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Transborder Processes and Transborder Regions in South America.

The Case of the Triple Border between Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

This work deals with some territorial repercussions of transborder processes on transborder regions in the southeast triple border in South America between Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. This region encompasses the twin cities of Barra do Quaraí (Brazil), Monte Caseros (Argentina) and Bella Unión (Uruguay). The work focuses on identifying the actions of territorial actors who seek integration between the three cities. South American macro-regional policies are still not sufficient for the daily problems of border populations, mainly rural and distant from the main centres. Territorial actors, whether from the organised civil society or local governments, develop actions that seek integration between the three cities. For the analysis of their actions, we study the contemporary scenario of the processes and policies of opening/closing the South American borders, as well as the historical and territorial construction of the triple twin cities.

KEYWORDS

Transborder regions, Territorial actors, Territorial policies, Integration, South America

RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail examine quelques répercussions territoriales des processus transfrontaliers à l'œuvre dans la région transfrontalière de la triple frontière la plus au sud des Amériques entre le Brésil, l'Argentine et l'Uruguay. Cette région comprend les triples villes jumelles de Barra do Quaraí (Brésil), Monte Caseros (Argentine) et Bella Unión (Uruguay). Le travail est centré sur l'identification des actions des acteurs territoriaux en quête d'intégration entre les trois villes. Les politiques macrorégionales sud-américaines ne sont toujours pas suffisantes pour les problèmes quotidiens des populations frontalières, essentiellement rurales et éloignées des principaux centres. Sur les triples villes jumelles, les acteurs territoriaux, issus de la société civile et des collectivités locales, développent des actions qui visent l'intégration entre les trois villes. Pour l'analyse des actions de ces acteurs territoriaux locaux, le scénario contemporain des processus et politiques d'ouverture / fermeture des frontières sud-américaines a été analysé, ainsi que la construction historique et territoriale des triples villes jumelles.

MOTS CLÉS

régions transfrontalières, acteurs territoriaux, politiques territoriales, intégration, Amérique du Sud

1. GENERAL GUIDANCES AND CONTEXTS

The current course of territorial policies, mainly for regional development and more recently for transborder processes in transborder regions, either in the scenario of Europe or of South America, is referenced in the general principles of the European integrationist model and the New Regionalist Orthodoxy. In this article, "border regions" are to be understood as unstable spaces, which refers more to a process than to a place. (Amilhat-Szary, 2015: 29, translation by the authors). It aims, among other objectives, to attribute importance to regions and their territorial actors (Raffestin, 1980; Rosière, 2007) with strong focus on their actions with a view to the development and transformation of regions by macro policies (e.g. large infrastructure connections) and/or micro policies (e.g. *place-based policies*) for local/regional development.

Supranational and national actions, in general, have had trends in recent political and economic uses of territories leading to territorial transformations –in contexts with or without instabilities, especially in South America, for example– in regional integration processes. One of the tendencies of regional policies has been to try to insert remote regions –bi or tri-national transborder regions and "internationalised" border

regions– into the dynamics of development and globalisation, even when peripheral. This trend was seen in the 2000s and following years when the guidelines of the foreign Brazilian policy-makers of the Lula da Silva governments, mainly, turned to actions to build South-American infrastructure through South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA), Infrastructure and Planning Council (COSIPLAN), South American organisations belonging to the Union of South American Nations (UNASUL). This perspective of the Brazilian diplomacy adopted the understanding that the bi-oceanic infrastructure corridors should not only serve for transportation but should also induce regional development in South American hinterland regions. The continent, after a period of relative political stability in recent years, is once again an unstable region in which government policies tend to be ephemeral without producing the results of significant territorial transformations (Da Costa, 2018). UNASUL is now facing a crisis and the integration projects of infrastructure are slow. In this context, we focus on the central question of territorial policies applied to transborder regions: what kind of territorial policies have emerged in rapidly evolving multi-scale territorial scenarios taking into account recent national and international experiences in Brazil in interface with Mercosur?

