

# Strategic cross-border synergies: unpacking Belize's relationship with Mexico

Sinergias estratégicas na fronteira: uma exploração da relação entre Belize e o México

Sinergias estratégicas en la frontera: una exploración de la relación entre Belice y México

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**Abstract:** This article examines Belize's ties with Chetumal, Bacalar, and Guatemala, focusing on the implications of cross-border cooperation for local and regional development. Rooted in a diachronic analysis of Belize-Guatemala dynamics, this study reveals how historical tensions have intensified Belize's interactions with Mexico. We emphasize Chetumal's regional role as the capital of Quintana Roo and discuss Bacalar's rising significance, largely driven by tourism. The research highlights the multifaceted nature of the Mexico-Belize border and stresses the need for comprehensive cross-border governance to boost competitiveness and well-being in both adjacent and wider regions.

**Keywords:** cross-border cooperation; diachronic analysis; regional development; tourism promotion; border governance.

**Resumo:** Este artigo examina os vínculos de Belize com Chetumal, Bacalar e a Guatemala, concentrando-se nas implicações da cooperação transfronteiriça para o desenvolvimento local e regional. A partir de uma análise diacrônica da dinâmica Belize-Guatemala, o estudo revela como as tensões históricas intensificaram as interações de Belize com o México. Destaca-se o papel regional de Chetumal como capital de Quintana Roo e analisa-se a crescente importância de Bacalar, impulsionada em grande medida pelo turismo. A pesquisa evidencia o caráter multifacetado da fronteira entre México e Belize e ressalta a necessidade de uma governança transfronteiriça abrangente para promover a competitividade e o bem-estar tanto nas regiões adjacentes quanto nas mais amplas.

**Palavras-chave:** cooperação transfronteiriça; análise diacrônica; desenvolvimento regional; promoção turística; governança fronteira.

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina los vínculos de Belice con Chetumal, Bacalar y Guatemala, centrándose en las implicaciones de la cooperación transfronteriza para el desarrollo local y regional. Partiendo de un análisis diacrónico de la dinámica Belice-Guatemala, este estudio revela cómo las tensiones históricas han intensificado las interacciones de Belice con México.

Destacamos el papel regional de Chetumal como capital de Quintana Roo y analizamos la creciente importancia de Bacalar, impulsada en gran medida por el turismo. La investigación pone de relieve la naturaleza polifacética de la frontera entre México y Belice y subraya la necesidad de una gobernanza transfronteriza integral para impulsar la competitividad y el bienestar tanto en las regiones adyacentes como en las más amplias.

**Palabras clave:** cooperación transfronteriza; análisis diacrónico; desarrollo regional; promoción turística; gobernanza fronteriza.

## **HYDROLOGICAL BOUNDARIES AND EVOLVING DYNAMICS: UNDERSTANDING THE MEXICO-BELIZE BORDER REGION**

The border between Mexico and Belize spans a total length of 278.26 kilometers, of which 193 pertain to the land boundary and 85.26 to the maritime limit in the Bay of Chetumal. This border is primarily delineated by water bodies, such as the Hondo River, the Blue River, the Bay of Chetumal, and the Boca Bacalar Chico. This setting has led to the region sharing a watershed, representing potential for a governance model oriented towards local and regional development (Rosenberg, 2018). Hence, the significance of the relationship between the river, bay, and sea ecosystems, which historically has served as the axis to divide this vast region and to integrate two different colonization systems, indigenous peoples, and diverse immigrants (Norman, Cohen, and Bakker, 2013).

The population dynamics along the Mexico-Belize border have undergone significant transformations over the years, fundamentally influencing the social and economic interaction of both countries. As Bolland (2019) highlighted in his comprehensive study on Belize, the formation of this Central American nation was a complex process marked by considerable ethnic and cultural diversity. In this context, the border region with Mexico has been a convergence zone for various communities and has witnessed significant demographic shifts over the years.

The demographic transition at the border has not only been a product of internal and external migratory movements but also of economic growth driven by sectors such as ecotourism. Lindberg, Enriquez, and Sproule (1996) in their study on ecotourism in Belize, argue that this sector has impacted the population distribution at the border with Mexico. Thus, the evolution of ecotourism has influenced the formation of border communities and modified interactions between both nations.

Furthermore, Lavell (2002) in his analysis of border regions in Central America, emphasizes the crucial role of border zones in regional integration and sustainable development. On the Mexico-Belize border, demographic growth and the change in population composition have posed challenges and opportunities for managing and utilizing shared

resources. This population dynamism, in conjunction with bilateral cooperation initiatives, shapes an interaction scenario that is in continuous evolution.

