



Danish Institute for International Studies

Wars over checkpoints

Nine theses on roadblocks and the politics of circulation in conflict-affected borderlands

Schouten, Peer; Thakur, Shalaka; Weigand, Florian; Craze, Joshua; Lndi, Abubaker; Gaston, Erica; Walther, Olivier; Mansfield, David; Jalal, Ibrahim; Markó, Ferenc; Peng, Xu

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WARS OVER CHECKPOINTS

Nine theses on roadblocks and the politics of circulation in conflict-affected borderlands



Centre on Armed Groups
Research. Dialogue. Advice.

Peer Schouten, Joshua Craze, Shalaka Thakur, Abubaker Lndi, Erica Gaston, Olivier Walther, David Mansfield, Ibrahim Jalal, Ferenc Markó, Xu Peng, and Florian Weigand

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ABSTRACT

This working paper advances nine theses on checkpoints (or roadblocks) as central institutions in contemporary conflict-affected borderlands. Drawing on discussions at a dedicated workshop involving researchers working on Chad, DR Congo, Libya, Myanmar, South Sudan, West Africa and Yemen, the paper challenges narrow readings of roadblocks exclusively as security devices or sites of corruption. Instead, it conceptualises them as politically and economically generative nodes through which authority is exercised, rents are extracted and redistributed, markets are shaped, and conflict is financed. The paper shows how control over circulation often trumps territorial control; how checkpoint governance varies systematically with transport geographies and trade density; and how state and non-state actors frequently converge in practice, sometimes with insurgents outperforming governments in predictability and standardisation. The paper further demonstrates that checkpoint proliferation can reflect deliberate coalition management or coping strategies under fiscal collapse rather than governance failure, and that the costs of checkpoint taxation are borne indirectly through commodity chains, disproportionately affecting vulnerable producers and consumers. By organising these insights into nine analytically distinct but tension-filled theses, the paper offers diagnostic tools rather than prescriptions, aimed at scholars, policymakers, and practitioners concerned with conflict financing, humanitarian access and stabilisation in borderland economies structured by circulation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, checkpoints have forced themselves into policy discussions as something to reckon with in armed conflict. To take but a few examples, checkpoints are central to the finances of Al Shabaab, the Somali insurgent group designated as a terrorist by western governments (Schouten, 2023). In both Yemen and South Sudan, costly checkpoints run by different parties to the conflict consistently form the main impediment to affordable and free aid delivery (Rights Radar, 2023; UNICEF, 2018). But perhaps most notably, the Taliban eventually took over Afghanistan by picking off one border checkpoint at a time (Afghanistan Border Monitoring Project, 2022).

Propelled by such insights, a growing body of research has begun to document the scale and significance of checkpoints in conflict-affected settings (e.g. Agbibo, 2022; Akhtar, 2022; Derebe, 2025; Eaton et al., 2019; Martinez and Sirri, 2020; Néya and Lombard, 2019; Schon, 2016; Schouten, 2019; Thakur, 2021). Policy-oriented mapping exercises and conflict monitoring reports have put thousands of checkpoints on the map, drawing attention to their role in financing armed actors, raising transport costs, restricting freedom of movement and impeding humanitarian access (e.g. Ali, 2023; Coombs and Salah, 2023; Integrity Watch Afghanistan, 2013; Mohamed, 2023; Schouten and Kalessopo, 2017; Schouten et al., 2017, 2021).

In parallel, a more conceptually oriented literature has sought to situate checkpoints within broader debates on rebel governance, public authority, taxation and state formation, emphasising their role in extracting ‘payments on flows’ rather than taxes on territory, people or resources (e.g. Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023; Lombard, 2013; Mampilly and Thakur, 2025; Neil and Chit, 2024; Schouten, 2022). Collectively, this

work has challenged the assumption—still dominant in much conflict analysis—that control over territory or static resources is the primary stake of armed struggle.

Against this background, researchers with deep empirical expertise on Chad, DR Congo, Libya, Myanmar, South Sudan, West Africa and Yemen came together in Entebbe in November 2025, for an XCEPT workshop to take stock of these developments and to push the conversation further. Rather than treating checkpoints (or roadblocks, terms we here use interchangeably) as isolated one-dimensional phenomena—sites of corruption, insecurity or inefficiency—participants approached them as politically and economically generative institutions. Striking similarities emerged in checkpoint practices between state forces, rebel groups, militias and hybrid authorities. At the same time, important variations were identified, shaped by differences in transport geographies, trade volumes, political culture and the degree to which roadblock economies are oriented toward transnational flows.

Our discussion was tied together by a collective focus on borderlands, which as hotbeds of both trade and conflict constitute privileged terrains to explore the politics of roadblocks (cf. Goodhand, 2018). Indeed, participants noted that roadblock dynamics could vary drastically within a single national territory, due to their entanglement with situated cross-border economic, cultural and political dynamics. This clearly calls for an analytical rezoning of checkpoint geographies around borderlands rather than national territories. Yet we here deploy the concept of ‘borderlands’ not to refer to territorial margins determined by administrative boundaries but as extended political–economic fields structured by circulation.

Checkpoints render this especially visible. Although border posts are privileged sites for taxing and regulating cross-border trade, inland checkpoints—along feeder roads, market hubs and transport bottlenecks—frequently operate as *de facto* borders, intercepting and taxing transnational flows long before or after goods cross a formal frontier. In contexts of porous borders, limited state capacity or fragmented authority, these ‘borders away from the border’ may matter more for traders, armed actors and civilians than the geographical border crossing (Ngo and Hung, 2019: 188). Foregrounding checkpoints therefore allows us to analytically decouple borderland dynamics from physical borders, and to understand borderlands instead as more geographically mouldable spaces of circulation in which authority is exercised, contested and monetised at multiple points along a cross-border route.

This report serves a double purpose. First, it provides an overview of the academic debate on checkpoints and the politics of circulation in conflict, drawing from discussions at the workshop which sought to link insights from political economy, anthropology, geography and conflict studies that have often developed in parallel rather than in conversation. Second, it speaks directly to policymakers and practitioners concerned with conflict financing, humanitarian access and stabilisation by foregrounding the policy dilemmas that checkpoint-based conflict economies generate.

