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**CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS**

Policy brief

July 2025

Centring local communities in borderland governance

Laura Collins

Purpose

This policy brief presents key findings and policy recommendations drawn from research on the role of local cross-border agreements in governing the borderlands of the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad; CAR and Sudan; and between Sudan and South Sudan (henceforth "the three borderlands").

The three borderlands are each porous to people, goods and livestock, both through legal trade and seasonal migration of livestock ('transhumance'), and through the illicit movement of armed groups, small arms, and contraband.[1] In the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands, political governance over the Abyei area (a disputed territory on the border under provisional status since the end of the civil war) is contested between the two countries. Abyei's unresolved status has resulted in an absence of formal state-based institutions and compounds local challenges around free movement and access to resources as land conflict is politicised between the two countries.[2]

Local communities across the three borderlands have developed formal and informal agreements to manage their borders, address some of the issues affecting cross-border relations, particularly around transhumance, and govern the space and access to resources.[3] However, despite calls from academics[4] and African policymakers[5] alike for borderlands and local borderland communities to be involved in

1   On the CAR/Chad see, for example, Concordis International (2020), 'Promoting peaceful and safe seasonal migration in Northern Central African Republic'. Available at: https://concordis.international/reports/promoting-peaceful-and-safe-seasonal-migration-in-northern-central-african-republic. See also Carayannis, T. and Lombard, L. (eds.) (2015), *Making Sense of the Central African Republic.* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd). On CAR-Sudan see, for example, Carayannis et al (2015). On Sudan-South Sudan see, for example, Vaughan, C., Schomerus, M., & de Vries, L. (2013), *The borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives.* (Palgrave Macmillan).

2   Vaughan et al (2013). See also Focus Group Discussion (FGD) A013 (local people – villages / Noong); A011 (local people – villagers – Dokura); and A011 (CSOs – 01), (March 2024).

3   Concordis International (ed.) (2025) Recognising the local in borderland governance (London: Concordis International).

4   Scorgie, L. (2013), 'Prominent peripheries: the role of borderlands in Central Africa's regionalized conflict', *Critical African Studies* 5 (1), p.33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2013.774550. See also Hataley, T. & Leuprecht, C. (2018), 'Determinants of cross-border cooperation', *Journal of Borderlands Studies,* 33 (3), p.324. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2018.148277; Hlovor, I.K. (2020), 'Inclusion of borderlanders in border management in Africa: Toward an emancipatory framework for the study and management of African borders', *International Studies Perspectives* 21 (1), pp.32-53. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz022.

5   Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (2018), *Policy Framework on the nexus between Informal Cross-Border Trade & Cross-Border Security Governance* (Djibouti: IGAD); African Union (AU) (2012), *Draft African Union Strategy for Enhancing Border Management in Africa* (Addis Ababa: AU); see also AU (2020), *African Union Strategy for a better integrated border governance* (Addis Ababa: AU).

Figure 1 - Data collection sites

gvernance, there is little knowledge about community-level cross-border agreements, their effectiveness, and how they intersect with national and regional level border governance arrangements.

Methodology

The data collection process used a mixed qualitative methods approach. Collection took place across eleven local field sites, spread over the three borderlands in four countries: Chad, CAR, Sudan, and South Sudan. A questionnaire collected information about four key interconnected cross-border issues: security; the movement of people, goods, and animals, particularly linked to seasonal transhumance; local state and non-state cooperation; and the prevention, mitigation, and management of cross-border disputes. The questionnaire also requested information on the local arrangements, processes, mechanisms or agreements in place to address (1) the issues affecting borderland communities; (2) the involvement of local authorities and communities in discussions surrounding their development; and (3) whether local agreements affecting cross-border relations are reflected in bilateral and multilateral agreements on cross-border cooperation. The questionnaire was designed to generate insights into how local authorities and communities are involved in negotiating and delivering on borderland governance agreements.

The local stakeholders involved in this research include state representatives (political and administrative); security and defence officials; customary, traditional, and religious leaders; and community representatives from youth and women's organisations, in addition to farmers and transhumant herders. Conversations with local and international staff working at Concordis International supplemented the primary research conducted between October 2023 and March 2024.

Key findings

Local cross-border agreements are an integral component of community-level borderland governance processes.