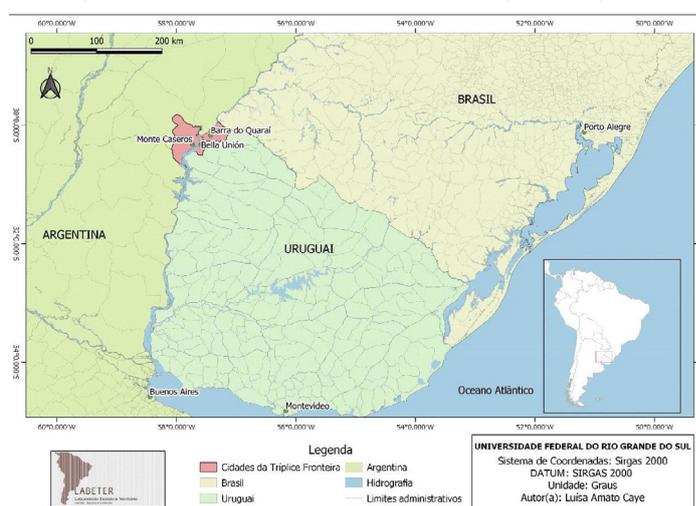
This article deals with a specific case of territorial transborder integration on the most southern triple border in South America between Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Three small rural cities –Barra do Quaraí (Brazil), Bella Unión (Uruguay) and Monte Caseros (Argentina)– are located in this sort of *territorial international corner* in the La Plata Basin along two international rivers. Integration processes in South America are quite different from the European integrationist model, dealing with long distances along the borders, relative isolation and direct dependence of their national governments, less to Mercosur. Therefore, this article explores a rural transborder micro-region where local civil territorial actors are quite active, trying to push forward international connections to cooperate in environmental, educational and cultural issues, even if living quite isolated from their national power centres.

2. THE CASE OF TRIPLE TWIN CITIES IN A FARAWAY TERRITORIAL INTERNATIONAL CORNER

This specific case deals with local and micro-regional transborder triple twin cities in the faraway international corner of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay: Barra do Quaraí (BR), Bella Unión (UY) and Monte Caseros (ARG). We especially focus on how local and regional civil territorial actors move their propositions to promote transborder integration, even in the absence of prominent territorial policies. The case is located in the La Plata Basin, the most important South American transborder macro-region, as a large background scope (fig. 1). 33 twin cities are located on the borders of Brazil with neighbouring countries, on 15,735 km of international borderlines, and more specifically 11 on the borders of the most southern state of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul and its neighbours Argentina and Uruguay. The choice of this case responds to the need of examples of transborder regions in dynamic and non-dynamic, or non-central regions. Besides, this research lays on the only triple border that brings together three countries in South America.

Non-central and even peripheral transborder rural micro-regions in integration processes show different aspects that are quite unknown in national decision centres, such as the high mobility of civil territorial actors promoting integration processes between the three countries. The case highlights, as well, not only internal disparities and asymmetries in transborder regions, but also the imbalances of regional policies for these regions in these Mercosur countries.

Figure 1. Localisation of the triple twin cities in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina



3. DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSBORDER REGION OF THE TRIPLE TWIN CITIES

The borderlines between Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay are fluvial: between Brazil and Argentina lays the Uruguay River, while the Quaraí River separates Brazil and Uruguay. The cities Barra do Quaraí (BR) and Bella Union (UY) are connected by an international bridge over the Quaraí River, built next to an ancient railway line. The crossing from Uruguay to Argentina is made by private boats or by a ferry that runs from Monday to Friday. This aspect demonstrates the fractured character of this transborder region that, besides, lacks an effective connection between the three cities. The request for the recognition of the cities of Barra do Quaraí (BR), Monte Caseros (ARG) and Bella Union (UY) as twin cities was proposed in 2017, during the meeting of the Movement for the Tri-national Border Committee. The definition of twin cities can be found in the Federal Official Newspaper published by the Ministry of National Integration of the Brazilian federal government.

“Twin cities will be considered the municipalities cut by the borderline, whether dry or fluvial, articulated or not by infrastructure work. They have great potential for economic and cultural integration, with or without a conurbation or semi-conurbation with a locality neighbouring country, as well as ‘condensed’ manifestations of the characteristic problems of the border, which acquire greater density there, with direct effects on regional development and citizenship.” (Brasil, 2014. Translation by the authors)