The report deliberately adopts a non-linear structure. Rather than organising the discussion around regions, methods or disciplinary literatures, it advances nine theses on checkpoints in conflict. These theses do not form a unified theory, nor are they mutually exclusive. On the contrary, some sit in productive tension with one another: conflict fault lines can be a surface register for extraction; ‘widespread corruption’ can be a distributed welfare mechanism; formalisation can reflect constraints rather than a

state project; and sometimes non-state armed actors outperform state agencies in the very quality—predictability—that many actors pragmatically seek from ‘the state’ (cf. Zanoletti, 2022).

A roadblock is rarely reducible to one dominant logic; it is a node where different claims to authority, moral economies and forms of brokerage are negotiated and sometimes temporarily stabilise (cf. Schouten et al., 2024). Checkpoints are therefore best approached as multipurposed ‘twilight institutions’ (Lund, 2006), subject to the push and pull of competing logics and agendas that so often prevails in settings of contested authority. Mirroring this, the theses forwarded in this report reflect the empirical complexity of checkpoints as institutions that simultaneously extract and redistribute, stabilise and destabilise, enable trade and entrench conflict in borderlands.

Each thesis combines three elements: a conceptual claim that is grounded in existing literature; cross-case empirical insights emerging from the workshop discussions; and a set of implications for how roadblocks can be understood, monitored and intervened upon in policy. By framing the discussion this way, the report moves beyond the question of whether checkpoints are ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘efficient’ or ‘inefficient’, ‘state-like’ or ‘criminal’. Instead, it starts from what checkpoints *do*: how they reorganise political authority around circulation, how they shape conflict trajectories and how they complicate conventional assumptions about governance, sovereignty and economic order in war. The theses that follow should therefore be read not as prescriptions, but as diagnostic propositions, tools to think with, and sometimes against, prevailing approaches to conflict and mobility.

THESES 1 – ROADBLOCKS ARE EXTRACTIVE RATHER THAN SECURITY DEVICES



A persistent framing—visible in both policy discourse and academic studies—treats checkpoints primarily as security technologies that are corrupted by rent-seeking. Indeed, governments, their militaries and their armed detractors often invoke looming threats to deploy roadblocks and scrutinise movement, performing security and control. While in many cases—Israel, Iraq, the US—such performances and the ensuing filtering of people *is* the point, the workshop discussions and the state-of-the-art literature push toward an inversion: in many conflict-affected settings, checkpoints are *first* extractive institutions geared towards imposing ‘payments on flows’ (Tilly, 1990: 87), and only secondarily (and sometimes performatively) about security or even ‘authority over navigation’ (Lombard 2013). Because of their low barriers to entry, roadblocks are a go-to funding mechanism irrespective of the context: all things being equal, it takes less effort to obstruct a flow of goods than it does to loot or traffic bulky resources. For this reason, as an earlier study put it, the transport sector may be ‘the main economic resource and the most easily taxable in the context of insecure areas’ (Cantens and Raballand, 2017).

This certainly is the case in the geographical contexts reviewed during our workshop. The bulk of the hundreds of roadblocks in eastern DR Congo serve as a self-financing mechanism to sustain—and enrich—the Congolese armed forces and their militia proxies (IPIS and ASSODIP, 2024). Similarly, in Yemen, armed conflict seems to revolve

principally around taking over control of profitable portions of the road network (cf. Coombs and Salah, 2023). In South Sudan, after the drying up of oil revenues, roadblocks appear as the singularly most important source of cash for the ‘gun class’, made up of government soldiers, allied militia and opposition groups (see Figure 1, cf. Schouten et al., 2021, D’Agoot, 2022).

Figure 1. Roadblocks are about making money



Source: Schouten, Matthysen & Muller, 2021, p. 49.

This basic observation matters because it helps correct the lingering gravitational pull of the ‘resource wars’ optic. The mechanism is straightforward but underappreciated: unlike spatially concentrated mining pits or oil fields, long trade routes offer virtually unlimited taxable opportunities. Roadblocks allow armed actors who are unable to access or control resource pockets to nonetheless tax resource economies at a distance, by imposing levies further along the commodity chain (Schouten, 2022). This explains for instance the many roadblocks in eastern Congo dotting the routes connecting mining sites to national borders.

Two implications follow. First, ‘security’ at checkpoints is often a legitimating idiom for an extractive arrangement. That idiom can be sincere—armed actors may genuinely seek to avoid infiltration or block the advance of enemy troops—or it can be strategically deployed as an excuse to impose transit taxes. Either way, treating the checkpoint merely as a security problem invites predictable policy failure: it pushes interventions toward either peace deals or technical fixes, such as security sector reform, while leaving untouched the revenue dependencies that make the checkpoint regime rational for those who run it (about which more later). Second, if roadblock geographies are as much ‘roadblock economies’ as they are about ‘roadblock politics’, then we need to know more about the features of these economies—about how both the burden of, and rents extracted through, roadblocks are redistributed in conflict-affected societies.

THESIS 2 – CONTROL OVER CIRCULATION TRUMPS TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN CONFLICT



Much of the canonical language of civil war analysis still presumes that the object of armed contestation is territorial control: holding land, administering populations and consolidating monopoly claims within bounded areas. Although checkpoints are typically the most prevalent tool through which armed actors effectively stake claims to territorial control, checkpoints don't need to reflect exclusive territorial ambitions (cf. Neil and Chit, 2024). Across multiple conflicts discussed at the workshop, armed deployment and control efforts are frequently organised along corridors, feeder roads, border posts and ports—the bottlenecks that connect domestic economies to regional and global supply chains (see Figure 2). In Southeast Asia, rather than seeking to control the entirety of a borderland, authorities of varied ilk focus their presence at 'checkpoints, not borders' (Ngo and Hung, 2019: 188). Territory away from this logistical landscape often hardly has any armed presence because little cash circulates here. In such contexts, 'territory' matters insofar as it contains and secures the points where flows can be intercepted. As Mansfield and Smith point out for Afghanistan before 2021, 'Gaining the upper hand in this conflict is not always related to the sheer amount of landmass that falls under the "control" of any side. More important are the funds collected by seizing key terrain along roads and highways' (2021: 8).