The relationship between Mexico and Belize has historically been very stable and constructive. Consequently, the prospects for sustainable management of their border areas are limited only by challenges stemming from complex issues, such as drug trafficking, illegal human and arms trafficking, and the smuggling of endangered species. These factors have disrupted the border dynamics. The question then arises: how has this agenda constrained a development proposal for local and regional growth that aligns with the strengths and opportunities of the Belize-Chetumal-Bacalar (BCB) border area?

Throughout history, the economy of the border region between Mexico and Belize has significantly influenced population dynamics and bilateral relations. In particular, the timber industry and the sugar sector have played dominant roles in the evolution of the border economy, leading to profound socioeconomic impacts in the region. According to Vidal (2012), Mennonite communities in Belize have been key actors in the value chain of timber production. Their involvement in this industry has led to demographic shifts and the evolution of settlement patterns at the border. Timber extraction has fostered migration towards the border area, which in turn has altered population distribution and influenced bilateral interactions.

Similarly, the sugar industry has been another cornerstone of the border economy, with significant implications for population dynamics. Runge (1961), in his study on the sugar industry in the Western Caribbean, highlights this industry's role in the region's economic development. Shifts in sugar production have directly impacted the demographic composition and distribution of the population at the border.

Changes in the dynamics of the Mexico-Belize border have resulted not only from economic and demographic factors but also from political and diplomatic decisions. In 1993, Mexico and Belize established the International Boundary and Water Commission with the aim of more effectively managing border and water issues. This commission has played a pivotal role in defining the border and addressing issues arising from the region's population and economic dynamics.

Foreign policies have also played an essential role in the relationship between the two countries. As Reynoso (2018) points out, Mexico has had a specific approach to Central America and the Caribbean in its foreign policy. This approach is reflected in its border management with Belize, where it has aimed to maintain a cordial and productive relationship despite challenges posed by migration and economic activities at the border. In summary, the border between Mexico and Belize results from a complex interplay of demographic, economic, and political factors. Changes in the border region's population and economy

have influenced the bilateral relationship but have also been shaped by the political and diplomatic decisions of both countries.

Culture and identity have played a crucial role in the dynamics of the Mexico-Belize border. The region is home to a variety of cultural groups, including the Mayans, mestizos, creoles, and Garifunas. Vallarta Vélez (2001) emphasizes in his work the complexity of identity and culture in the Payo Obispo region, a significant part of the Mexico-Belize border. The coexistence and blending of these diverse cultures have created a unique identity in the border area, reflected in the daily life, customs, language, and traditions of its inhabitants. This cultural mosaic has influenced the area's population and economic dynamics, leading to specific forms of coexistence and cooperation but also to tensions and conflicts.

The emergence of ecotourism has also played a pivotal role in the dynamics of the Mexico-Belize border. Lindberg, Enriquez, and Sproule (1996) examine in their study the impact of ecotourism in Belize. With the growing popularity of this type of tourism over recent decades, both Mexico and Belize have seen an uptick in visitors seeking more sustainable and nature-focused experiences. This trend has brought about significant shifts in the local economy and impacted local communities, with both positive and negative repercussions.

Delving deeper into the challenges and opportunities at the Mexico-Belize border, several factors warrant consideration. Firstly, trade and the economy. As previously discussed, the border economy has been heavily influenced by the dynamics of timber production, the sugar industry, and ecotourism. However, global economic fluctuations and changing demand present challenges to the sustainability of these sectors. In an increasingly globalized world, finding ways to diversify the local economy and bolster economic resilience is a paramount challenge.

Secondly, security remains a concern in any border region. The border between Mexico and Belize is no exception. While the area has generally been peaceful, security issues have arisen, including drug trafficking and illegal migration. Addressing these issues demands a unified and coordinated approach from the authorities of both countries.

Natural resource management and environmental protection are other significant topics at the Mexico-Belize border. The region hosts an array of unique ecosystems and species threatened by deforestation, pollution, and climate change. Simultaneously, the pristine nature of the region offers opportunities for ecotourism and conservation.

The Mexico-Belize border region faces substantial challenges in trade, security, and the environment but also presents prospects for cooperation and sustainable development. The key to capitalizing on these opportunities and overcoming these challenges lies in the ongoing, effective cooperation between Mexico and Belize and the ability of local communities to adapt to shifting economic and environmental circumstances. It's an area replete

with complexity and steeped in history. Its population dynamics, economic interactions, and environmental challenges unveil patterns and trends that can enlighten other border and Central American studies. However, the narrative of the Mexico-Belize border remains distinctive, shaped by the region's geographical, historical, and socio-political circumstances.

The challenges this region faces, from economic shifts to threats to security and the environment, are not issues that can be addressed by a single country. Cooperation and continued dialogue between Mexico and Belize are vital for the future of this border. The approach to this collaboration should be balanced, weighing both economic and security needs against the importance of environmental protection and biological diversity.

