Networking on the Border:
The Realities of Communication among Border Entities

By Francisco Lara

Introduction
In the past, it was argued that transboundary planning and cooperation was neither practically feasible nor politically viable, considering the history and deep asymmetry characterizing US-Mexico relations. However, a number of well-known regional processes have taken place during the last 15 years which have had considerable effects on the way border communities have traditionally interacted. Internationalization and greater integration of the border economy and society is one example. Likewise, political change in the border area is also apparent.

Though traditional barriers to cross-border planning and cooperation still play a significant role, such trends as internationalization are creating new and solid opportunities for interaction and partnering across the border. Indications of these opportunities are:

(a) The formation of regional networks involving community organizations concerned with issues of social and environmental development.
(b) An increase in cross-sectoral alliances promoting region-wide and long term policy agendas.
(c) The emergence of "binationalism" as an important factor for regional community leaders, policy-makers and scholars.
(d) The resurgence of regional approaches as legitimate formulas to address issues in infrastructure development, environmental management and economic planning.

A closer examination of the recent evolution of cross-border interactions shows that the increased web of relations is the result of increasingly similar values and attitudes among community leaders, a vision of the future which embraces regional integration and binationalism, a new structure of incentives, and better communication among border entities. The role of electronic networks has been essential in enabling information exchange and communication, and in allowing the development of new modes of interaction. However, the influence of these factors fluctuates along the U.S.-Mexico border.

This paper attempts to offer an overview of organizational networking and collaboration within the San Diego-Tijuana border region.

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Cross-border Collaborative Action along the San Diego-Tijuana Border

The nature of collaborative action

Understanding the nature of cross-border collaborative action and how it progresses is an important step toward promoting its facilitation. Cross-border partnerships can be characterized by varying levels of coalescence, which reflect the organization’s level of capacity, degree of autonomy, and specific interests and priorities.

There are three levels of coalescence: convergence, collaboration, and co-management. Figure 1 shows these levels as a pyramid of cross-border interactions.

Figure 1: Cross-Border Collaborative Action: Intensity of Interactions

**Actions:**
- Pooling of human and financial resources
- Exchange of money and other material resources
- Personal contacts
- Invitations to attend meetings
- Exchange of information

**Outcomes:**
- Binational programs
- Joint commissions or cross-border coalitions
- Formation of binational groups
- Mechanism for consultation with the other side
- Communication of information regarding preliminary plans or policies

The convergence level represents the lowest degree of coalescence. Convergence actions are the spontaneous outcome of the day-to-day interplay of communities that occupy contiguous territories. Interaction takes place through frequent but informal contact, and personal meetings between representatives of organizations on both sides of the border. One main purpose of partnerships at this level is to keep communities on the “other side” of the border aware of actions that, if undertaken, might have cross-border implications. Thus, one of the main features of convergence level collaboration is the exchange of information and data. Because associations at this level are so informal, there are no legal obligations; but these interactions may lead to identifying difficulties and the discussion of possible solutions. Eventually, convergence level partnerships can lead to synchronized actions, a feature of most advanced levels of cooperation.
To have a complete picture is necessary to see which types of organizations are leading the activity within each sub-network. In San Diego, collaborative action is undertaken equally by academic, volunteer, and government organizations, while in Tijuana the most prominent actors were volunteer organizations and a government agency. In fact, the highest number of ties (11) in San Diego belongs to two academic institutions, followed by a volunteer organization and a government agency. In Tijuana, network primacy was held by one volunteer organization with 12 ties, followed by a government agency. The study also showed that networks in San Diego are characterized by strong partnerships without sectoral distinction. Whether the organization is public or private seems to have no bearing on whether its partnerships are at the collaboration or co-management level. In contrast, Mexican organizations seem to be more selective in establishing partnerships, and academic and government agency links are mostly at the convergence and collaboration level.

Cross-border interactions are more complex. On the one hand, volunteer organizations have a greater propensity to form transborder alliances at the highest level of cooperation than academic or governmental organizations. Indeed, all of the co-management cross-border partnerships identified involved volunteer organizations in Tijuana. On the other hand, the only two organizations in the survey that did not participate in cross-border arrangements were volunteer organizations, both of which were well connected in their respective countries.

Final Remarks
Networking and cooperation is a collective search for common ground and opportunities for mutual benefits. When well established, all participants become partners looking for synergistic benefits. In the border context the main source of regional synergies is interdependence. Interdependence means that Tijuana and San Diego, because of their geographical closeness and the extensive social and natural linkages and interactions, have experienced a substantial reduction in their ability to control all the factors affecting their own welfare. Collaborative action combines those factors by developing commonalities that can be the source of increased opportunities for regional wellbeing. Communication and information exchange are the key for stimulating this mechanism.

However, it is necessary to warn of the risk of oversimplification. Although regional collaborative networks are growing, it is not enough. While local institutional capacity is built through networking and cooperation, the complexity and severity of regional problems can be beyond the capacity of local actors. Also, the strength of the network is a function of the strength of its membership. Particularly in the realm of community organizations, the region suffers serious problems related to funding and institutional room for systematic intervention. Furthermore, a good deal of rigidities persist within the governmental sector, which is a critical actor in the development of credible and effective partnerships. Finally, there is always the risk that further development of collaborative actions across the border suffer a setback if the current momentum is overwhelmed by unilateral actions, prejudice and provincialism. Nonetheless, cross-border collaboration in the San Diego-Tijuana Region has and continues to be significant and many opportunities to further this collaboration exist.

References