Figure 1. Control over roads is key



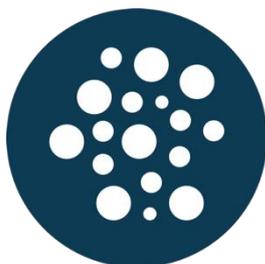
Source: Still from *Katanga Business* (2009, dir. Thierry Michel), with permission from the director.

In contexts where value concentrates disproportionately in trade, the ability to tax and regulate circulation can generate sufficient rents to sustain armed organisation and buy

compliance—sometimes more efficiently than trying to ‘govern’ dense urban areas or dispersed rural populations. Often, transport networks are surprisingly sparse in conflict-affected areas, leading to a clustering of checkpoints along the few trade routes that do exist. As a result, workshop participants surmised that these routes are often embattled and contested geographies, spaces of exceptional militarisation compared to the overall landscape, and therefore may attract more violence (cf. Schon, 2016; Walther et al., 2025). As a result, corridors may be under mixed control of a patchwork of armed actors, defying any effort to gauge discretely controlled areas.

Importantly, this geographical pattern may derive from structural political-economic path dependencies that pre-exist the conflict. Whether as a legacy of colonialism or structural adjustment, many governments of countries now affected by conflict have historically disproportionately concentrated their extractive and security capacity along trade routes and crucial nodes rather than evenly across territory. War may radicalise this logic rather than overturn it—making conflict less about conquering space and more about capturing the fiscal choke points that already structured state power. Indeed, multiple workshop participants framed the conflicts they were studying as ‘wars over checkpoints’ (cf. Craze, 2025). The implication is that efforts to understand conflict dynamics should focus on control over strategic nodes along trade routes, recognising that the overall militarisation of transport geography is likely the product of ‘legacy institutions’ (Thissen, 2019) that are more difficult to undo.

THESIS 3 – DENSE TRADE FLOWS ARE THE ‘PRIZE’ OF ROADBLOCK POLITICS, BUT REQUIRE POWER



If one takes a map of all the roadblocks in any given conflict setting, the map will reveal a confusing flurry of dots sprinkled across a putative geography. They reveal diffuse checkpoint distributions in which authority over movement is decentralised and contested—landscapes that may be conceived of as ‘heterarchical’ rather than hierarchical. This term was coined by Crumley (1995) to indicate that the alternative to centralised authority is often not its complete absence but the unequal

distribution of different forms of power between multiple nodes, and over various social or economic spheres of activity.

However, roadblocks are not sprinkled at random across conflict zones; they exhibit patterned geographies with their own logic, and important power disparities exist within heterarchies. To assess relative strength and revenue extraction capacity, the question is: who is able to impose checkpoints on the most profitable nodes, and who is relegated to marginal routes? The most prized routes in any geography are typically those with the highest density of flows—often paved roads and the interfaces between domestic and international economies (ports, border crossings, and the inland arteries that feed them—see for example Figure 3). Whether in Afghanistan or Somalia, it is preferable for armed actors to capture a border post where import and export taxes can be imposed on regular flows of trucks, over a roadblock along a feeder road where farmers carry produce to a market (cf. Gebresenbet, 2018). Importantly, many of these high-value positions are located well inside national territory, underscoring how borderland political economies are often anchored in inland checkpoints rather than at the borderline itself.

The ideal type here is that of the insurgent equivalent of a ‘gatekeeper state’ (Cooper, 2002)—a type of government in weak states that survives by controlling the ‘gate’—the interface between domestic trade and the outside world. This model could be seen in action on the China-Myanmar border, in southern Libya and on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where insurgent roadblock operators manage to force transporters through a highly taxed funnel. Similarly, competition to monopolise taxable transit points along cross-border trade routes and disrupt competing ones seems to be a significant stake in the conflicts in Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and the Great Lakes Region. What is interesting is that the geography of the most prized routes is often ‘extraverted’, that is, that it clusters around the borders and cross-border routes where the densest flows are found.

Nonetheless, participants were quick to underscore that feasibly emulating the gatekeeper state depended on substantial military or infrastructural clout: checkpoint operators in southern Libya have at their disposal high-speed patrols capable of apprehending any vehicle that strays from the appointed desert route, while China and Pakistan built costly border fencing to effectively force transporters from Myanmar and Afghanistan, respectively, through the only remaining checkpoint. In eastern DR Congo, it even involves competing road rehabilitation efforts by Uganda and Rwanda (cf. Titeca and Salvaggio, 2025). In other words, if you want to move up the chain of roadblocks and economic gatekeeping you need considerable resources.

Figure 3. Convoy of trucks waiting at a South Sudanese checkpoint



Source: Schouten, Matthysen & Muller, 2021: 34.

In any conflict landscape, the checkpoints along key corridors are often accompanied by a flurry of roadblocks operated by less powerful or ‘subaltern’ actors along secondary routes. These might be remote bush routes in areas where the natural resources are extracted or grown and which ultimately feed into cross-border trade routes. Because these activities are typically scattered, traffic is less dense, meaning there are less rents to be extracted from trade (Dobler, 2016). Dominant actors in a conflict system often relinquish them to minor groups because the effort to try and take over control of marginal roadblocks in difficult terrain is not worth the effort. Workshop participants volunteered that such ‘subaltern’ roadblocks are widespread in South Sudan, Myanmar and DR Congo.

In other words, the hierarchy of competing parties to conflict is reflected in their access to prized checkpoints. The takeaway is that mapping who controls which roadblock onto the features of the transport network in a given conflict setting is an intuitive tool to help shed light on relative revenue gaining capacity and through that, differences in military strength in often complex conflict landscapes.