Local cross-border agreements in the three borderlands aim to prevent the escalation of violence and help resolve conflict. Cross-border agreements, both written and unwritten, have been successful at responding to the immediate security needs of borderlands communities, so that they can pursue their livelihoods.[6]

This research finds that local agreements governing cross-border relations, livelihoods and transhumance-related disputes are predominantly unwritten, more informal and ad hoc. These agreements function through a process of relational proximity: repetitive interactions, relationship building and highly localised dialogue to resolve disputes related to livelihoods such as cattle theft and the trampling of fields.

Local cross-border agreements can set an important precedent to promote more peaceful, inclusive, and accountable transhumance.

Transhumance remains a central challenge affecting the borderlands communities studied, and local actors govern, manage, and engage in and with local cross-border agreements that address

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6   All the written agreements are available from Concordis International. Agreements address issues such as freedom of movement for people and livestock, grazing areas, dispute resolution and potential escalation to local authorities, and other governance issues.

this to their mutual benefit. Written agreements around transhumance and related issues such as free movement, access to and management of land and grazing pasture have made a difference in transforming the livelihood practice from one that is poorly negotiated and largely unregulated locally into a practice that generates income and livelihoods. These agreements can function as an important reference point from which local borderland communities can renegotiate to better manage cross-border relations and livelihoods as issues evolve or new issues emerge.

Borderland governance is an ongoing process of which local cross-border agreements are an essential component, not an end point. For example, in Abyei, the pre-seasonal migration conferences supported by Concordis functioned as a means through which to hold to account the parties to the 2016 cross-border Noong Agreement. This was an important opportunity to remind all sides of their mutual responsibility to ensure the agreement was fully implemented.

Community issues both inform and are affected by local cross-border governance agreements.

Both formal and informal local agreements are often negotiated amid broader instability and insecurity, alongside politicisation of land conflict. Community-based issues, however, are at the heart of local cross-border governance in the three borderlands. Consequently, many of these agreements and their implementation mechanisms focus on more immediate needs for security, non-violent dispute resolution, trade and free movement and access to land for livelihoods essential to local communities' sustainability. For example, local agreements in Abyei have succeed by sidelining (not resolving) the seemingly intractable and protracted conflict over Abyei's political status, focusing instead on the immediate needs of the communities concerned. As such, local cross-border agreements and their implementation mechanisms can bring about improvements in the quality of lives and livelihoods

at the local level that may be more complicated to achieve at the national or regional level.[7]

Shifting local, national and international dynamics can strain existing local cross-border agreements aimed at enhancing security, cross-border interactions and the livelihoods of borderland communities.

Changing socio-political dynamics in borderlands can render local agreements less effective at dealing with the locally identified challenges they initially sought to address, or less relevant as new conflict fault lines emerge. For example, transhumance in the three borderlands has not only shaped local cross-border dynamics, fuelling tensions and driving conflict in these areas: broader conflict dynamics at the national level, and inter-state tension in the case of Abyei, have also reshaped transhumance as it cuts across issues of land access and the free movement of people, goods and livestock.

The success of effective borderland governance is shaped by the actions and interactions of multiple actors in border areas.

Local community stakeholders play a crucial and leading role in initiating, negotiating, and delivering on borderland governance around transhumance and related issues. Customary and traditional authorities play a particularly prominent role in local cross-border governance agreements in the CAR-Sudan and Sudan-South Sudan borderlands in place of absent rational-legal (state) authorities in these borderlands. Conversely, local political authorities present in the CAR-Chad borderlands play a leading role.

Young people are an emerging local stakeholder in borderland governance in Abyei, using existing local cross-border agreements to support their efforts to prevent disputes arising from cattle theft and other criminality. Local youth refer to the commitments made in previous local agreements in their engagement with local communities along the cattle corridors prior to the seasonal migration.[8] For

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7   This finding speaks to insights from existing work on cross-border agreements. See Lino, M.O. (2020), 'Local peace agreement in Abyei: achievements, challenges and opportunities', *LSE Conflict Research Programme*. Available at: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/106614/1/CRP_ local_peace_agreement_in_abyei.pdf. This finding also speak to insights from scholarship examining local agreements without a cross-border dimension in contexts of internal armed conflict. See, for example, Pospisil, J. (2022), 'Dissolving conflict. Local peace agreements and armed conflict transitions', *Peacebuilding* 10 (2), pp. 122-137. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2032945; Duursma, A. (2021), 'Making disorder more manageable: The short-term effectiveness of local mediation in Darfur', *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (3), pp. 554-567. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022343319898241; Kaldor, M., Theros, M. & Turkmani, R. (2022), 'Local agreements-an introduction to the special issue', *Peacebuilding* 10 (2), pp. 107-121; Turkmani, R. (2022), 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', *Peacebuilding* 10 (2), pp. 156–171. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/2164725 9.2022.2032941.