### **FOUNDATIONAL GOVERNANCE: NAVIGATING TENSIONS AND BUILDING CONSENSUS IN BORDER REGIONS**

Institutions are paramount to understand the interactions and practices of actors within their various tendencies and processes, especially in conflictual contexts. These contexts underscore the need to establish foundational agreements on border governance, tailored according to the level of existing tension and conflict, as seen in the case of the Belize-Guatemala border. In contrast, this level of tension is not apparent along the Belize border with Chetumal and Bacalar, which has enabled significant progress on a foundational regional cross-border cooperation agenda.

Governance, perceived as a strategic, political, and technical process, creates public value grounded in a holistic management model. This process recognizes sociopolitical agreements as an intrinsic aspect of its conceptualization, aiming to make a social impact viable despite any existing tensions. Such governance, understood as part of institutional change, might prioritize foundational governability, intending for such agreements to define a common agenda based on the identified priorities to progress in the creation of public values (Moore, 2011). From this viewpoint, governance demands modernizing the capability of institutions to achieve basic consensus among actors, particularly in intricate contexts (Falcao & Marini, 2010).

The feasibility of governance lies in delineating the extent of its intervention to create public value. In conflictual settings, this entails bolstering the ability to argue, persuade, and provide evidence of the benefits of promoting minimal cooperation among actors, ensuring acceptable governability for all parties in line with the potential public value to be generated. This foundational cooperation is vital as it can pave the way for a shared agenda that sets the boundaries of conflicts and mutual cooperation. The fundamental management elements for effective governance, juxtaposed with a reactive government in favor of foundational governability, are as follows:

Governance framework towards minimum border governance Belize-Guatemala.

<b>GOVERNANCE FOR RESULTS</b>	<b>REACTIVE GOVERNMENT</b>
<b>Multidimensional diagnosis, highlighting historical differences and common growth opportunities (migration, conservation, employment, trade).</b>	Sectoral diagnosis without integral and cross-border vision (with Guatemala and Chetumal)
<b>Direction towards minimum governance in terms of boundary agreements</b>	Reactive management without a focus on minimum governance and an agenda for growth
<b>Cross-cutting strategies aimed at such governance and exchange options in related sectors</b>	Limited or non-existent strategies
<b>Inter-institutional and multi-stakeholder coordination according to defined governance</b>	Limited inter-agency coordination
<b>Incentives for governance and growth of cross-border cooperation including Chetumal</b>	Limited or no incentives to promote such governance and an agenda for growth
<b>Planning toward a cross-border governance and growth agenda</b>	Absent planning towards such governance and defining an agenda for growth
<b>Assessment of progress towards basic governance and feasibility of options for growth</b>	Limited evaluation for development

Source: ???

The multidimensional diagnosis reflects the various dimensions of cooperation among actors, as well as the choices and challenges they present. Initially, the strategic direction proposes the orientation of diverse and multi-level strategies focused on defining a baseline governance. This aspect is pivotal, as within a complex context like the Belize-Guatemala border, coordinating actors' divergences based on effective leadership is essential to pinpoint consensus areas.

A central element in this process is the identification of incentives that can diminish tensions and conflicts. This step eases the planning of actions and strategies aimed at achieving baseline governance, using continuous evaluation of all mentioned management elements as a tool. The primary goal of this multidimensional approach is to create diverse values, all geared towards baseline governance between Belize and Guatemala. These can lay the groundwork for a cooperation agenda promoting growth in both regions.

These factors can be supplemented with international mediation, whether from regional countries or the International Court of Justice. Such mediation can offer an additional framework for negotiation and commitment, thus streamlining the process of moving towards the desired governance. The inclusion of international mediators, besides providing a neutral and expert viewpoint, lends legitimacy and trust to the process, ensuring resolutions are fair and globally recognized. These types of interventions often rely on international precedents and standards, ensuring involved parties are informed and aware of their

rights and obligations. Moreover, an external mediator's presence can act as a catalyst to foster dialogue and collaboration, reducing the odds of escalating tensions and emphasizing consensus-based solutions. In essence, international mediation not only serves as a tool for conflict resolution but also sets a precedent for future interactions, encouraging more stable, long-term cooperative relations.

This governance model is proposed with the intention of establishing a baseline governance that could potentially lessen the tensions stemming from the territorial dispute that has hindered economic development, environmental protection, labor mobility, and international cooperation between Belize and Guatemala for 160 years. Within this tension and conflict framework, Belize's cooperation with Chetumal emerges as an alternative strategy. This cooperation has advanced towards a shared growth agenda, marking a significantly different dynamic than the prevailing one with Guatemala.