THESIS 4 – REBELS CAN OUTPERFORM THE STATE IN CHECKPOINT GOVERNANCE



Control over key cross-border corridors curtails the freedom of action of roadblock operators. The intricacies of global supply chains mean that even frontline logistical workers in conflict zones need to comply with certain kinds of paperwork, and that they push for predictable and standardised fees (cf. Sweet, 2021). This means that along paved, cross-border routes with dense traffic economic extraversion exerts a kind of constraint:

being able to tax cross-border supply chains can impose a ‘golden straitjacket’ of formalisation (sometimes largely performative) on roadblock operators, because transnational trade demands legibility, receipts and predictable taxes, regardless of the operator’s political project or grievances (Schouten, 2025).¹ In contrast, along remote, unpaved routes with scattered or intermittent flows—pastoralism, small-scale trade, smuggling—roadblocking is often more fragmented, negotiated ad hoc and unpredictable. This contrast was particularly clear on the China-Myanmar border, where the supplies necessary to operate scamming centres passed through technologically sophisticated checkpoints where digital receipts were issued, while the workforce for those same scamming centres had to travel through remote jungle paths, often facing unpredictable militia checkpoints along the way.

In short, rebels and state actors are compelled to behave more ‘state like’ along high-traffic routes and related checkpoints. This mechanism also explains why, along corridors that pass through areas under control of multiple armed factions, it may be difficult to identify who is operating any one checkpoint, because the ritual of passage is so similar for a truck driver—distinctions between state or non-state, foundational for political science, often dissolve along trade routes, with the same amounts and types of receipts issued (cf. Thakur, 2021). An expert on Yemen underscored this point during the workshop: ‘if the checkpoint doesn’t have a flag indicating their allegiance, it is impossible for travellers to know who they are facing’.

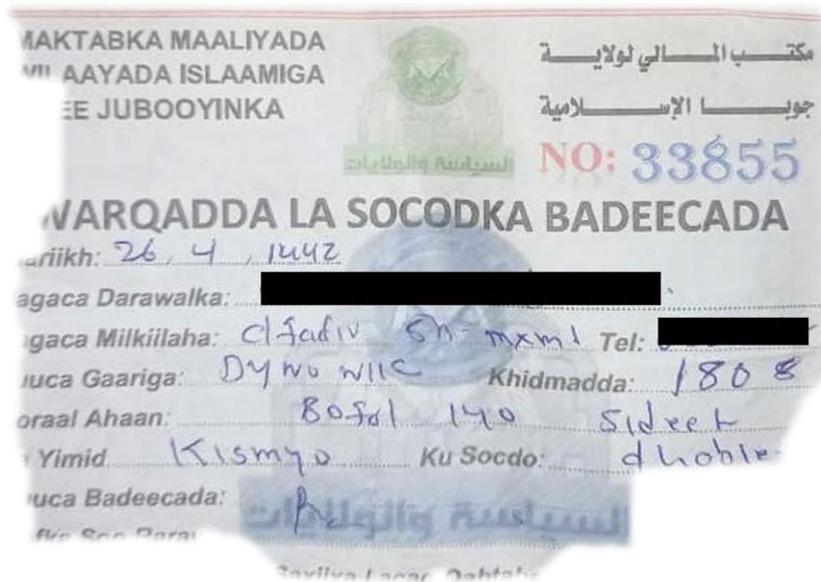
Interestingly, workshop participants noted myriad examples in which armed groups outperform government-affiliated roadblock operators in offering predictable, state-like roadblock regimes to road users. Both Al Shabaab in Somalia, the Taliban before the takeover, and today M23 in eastern DR Congo offer a more formalised, predictable and standardised checkpoint experience to transporters, compared to the haggling at strings of improvised roadblocks along government-controlled portions of the road network (cf. Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023). With all these armed groups, truckers are issued a receipt at the first checkpoint they encounter, to be waved through subsequent checkpoints on presenting said receipt (see Figure 4 below).

Needless to say, whatever their political convictions, transporters and traders strongly prefer such an experience to the alternative. Offering a leaner protection racket attracts trade flows to the routes they occupy, as well as ensuring political buy-in from powerful trade elites—who may in some cases even be the ones supporting the insurgency and driving the armed group’s policy (cf. Ahmad, 2024). Again, offering this measure of

¹ Even in contexts like DR Congo, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Somalia and Yemen, influential transport unions or associations exist through which traders collectively lobby and negotiate with checkpoint operators—or withhold revenues by imposing transport blockages. Participants agreed that their collective bargaining capacity and agency merit further investigation.

predictability is contingent on strict military hierarchy, or the capacity to ensure that roadside agents follow the precepts of their commanders. Workshop participants reflected that this challenged how we usually think about states and rebels: ‘if rebels outperform the state, and states behave more like militia, then are these labels still meaningful?’

Figure 4. Checkpoint receipt issued by al-Shabaab



Source: Courtesy of Jay Bahadur.

In policy terms, alarm bells evidently should go off when insurgents outperform the incumbents that the rule-based international order is supposed to defend, as it reflects just how dire the situation is. That said, controlling checkpoints along busy roads appears to provide lessons in governance for ‘states in waiting’: through managing and negotiating the flows of people and things rebels learn how to rule. This thesis seems to chime with conventional state-building theory, in which stationary bandits able to offer more predictable terms of extortion will be able to obtain buy-in from civilians and eventually crowd out roving bandits (Sanchez de la Sierra, 2020; cf. Olson, 1993). However, in practice, such checkpoint geographies, in which one party to a conflict manages to monopolise control over the most important points of passage, are comparatively rare: in both eastern Congo and Somalia, centralising roadblock actors have been forced to share control over the transport network with a flurry of competing actors, rendering the overarching checkpoint geography messy and costly.

THESIS 5 – CHECKPOINT FRAGMENTATION MAY BE AN ACHIEVEMENT RATHER THAN A FAILURE



In complete contradiction with the previous point, workshop participants pointed out that the decentralisation and fragmentation of checkpoint geographies ‘need not index a failure of power consolidation but can be a deliberate political objective’. This can be an expression of divide-and-rule tactics associated with patronage systems premised on self-financing and of political cultures committed to decentralisation of power—

or both.