8   A005 (CSOs – 02 (youth/Abyei), (March 2024).

example, youth civil society leaders facilitate meetings along the cattle corridors in the borderlands[9] "in coordination with the Joint Community Peace Committee (JCPC), a mechanism for solving community disputes, corridor leaders, and local authorities."[10] Discussions centre on supporting the free movement (and protection) of people and livestock along the corridors. According to local villagers in Amiet, youth also play a significant role in addressing crime along the migration routes.[11]

State and non-state authorities have demonstrated their political will and autonomy to address border insecurity and the management of transhumance in their localities. In the CAR-Sudan borderlands, local political authorities are absent and the engagement of international actors in local and cross-border peacebuilding is limited. Conversely, in the CAR-Chad borderlands, the inclusion of local security and defence officials in borderland governance negotiations proved crucial. Having space to negotiate and build trust enabled security and defence officials to develop commitments around how to respond jointly to criminality arising from or linked to transhumance and mitigate localised military confrontations between them arising from a lack of cross-border communication and coordination.[12]

International actors play a key role in supporting the emergence of local cross border agreements, but local ownership and knowledge is vital. In part this can be achieved by inclusive consultations and dialogue preceding and during negotiations around borderland governance. In addition, cross-border (written) agreements depend on diverse and locally embedded mechanisms, both to deliver on the agreements' provisions and to monitor their implementation to drive effectiveness. In the CAR-Sudan borderlands, where informal cross-border agreements are more frequent and often lack international support, local people still emphasised that it is important for international actors to be directly and actively involved in dialogue to reduce cross-border tension.

Local agreements with monitoring mechanisms provide a means through which international actors can provide ongoing and sustained support. This is crucial, particularly as local political or conflict dynamics shift, possibly requiring additional opportunities for cross-border communities to come together, engage in dialogue and revisit the progress regarding the implementation of an agreement's provisions. International actors can also provide crucial logistical support for such encounters.

Both local and international actors can reference local cross-border agreements, build upon and revise them, and generate new pathways (re)shaping the micropolitics of cross-border relationships and functioning of borderlands around dialogue and non-violence.

Policy recommendations

The research findings revealed important recommendations for policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners engaged – directly and indirectly – in formal and informal cross-border governance at the local, national, regional, and international levels. The following mutually reinforcing policy recommendations are suggested.

1. **Adopt a holistic, inclusive, and locally-driven approach to borderland governance that strengthens connections between local, national and regional governance strategies.**

   Sustainable cross-border agreements address locally identified challenges affecting immediate security, stability and livelihoods, and are supported by inclusive local implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, in addition to ongoing dialogue rooted in the local context. A thorough understanding of local contexts is essential, particularly regarding the mechanisms and effectiveness of existing local governance arrangements. While external actors can provide critical support, it is crucial to recognise that local cross-border communities can collaborate in different ways to resolve conflict, reduce tensions and support their own livelihoods. Collaborative engagement, including consultations with diverse stakeholders, is necessary to ensure that initiatives at one level support rather than undermine those at another. External actors must strike a balance in determining when to remain engaged to support the implementation of an agreement, when to assist in reconvening community stakeholders as interests and dynamics evolve, and when to step back to avoid undermining

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9   A005.

10   A011 (CSOs – 01), (March 2024).

11   A011 (local people villager -Amiet), (March 2024).

12   C/CH 002 Online Discussion with CAR staff member, (Bangui, April 2024).

local ownership. Recognising that borderland governance is an ongoing process, policymakers should also invest in long-term, relational and locally-rooted work to generate accountable governance and conflict transformation.

