

Cross-border narratives of development and space: transborder planning in North America

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Background

Achieving better coordination across the common international boundary has long been a priority for policy makers and planners along the U.S.-Mexico border. Efforts to harmonize and align regional policy and planning have included attempts to encourage more effective coordination across federal, state and local agencies, sometimes adopting a piecemeal approach and sometimes embracing comprehensive perspectives (Wong 2004). Habitually, these efforts target the private sector, which it is encouraged to engage in cross-border partnerships involving other private entities, local universities or even government agencies (Sparrow 2001). Often community-based organizations have been encouraged to engage in cross-border coordination as a way to improve the effectiveness of programs targeting the quality of life of border residents or the betterment of the border environment (Lara-Valencia 2011; Chang-Hee 2003).

It is possible to argue that cross-border coordination efforts in the US-Mexico border have been able to reshape regional policy making and contributed to create a new governance system in this region. As observed by Wong (Wong 2004), the intensification of collaboration between regional actors has resulted in the *formalization* of joint efforts and plans to manage development in the transborder space and, therefore, it is contributing to the formation of transboundary associative regions in the US-Mexico border. Yet, this process is not straightforward and it is full of paradoxes, as revealed by the ephemeral nature of most border plans, the limited implementation and follow-up of policies, the vulnerability of policy-making to political moods and cycles, the east-west unevenness of transborder policy-making, and the asymmetry in

the rules of engagement for regional actors in each side of the border. My position in this paper is that proponents of transborder regionalism in the North American context have failed to recognize the importance of regional awareness and identity, a fundamental ingredient in regional building and ensuing transborder policy-making. As suggested by Passi (Paasi 1991) the process of regionalization begins with the development of territorial consciousness, a state where formal boundaries are “softened” while functional ones receive some level of validation and the collective endorsement to act as the demarcation of a legitimate policy domain.

Objectives

Through the analysis of qualitative data, this investigation addresses two specific areas of uncertainty regarding regionalism and transborder coordination in the US-Mexico border. One centers on the discursive representations of the region either as a transborder territory or a juxtaposed territory and the socio-spatial elements that demarcate such space. It was assumed that the dominance of one representation over the other is not only indicative of how regional actors have solved the tension between the forces of separation and integration intrinsic to the border, but also of the kind of policy actions that are conceivable and practical within such imagined space. The second area of inquiry corresponds to the examination of those elements in the discourse of policy makers that reflects some degree of symbolic and functional identity at a transborder scale.

Research process

The data for the analysis come from a Delphi process. A convenience sample of regional planners and policymakers was invited to participate in an online survey, based on their knowledge, expertise, and past participation on border planning and management. The Delphi method is a structured and systematized process that uses a series of sequential questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback from the research team. The two-round Delphi survey was completed between May and July of 2010 as part of the work conducted for the Border Governors Conference’s Strategic Guidelines for the Competitive and Sustainable Development of the U.S.-Mexico Transborder Region.

Results

Results suggest that dominant socio-spatial representations of the border economy portray the region as two juxtaposed systems and territories which interact mainly to exploit comparative advantages produced by uneven levels of development and geographical adjacency. This is consistent with a differential emphasis placed by participants on different elements of their vision and representation of the border region. From the perspective of US policy-makers the major obstacle for the development of the region is infrastructure bottlenecks at border-crossing points, a circumstance that increases the cost of trade and commerce in the region by slowing the movement of people and goods across the border. By contrast, Mexican policy-makers were more concerned with the decline of the global economy which translates in a lower demand for manufactured goods, and affects particularly the auto industry and maquiladora plants operating in northern Mexico. These findings highlight the urgency of developing narratives promoting a shared vision of development and space for consequential transborder planning and coordination in the U.S.-Mexico border.

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