The first logic conveys that checkpoint regimes often operate through tax farming and outsourcing: allocating the right to levy rents as a way to buy loyalty and manage coalitions. In such settings, governance depends not on eliminating predation but on distributing it (cf. Spatz et al., 2021; Verweijen, 2018). This is one reason so many checkpoint configurations exhibit principal–agent ambivalences: decentralisation of extraction is key to the conduct of politics. This is evident across the conflict-affected contexts under discussion at the workshop.

One workshop participant observed that in Eastern Congo, ‘the many militia checkpoints are the glue that holds the whole system together’, allowing the Congolese army to tie armed militia nominally to its resistance to the Rwandan-backed invasion because they could jointly extract wealth from trade without giving up their autonomy. In West Africa, another participant added, the hundreds of checkpoints that constitute a burden on regional trade constitute an informal buy-off for powerful army and police factions that could otherwise stage coups; in Somalia, fragile federal and member state projects rely on checkpoints to associate otherwise fiercely independent clan militia; and in South Sudan, the SPLA elite rules by allocating profitable checkpoint locations to loyal army generals as well as militia outside of the military hierarchy.

Similarly, in DR Congo, the government’s counteroffensive against M23 is supported by militia and underpaid soldiers who are allowed to self-finance through roadblocks, on the back of local populations. Of course, here the forms of ‘ceasefire capitalism’ pervading Myanmar’s borderlands also come to mind, in which the government co-opts certain armed groups in a state of neither war nor peace, allowing such ‘frenemies’ to jointly extract rents from the trade routes that connect them (Woods, 2013). In all these cases, the ground-level proliferation of roadblocks indicates that the political system ‘works’, in the sense that there are meaningful relations of patronage and accommodation between the political centre and those that carry arms on the ground. This mode of rule generates incentives for fiscal illegibility and untraceable supply chains: governments may prefer blurred, fragmented regimes that allow selective enforcement and off-book distribution.

Another situation in which a fragmentation of roadblock geographies indicates political ‘success’ rather than failure is in contexts where a healthy mistrust against the centralisation of power exists. In eastern DRC, much of the progressive fragmentation of the roadblock landscape over the past decade is the result of schisms among militia resulting from the internal resistance against the centralisation of roadblock rents by putative leaders. This dynamic may also reflect concerns by neighbouring communities

about imbalances in power: if one group erects a roadblock, others will follow simply to restore a perceived equilibrium of force (see Figure 5 below, cf. Schouten, 2022).

Figure 5. Roadblock operated by Congolese local self-defense group



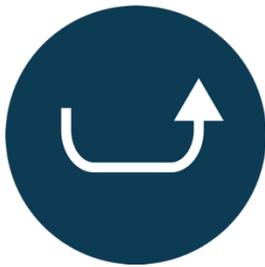
Source: Photo by Peer Schouten (2017).

This logic seems at play in the Somali territories, where checkpoint landscapes are read as much along the grain of the relative prowess of lineages as they are in terms of competing state-making projects (Edle et al., 2024; cf. Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023). One participant gave the example of the Tubu community which straddles the borderlands of Libya, Sudan, Niger and Chad, reputed for a political culture that has always refused hierarchy. He explained that the proliferation of checkpoints—each operated by a different group of youth—one can observe when the Tubu mobilise, is to be seen as an expression of deeply rooted values fundamental to local social ordering. Of course, to acknowledge that roadblocks reflect a local political culture doesn't make them 'nice' or beneficial. Of course, such a prevailing political sentiment is often manipulated by political entrepreneurs who benefit from fragmentation because it also weakens potential opposition.

A recurring temptation in policy debate is to treat checkpoints as pure predation: remove the barrier, remove the harm. Yet discussions at the workshop suggested that one should think twice before lobbying for a wholesale reduction of roadblocks. In the first scenario, doing so may disrupt carefully crafted political bargains, destabilising unfortunate but relatively stable channels of influence between an embattled government and the militias that it manipulates, but which could turn against it. When checkpoint rents become the glue holding political coalitions together, the 'end of

conflict' threatens fiscal collapse for the armed and political actors who have become dependent on roadside extraction. Conversely, tolerating checkpoint regimes as 'stabilising' can harden extractive war economies. The second scenario evokes the perpetual trade-off between state-building ambitions and the violence those ambitions entail for groups that often elude those ambitions. In either case, the eradication of checkpoints as a policy imperative makes sense intuitively, but is politically risky and requires careful attention to contextual dynamics not easily grasped through 'remote' methods.

THESIS 6 – CHECKPOINT TAXES AREN'T PAID AT THE ROADBLOCK



If checkpoints are often first and foremost fiscal institutions, one has to know how the burden and rents are distributed to grasp their full significance. The person who pays at the roadblock is rarely the person who ultimately bears the cost. In essence, checkpoint levies epitomise indirect taxes, which are incorporated into market prices; transporters and traders do not absorb them but pass them on. The 'blow' is not dealt at the checkpoint, but at the point where commodities are exchanged for cash, with the costs of transport and taxes 'hidden' in market prices (see Figure 6).

This means that roadblock costs are literally 'carried' by commodity chains across borders and to the most remote vulnerable populations. They take shape as market distortions in the form of depressed farm-gate prices for producers, or higher consumer prices for urban households. At the aggregate level, in other words, the indirect nature of roadblock taxation turns checkpoints into devices to tax 'at a distance'—without those ultimately subjected to them able to bargain directly with those at the receiving end (Schouten, 2025). Because neither the transporter nor the checkpoint operators pay, roadblocks should in principle be analysed as devices that systematically transfer wealth from consumers and producers towards traders and checkpoint operators—often already privileged groups within a given society. Of course, this problem pervades all types of tariffs and excises (cf. Tarschys, 1988), and in this sense the problem of checkpoints is part of a broader shift towards indirect taxes that seems to occur across the world.