2. **Acknowledge the significance of local cross-border agreements, the actors involved, and their ability to enhance the lives of borderland communities and promote their livelihoods.**

Formal and informal local cross-border agreements can have a real and positive effect on the lives of local people in borderland communities. Policymakers must support existing agreements where they are effective, including where agreements are specific about the support sought; provide space for new local agreements; and promote dialogue to foster more cooperative cross-border relations.

Policymakers must also acknowledge the diversity of stakeholders involved and the interconnected local and cross-border responsibilities they share in borderland governance. Local state authorities, as well as high-level community-based customary and traditional authorities, play a role in initiating, negotiating and delivering on borderland governance. Policymakers must recognise their varied contributions and avoid promoting one set of local actors, such as state authorities, as more legitimate than others in borderland governance.

3. **Focus on cross-border solutions that meet urgent community needs identified at the local level.**

In Abyei, where political governance is contested between Sudan and South Sudan, written cross-border agreements have succeeded by setting aside the enduring political conflict over Abyei's status and prioritising the immediate needs of the affected communities for livelihoods, free movement and security. In the CAR-Chad borderlands, where such political contestation is absent and references to bilateral and regional border governance initiatives can complement local agreements, agreements equally prioritise similar community needs. By focusing on these issues, local agreements and their implementation can improve the immediate quality of life and livelihoods for women and men, including young adults, within borderland communities - achievements that may be harder to realise at national or regional levels. Policymakers should remain open to and encourage local solutions, and, particularly in settings where broader agreements seem unlikely in the near term, work to create favourable conditions for these local solutions or, at the very least, avoid taking actions that could hinder them.

4. **Actively support local borderland communities through a diverse range of forums that foster proactive, intentional and inclusive dialogue.**

Across the three borderlands, local actors emphasised the effectiveness of dialogue, irrespective of whether this was attached to a formal (written) cross-border agreement or an informal, highly localised unwritten agreement around transhumance. To build on the local stabilisation and de-escalatory effects of the dialogue process underpinning diverse cross-border agreements, policymakers must strive to foster a culture of dialogue by creating spaces for discussion, removing barriers to dialogue and providing the necessary infrastructure. Policymakers must also encourage more proactive, intentional and inclusive dialogue by engaging local borderland communities in collaborative efforts, supporting organisations or actors likely to promote dialogue, disseminating information about successful agreements reached by other borderland communities and encouraging the involvement of additional stakeholders (such as local security and defence officials where present) who have a key role to play in negotiating and, thereafter, delivering on borderland governance. This also extends to creating spaces in processes for emerging change agents such as women and youth, who have already shown efforts to prevent local disputes.

5. **Leverage established local cross-border agreements to revisit, revise, renew or develop new dialogue processes and agreements.**

Policymakers should capitalise on both current and lapsed agreements, recognising their potential to act as catalysts for revisiting or embarking on a future local cross-border agreement. Potential parties to a future agreement view previous agreements as proof that it is possible to reach consensus on urgent community needs related to security, stability, livelihoods and better functioning local economies. Local agreements should not be seen as endpoints in managing borderlands and governing spaces and land access. Instead, existing local agreements in a borderland area are a vital component in a dialogue and accountability framework. They can serve as a starting point for further discussions or can be used to initiate new agreements by incorporating specific commitments from a previous agreement.

Policymakers have a crucial role in advocating for peace agreements as part of effective governance processes, and in countering a narrative that lapsed or broken agreements cannot be revisited or revisited.

About the author

Laura Collins is an independent researcher who has conducted extensive research throughout the Central African Republic on the dynamics of non-state armed violence against civilians and the interactions between religious organisations and armed groups.

About XCEPT

The Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace. The views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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About Concordis

We are peacebuilders. We support those who live where conflict is fought and felt. We work hand in hand with communities, helping them find workable solutions that address the root causes of conflict and contribute to lasting peace and economic development. We are committed to finding sustainable solutions that benefit all those involved: women and youth, as well as men; local administrative authorities, community leaders, and civil society; those who choose to take up arms and those who don't. We engage for the long term to build trusting relationships, leaving a legacy that enables future conflict to be managed peacefully within the community. We work to our values of humility, impartiality, and inclusivity.

Contact

Contact for XCEPT:
info@xcept-research.org.

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