Several political, economic and social processes formed the transborder region. The most important political process concerns the 1851 Treaty of Limits when the borders between Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina were legally established. An important economic aspect of the region was the presence of the *Saladero* industry (salted meat), in Barra do Quaraí, in the 19th century which. In addition to boosting the economy of the region, it stimulated the building of the railway lines that connected Brazil and Montevideo (Uruguay) for the exportation of salted meat to England. The economic activities of the region are currently concentrated in agriculture, with high rates of rice crops. The triple border has been facing a diplomatic dispute between Brazil and Uruguay since 1851 over the *Brazilian Island*, a 200 hectares Brazilian territory located at the mouth of the Quaraí River when entering the Uruguay River. Uruguayan government has been claiming, since 1940, that the treaty was carried out without considering the Uruguayan interests. The island has been uninhabited since the death of its only resident in 2011. The main reason for this contestation is due to the understanding by the Uruguayan government that it is in the Uruguay River and not in the mouth of the Quaraí River. The presence of a Brazilian Imperial Landmark, 13-P, built-in 1862 during the construction of the border, is also contested. Currently, the island is an environmental protected land used by NGOs for educational activities, tourism and catalogue of fauna and flora by Brazilian and Uruguayans.

4. LOCAL TERRITORIAL ACTORS IN TRANSBORDER COOPERATION POLICIES

Many joint actions between the three countries have started in the 2000s from the movement of local territorial actors interested in the integration and resolution of problems common to the three cities. (Movimento Transfronteiriço de ONGs). It led to the creation of the Tri-national Border Integration Committee Barra do Quaraí (Brazil)–Monte Caseros (Argentina)–Bella Unión (Uruguay), e.g. a committee formed by government representatives and organised civil society (in this case, mainly NGOs) from all three countries. The Committee was recognised in 2019 by the three countries as the *first tri-national committee in Brazil*. Its three main lines of action are education, environment, and culture. The table below shows all NGOs active in the transborder region.

Chart 1. NGOs that integrate the Transborder Movement
Source: Field research (2019)

| NGOs | City/country |
|--|-------------------------|
| NGOs <i>Atelier Saladero</i> | Barra do Quaraí/Brazil |
| Binational Commission for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources Paso de Los Libres and Uruguiana | Uruguayana/Brazil |
| Friends of Rio Uruguay Association | Monte Caseros/Argentina |
| Pro Tri-national Committee | Barra do Quaraí/Brazil |
| Friends of the River | Uruguiana/Brazil |
| GrupAma | Bella Unión/Uruguay |
| Rio Mocoretá Ecological Association | Chajari/Argentina |
| Quaraí River Basin Committee | Uruguiana/Brazil |
| Nautical Club Monte Caseros | Monte Caseros/Argentina |

The main axis is environmental since the dialogue between local territorial actors from the three countries started from the identification of common environmental problems. Its most important project is the creation of a tri-national biological corridor that would encompass environmental areas on the border of the three countries to act together in a single area of environmental preservation. The project includes the mouth of the Miriñay River (Argentina), the Uruguay and Quaraí Island (Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay), Parque do Espinilho (Brazil), Rincón de Franquía (Uruguay) and Reserva Mocoretá (Argentina). As for education, the project “Tri-national University Diploma in Cultural Policy Management” is a course held by regional universities from the three countries (National University of Quilmes, Argentina, University of the Republic, Uruguay, and Federal University of Pampa, Brazil). The cultural axis refers mainly to the realisation of projects that address the cultural characteristics of the region and the three countries.

CONCLUSION

Border regions usually have low population density, and are socially and economically needy due to the lack of resources and policies for economic and social development. It is mainly up to the local authorities to identify the problems so that, supported by their national legislation, they can develop joint policies and actions. We can give a partial answer to our initial questions on the kind of territorial policies that have emerged in rapidly evolving multi-scale territorial scenarios taking into account recent national and international experiences in Brazil in terms of interface with Mercosur: it is possible to assert that, in the specific case of the triple border Brazil–Argentina–Uruguay, many integration actions between the three cities are mainly pushed on by social organisations composed by a tri-national border committee, due to the lack of national policies to supply their local needs. Therefore, despite the sharing of common cultural values and the constant flows of local population between the three countries, the three twin cities are not fully integrated. The lack of connection infrastructures between the three cities is an obstacle to cross from Brazil to the Argentine side and *vice versa*. In addition, local territorial actors face different legal systems and legislation in the three countries. Territorial repercussions are not strongly territorialised so far. The recent official recognition of the Tri-national Border Integration Committee Barra do Quaraí (Brazil)–Monte Caseros (Argentina)–Bella Unión (Uruguay) by the three national governments is a significant institutional step forward for this *faraway international corner* and its active communities for territorial integration in the La Plata Basin, South America.

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