Figure 6. Checkpoint taxes are paid elsewhere



Source: Schouten, Matthysen & Muller, 2021: 43 (left) and photo by Abdirahman Edle (2023) (right).

The negative developmental impacts seem disproportionate in conflict-affected societies. Because of their indirect nature, at the level of commodity chains, roadblocks appear to redistribute economic fungibility between imports and local producers. The cumulative number of checkpoints along alternative routes can reshape whole price geographies—as in the striking example of sorghum surpluses perishing in northern South Sudan while Juba imports sorghum from Uganda, because surpluses cannot compete given checkpoint burdens along internal routes (Schouten et al., 2021). Similarly, the density of roadblocks between farming areas and urban consumption markets in Mogadishu disfavour domestic grain agriculture, because imports of the same grains that arrive through the port are taxed a lot less (cf. Ripamonti et al., 2024; Schouten, 2023). While some of this is specific to conflict economies, it can equally be a feature of state-making, in contexts where governments favour imports over domestic production simply because the indirect taxes are easier to levy—while ultimately penalising domestic consumers and producers alike. This proclivity is stacked against agricultural producers of onions and other staple foods in the Sahel, who rely on the principally urban consumption markets of their West African coastal neighbours, who can equally import and tax (often heavily subsidised) versions of the same goods through ports (Haggblade et al., 2019).

In assessing the impact of checkpoint levies, most studies record the amounts paid by road users at checkpoints and leave it at that. Yet the price of roadblocks is often paid elsewhere, in patterns that are likely pernicious to the most vulnerable in conflict-affected societies and potentially disruptive of livelihoods. To gauge exactly how, roadblock operators should thus be analysed as intervening in food systems and studies of roadblocks should thus follow roadblock-affected commodity flows all the way.

THESES 7 – CHECKPOINTS MAKE MARKETS



A familiar policy reflex treats checkpoints as non-tariff barriers that distort an otherwise desirable market order: remove the roadblocks, reduce transaction costs, restore trade and development will follow. Workshop discussions pushed hard against this deceptively clean diagnosis. Across cases—particularly DR Congo and South Sudan—participants stressed that checkpoints are not simply distortions imposed on otherwise

free, pre-existing, markets. They are institutions that *make* and *shape* markets, often in contradictory ways: they deepen cash dependence and commodification in some places, while re-embedding circulation in local political and moral institutions in others. Thinking of checkpoints only as obstacles to efficiency risks misunderstanding what is being governed at the roadside—and why many checkpoint regimes persist despite their obvious aggregate economic harm.

One side of this story is marketisation through the monetisation of mobility. Paid checkpoints mean that movement itself—whether it concerns displacement or access to farmland, natural resources, markets and services—becomes priced. In settings where conflict, displacement, flooding or state retreat have already weakened subsistence production and collective safety nets, this ‘enclosure of mobility’ (Scholz, 2020) can force households deeper into the cash economy. Workshop participants suggested that

checkpoints expand transactional, monetised exchange into spaces where livelihoods were previously embedded in other mechanisms of social reproduction—effectively compelling participation in markets for food and basic commodities. In Somalia, for instance, cumulative checkpoint taxes affecting farming areas compelled agricultural producers to shift toward cash crops—sesame, lemon—or the production of charcoal, whose value-to-volume ratios can better withstand the cumulative burdens of transit taxation and price markups (Schouten, 2023). In this sense, checkpoints do not merely tax markets; because they turn movement into a transactional, monetised good, they actively contribute to marketisation and rewire existing livelihood strategies. Because they are spaces where cash is handled, roadblocks often also turn into small markets themselves, deepening the connection between extraction and exchange (see Figure 7, cf. Muzalia et al., 2021).

Figure 7. South Sudanese checkpoint doubling as charcoal shop



Source: DIIS/IPIS 2021. Schouten, Matthysen & Muller 2021: 67.

Perhaps South Sudan offers the starkest case of this mechanism. Here, the state's withdrawal from services and wages, the collapse of aid, and the degradation of livelihoods created a population dependent on cash without reliable access to it. In such conditions, checkpoints become one of the principal means through which money enters rural communities, and whole markets can spring up around transport nodes. From the standpoint of a World Bank-like vision of 'smooth markets', checkpoints are blockages; but empirically, they can be among the mechanisms that produce marketisation itself. That marketisation, however, is structurally extractive: the tax base is circulation, the incidence is dispersed through prices, and the poorest pay disproportionately because they cannot opt out of the market.

Checkpoints can conversely also function as devices for re-embedding markets—sometimes as a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985). Participants working on DR Congo and South Sudan protested the notion that reducing roadblocks to 'transport inefficiencies' is always unambiguously desirable. They emphasised that such frictions could encode the capacity to locally negotiate and assess each traveller and batch of goods, allowing otherwise vulnerable communities to reassert a measure of control over capitalism and circulation that would otherwise elude them. One of the workshop's through-lines was that inefficiency and delay often serve a purpose: roadblocks can be designed to embed preferences into each encounter rather than maximise throughput.

This includes preferences over who should be allowed to trade, which goods should move, whose authority is recognised, and how outsiders should be treated. As one workshop participant put it: ‘Slowing down and negotiating passage on a case-by-case basis *is* the point of checkpoints’.

Traders may be charged different amounts depending on social proximity to those controlling the roadblock; commodities are judged, expropriated or encouraged based on where they are from and where they are going; and the checkpoint becomes a site where it is insisted there are no ‘goods from nowhere’. This is not a romantic story. Community checkpoints often resist the state by echoing the state’s own logic of predation—mimicking extraction even as they contest who gets to extract, and get to decide the terms under which passage can take place. In one remote mountainous corner of Afghanistan, one workshop participant ventured, roadblocks are precisely meant to ensure that members of the local community can participate in the transport sector, the only cash source available in otherwise barren land. Truckers are forced to unload and transship their goods onto mule caravans that slowly but surely get goods to the other side. This clarifies that roadblock politics revolves around moral economies as much as rent collection. It also helps explain why ‘inefficiencies’ persist: they can be functional for producing legitimacy, asserting a claim to the right to participate in a mobile economy, and redistributing opportunity. The same roadblock can be experienced as protection by some and extortion by others, depending on one’s position in local hierarchies of belonging, trade access and vulnerability (cf. Pottier, 2006).

