with peers. The following table presents an overview of the foreseen costs:

Expenses fieldwork in US dollars	
Travel expenses: Amsterdam-Foz do Igauçu-Amsterdam	1850
Research expenses	600
Bench fee (congress participation)	550
Accommodation during fieldwork	1150
Daily allowance during fieldwork	850
<b>Total</b>	<b>5000</b>

## Expected results

In a period of 12 months (expectedly from July 2009 to June 2010), the following products will be delivered:

- I. Research stay of seven weeks in South America.
- II. Participation in the annual international conference Peace and Conflict Studies organised by the European Association of Social Anthropologists. Presentation of preliminary results.
- III. Publication of two articles. One article will be submitted to the Global Consortium for institutional publication. A second article will be sent to an international academic journal in social sciences.

In all products, there will be explicit mention of the Consortium as financing institution.

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