The distributional stakes of roadblocks are therefore irreducibly political and often contradictory. Community checkpoints can discriminate against outsiders or trading elites, functioning as a strategy of resistance against the disruptive effects of unfettered trade penetration—even while those same communities may resent other checkpoints elsewhere along the commodity chain. These contradictions are precisely why checkpoints must be analysed at the level of whole chains and route systems rather than as isolated barriers.

The policy implication is not that checkpoints should be celebrated, but that transport ‘facilitation’ reforms change distribution, not only efficiency. Reducing checkpoints may lower prices for urban consumers while harming some rural groups through price shifts, elite penetration of local markets, or land grabs; conversely, tolerating some community barriers may protect local autonomy while taxing others and entrenching coercive extraction as a livelihood regime. Access negotiation and reform efforts that treat checkpoints as purely technical obstacles risk empowering the most violent actor rather than the most legitimate one. A more robust approach begins by mapping local legitimacy structures and the social grammar of negotiation at barriers—and by recognising that attempts to streamline passage can be read, locally, as attempts to disembed circulation from local moral economies rather than as neutral improvements in ‘efficiency’.

THESIS 8 – CHECKPOINTS ARE A COPING STRATEGY



Checkpoint geographies often look permanent because they are physically there—once etched on a map, they have a way of pretending to be geology. Yet one of the workshop’s most surprising insights is that roadblocks are sometimes best understood as coping strategies: contingent, adaptive responses to climate shocks, livelihood stress and political uncertainty, rather than an immutable political form that straightforwardly expresses state-building, rebel governance or a stable project of territorial rule. This matters for analysis because it shifts attention from what checkpoints are ‘supposed’ to mean—order, sovereignty, authority—to what they enable under constraint: they constitute a source of cash when other revenue sources fail; they offer employment when other labour markets collapse; and they provide localised social safety nets where other fallback strategies are absent.

The clearest version of this argument emerged in discussions on Yemen, DR Congo and South Sudan. Participants observed that in these settings checkpoints became central not because armed actors suddenly discovered them as a timeless instrument of predation, but because other funding mechanisms deteriorated: oil revenues contracted, external patronage dried up, and wage and service systems eroded. In such conditions, taxation of circulation becomes an accessible ‘funding mechanism of last resort’. In Yemen, for instance, the number of checkpoints increased proportionately to cuts in foreign aid and patronage. As one workshop participant commented, ‘the conflict in Yemen used to have a territorial inflection, revolving around boundaries and frontlines, but it has since been refashioned into competition for control over corridors’. In DR Congo, armed groups that had been displaced from profitable mining sites during the heyday of mineral supply chain formalisation and monitoring efforts, reinvented themselves as roadblock managers. But perhaps the most dramatic example is South Sudan. With the collapse in oil revenue and the patronage networks it sustained—what has been called ‘shock decarbonisation’ (Craze, 2024)—checkpoints proliferated both as a means of revenue capture for political and military elites and as a means of survival for armed young men.

The point of these examples is that roadblocking is but one element in a repertoire of funding strategies that are more or less fungible under specific contextual opportunities and constraints (cf. Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023). The cautionary corollary is that policy prescriptions often underestimate how nimble conflict actors can be when pressured: if checkpoints are constrained choices, then simply targeting them may prompt substitution rather than resolution—shifts toward other revenue instruments, relocated roadblocks or intensified predation elsewhere. Seen through this lens, checkpoint geographies are ‘living ecosystems’ that flourish in waves accompanying offensives, temporary bargains revised as coalitions shift, and experiments in local survival that may harden into durable systems—or dissolve as soon as the conditions that produced them change.

Figure 8. Turning crisis into opportunity



Source: Schouten, *Roadblock Politics*, p. 94.

Roadblocks can be fallback strategies for governments and armed groups, but they can also be so for communities. Checkpoints can function as social safety nets for unemployed youth or demobilised soldiers who may be compelled to ‘pick up weapon and sit by side of road’ when no other avenue exists to obtain cash for basic goods (see Figure 8). In some contexts, this constitutes a form of socially accepted livelihood diversification or crisis adaptation in response to farming lulls, rainfall shocks and displacement—the temporal variables that structure employment opportunities and livelihood stress (cf. Debos, 2011). It can also be tacitly tolerated, or even locally encouraged, because communities may prefer their youth concentrated at the roadside—obtaining a meagre few daily bills from truckers—rather than raiding livestock from neighbouring communities, provoking wider cycles of violence. Concentrating armed men along corridors may keep them out of the village. In DR Congo, a whole class of roadblocks is operated by what locals call ‘volunteers’ who pretend to do basic road rehabilitation, but who more often than not channel their energy into imposing small checkpoint fees on road users. They are formally demobilised but uncompensated rebels sent there by the elders of their community, to give them a clear place in the local community and political economy. This is not a moral defence of roadblocks; it is a sober description of the coping logic that can make them locally ‘workable’ and fungible as a form of DDR on the cheap.

The good news is that if some checkpoints are contingent coping strategies rather than deep structures, then seemingly pervasive roadblock landscapes can also disappear again. The caution is that coping strategies are not removed without cost. They are often compensations for institutional failure—wage collapse, missing services, degraded livelihoods, absent policing—and removing them without substitutes can produce immediate losers with coercive capacity. Dismantling checkpoints is then not only a transport or governance reform; it is often a fiscal intervention and a labour-market intervention at the same time. ‘Crackdowns’ can turn stationary bandits roving again, producing displacement of a problem rather than resolution as actors adapt—either by simply moving roadblocks, or by shifting to more unpredictable kidnapping or cattle raids. The broader implication is that checkpoints are sites of political adaptation. They are not always signs of an emergent ‘checkpoint state’, nor simply the residue of state failure. They are often experiments in coping with crisis—experiments that can be reversed, but rarely without building something in their place.

THESIS 9 – CHECKPOINTS INCREASINGLY INTERTWINE WITH THE DIGITAL REALM



A liberal hope—often implicit in governance programming—is that digitisation and traceability will dissolve illicit economies by making flows legible. Workshop discussions offered a sobering counter-hypothesis: checkpoint economies are increasingly (though unevenly) interlaced with the digital economy, and armed actors and smugglers can be first-movers creatively experimenting with digital tools to create their own legibility

schemes.

In southern Libya, an armed group has recently begun issuing QR codes to those who paid at their checkpoints, to allow its mobile patrols to check whether road users are ‘in order’ or ‘smugglers’ whose goods need to be confiscated. The workshop’s most vivid example is the emergence of logistical supply chains controlled by Myanmar armed groups but plugged into China’s digital governance platform, feeding a dark online economy run from scamming centres thriving on indentured labour. In Somalia, meanwhile, transporters circumvent digital monitoring of mobile money transactions to Al Shabaab by relying on intermediaries to forward the money, making the transactions harder to trace again (Ali, 2023). The takeaway was condensed by a participant into a line worth keeping: ‘digitisation will not save us’.

This shows how digitalisation is politically plastic. Digital systems can reduce transaction costs, standardise pricing and stabilise enforcement—the very qualities that make extraction legible and scalable, and are therefore associated to state-making. But sophisticated, digital traceability solutions can also be used for the very opposite, to obfuscate roadblock payments made to sanctioned entities by logistical frontline workers. The systematic imposition of armed group taxes on heavily monitored and tracked mineral supply chains in DR Congo come to mind. The deeper issue is that ‘legibility’ is not synonymous with accountability. Digitised checkpoints can be highly legible to the extracting actor and still illegible to oversight institutions. And they can strengthen corridor governance in ways that are experienced as ‘state-like’ even when

operated by non-state armed actors—raising again the question of what, in practice, makes a state when the benchmark becomes predictable regulation of circulation rather than formal sovereignty.

Figure 9. Receipt issued at Congolese rebel checkpoint



Source: Shared by confidential source with one of the authors.

CONCLUSION AND TAKEAWAYS

The nine theses in this report have highlighted how checkpoints are not a residual irritant associated with corruption, insecurity and inefficiency, but rather institutions that *generate* political order around circulation in borderlands. That move is partly conceptual (it forces us to take ‘payments on flows’ seriously), but it is also practical. Checkpoints form the interface where armed actors, traders, communities and outsiders negotiate the terms under which goods, people and money move. They are places where struggles over authority and distribution become unusually visible—‘places where you can see things which are difficult to see elsewhere’ as one participant put it (and therefore, by extension, places that policymakers tend to experience ‘like weeds’: ubiquitous, politically awkward, hard to uproot without breaking something else).

If checkpoints are the everyday infrastructure through which conflict financing, coalition management, market-making and claims to authority are enacted, then shifts in checkpoint regimes are ideal diagnostic signals for broader conflict trajectories. In a world where value is increasingly made as much out of circulation as of production, tracking the governance of circulation becomes a way to track politics itself.

At the same time, the workshop’s central warning remains: dashboards do not interpret themselves. A rise in checkpoint numbers is not a stable ‘indicator’ with one meaning. It may signal fragmentation, deliberate decentralisation (a coalition-management strategy), seasonal labour adaptation, strategic siege-building or a change in the location of taxable flows. This is the core methodological posture the report recommends: not prediction-as-oracle, but diagnosis-as-interpretation—pairing emerging quantitative checkpoint datasets with a field-based understanding of the local grammar of extraction and negotiation.

To end, we wish to highlight the following overarching policy implications:

Treat checkpoint dynamics as a high-signal proxy for shifts in revenue dependence and coalition politics. When alternative revenue sources contract (oil, external patronage, mining access, aid rents), checkpointing often intensifies; when revenue alternatives expand or centralise, checkpoint regimes can consolidate or be replaced. In other words, the checkpoint landscape is a living register of how armed and political actors are financing rule and buying loyalty. Yet this is also where interpretive humility matters: a tightening, more predictable checkpoint regime may reduce certain kinds of violence while entrenching war finance; a crackdown may reduce visible checkpoint counts while displacing coercion into kidnapping, cattle raiding or protection rackets. Monitoring should therefore be designed to detect substitution, not merely ‘reduction’ of checkpoints.

Read checkpoint geographies together with transport infrastructure and flow density. The workshop discussion repeatedly returned to the point that dense, paved, cross-border corridors and port/border interfaces concentrate value and therefore attract more organised attempts at routinised taxation and enforcement. Conversely, remote routes with intermittent flows tend to host more negotiated, fragmented and unpredictable roadblocking. A diagnostic practice that ignores the underlying transport geography will over-interpret noise and miss the political economy of where value can be intercepted.

Avoid seductive dichotomies about the nature and impact of checkpoints in conflict-affected borderlands. One reason checkpoint dynamics are diagnostically powerful is that they force us to abandon neat categories—state/non-state, licit/illicit, governance/crime—that often travel poorly across borderlands. The report’s framing of checkpoints as ‘twilight institutions’ is a reminder that the same roadside node can stabilise multiple competing agendas at once, and that the practical meaning of ‘the state’ may be experienced by road users as predictability and routinisation rather than formal sovereignty.

Design policy engagement around differentiation, sequencing and expected adaptation. The workshop’s policy conclusion is not ‘tolerate checkpoints’, but ‘stop treating them as a single technical obstacle’. One-size-fits-all eradication can backfire; reforms alter distributions, legitimacy and coalition glue. The more robust approach begins by distinguishing configurations that are maximally harmful—those that massively tax essential goods, funnel revenue to war chests and sharply raise consumer prices—from those that, however coercively, are entangled with livelihoods or local legitimacy structures under collapse of formal authority. That differentiation enables targeted sequencing: pressuring removal where it is most extractive and escalatory, while negotiating transformation elsewhere—including formalisation into tolls that actually benefit communities, where politically feasible.

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