This fact underscores the significance of exploring and understanding alternative governance models, which can be effectively utilized to manage and reduce tensions between nations with long-standing territorial disputes. This study highlights the potential of the governance model applied in the cooperation between Belize and Chetumal, suggesting that similar techniques might be employed to mitigate tensions and foster cooperation between Belize and Guatemala. Such an approach, grounded in the establishment of baseline governance and promoting a shared growth agenda, could pave a new path to overcome historical disputes and boost economic and social development in the region.

An additional opportunity to promote a growth agenda between Belize and Guatemala, as well as with Mexico, emerges from the 2030 Maya Forest Comprehensive Strategy (FD-MSDRM, CONAP, & CONANP-SERMANAT, 2021). This strategy, considering its various levels of impact—national, regional, and international—poses a strategic chance to promote a unified ecosystem in conservation terms. It is noteworthy that the region comprising Quintana Roo, Belize, and Guatemala stands as the second most crucial environmental region internationally.

Thus, this agenda should establish the reference framework to manage geographical boundary differences and advocate baseline governance for cooperation. The focus on the environment and conservation might serve as common ground facilitating collaboration and commitment among involved stakeholders, despite existing territorial disputes and political tensions. By advancing a cooperation agenda centered on sustainable development and environmental protection, the emphasis would be on shared goals and mutual benefits, potentially tempering tensions and easing the move towards governance.

The primary challenge of this governance is driving cooperation and cross-border planning processes among communities with varying economic development levels and

differing institutional and administrative rationales. Nonetheless, these communities share a common objective: fostering competitiveness and well-being.

In this vein, the foremost challenge of the institutional agenda lies in how to integrate the most critical themes of Belize's regional, national, and cross-border relationship. These topics encompass security, drug trafficking, employment, climate change, and migratory flows. Moreover, addressing the management of this multidimensional agenda to stimulate growth and well-being in socially intricate contexts is imperative (Arias, Hinsley & Milner Gulland, 2021).

Recent literature has proposed various perspectives to transcend the state-centric viewpoint regarding cross-border waters. International relations and multi-level governance converge in this stance, with different actors and scales of analysis (Kauffer). The governance challenge for transboundary waters lies in integrating the roles of subnational and local scales based on their institutional capacities, taking into account the degree of actor participation. Nevertheless, a limitation in these studies is the lack of consideration towards borders and asymmetric capacities, which condition the effectiveness of cooperation and cross-border planning for development promotion.

## **MEXICO-BELIZE BORDER DYNAMICS: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND ECONOMIC IMPACT**

The border between Mexico and Belize stands as one of the least recognized geopolitical boundaries among Mexicans. Nevertheless, its prominence has recently surged due to allegations related to human trafficking and narcotics smuggling. This issue, intensified by its relative isolation and obscurity, is being addressed through bilateral agreements between Mexico and Belize, supported by the United States government (Barrachina & Monjaraz, 2013).

Despite the geographical closeness, Belize remains largely an unknown neighbor to the majority of Mexicans. This unfamiliarity might be attributed to the historically stable and remarkably conflict-free relationship between the two nations (Pérez Casanova, 2014). However, the contiguity and numerous underlying commonalities necessitate that Mexico cultivates a constructive and amicable relationship. This will capitalize on the potential of both countries, equipping them to tackle challenges emerging in an ever-changing and dynamic international context (Quesnel, 2018).

Although the shared border exhibits some permeability, it hasn't been a source of significant problems to date (Ramos-García, Barrachina-Lisón & Ramos, 2020). On the contrary, two formal bridges on this frontier record more than half a million individual crossings and 1.35 million vehicle crossings annually, inclusive of Mexicans entering the free zone. This



activity yields substantial benefits for the local economy of Chetumal, for the state of Quintana Roo at large, and for the other southeastern states of Mexico.

Of the international borders that Mexico shares, its boundary with Belize stands out as perhaps the least contentious in recent decades. This can be attributed to its shorter length, the sparse population settled on both sides of the border, and the general demographic distribution in the neighboring Central American country. The limited bilateral trade exchange, among other legitimate factors, often plays a role in any border relationship between states (Hidalgo, 2007).

In fact, the bilateral relationship between Mexico and Belize, which commenced in 1981 following Belize's independence from the United Kingdom, has been marked by friendship, cooperation, and good neighborliness. Notably, there have been no significant disputes along their border, even though it remains relatively porous with minimal surveillance and is flexible in migration terms (Hidalgo). Moreover, strong familial ties span this border.

The Mexico-Belize boundary allows almost all subjects of the bilateral agenda to be integrated into their border relationship, distinguishing it from Mexico's other two borders and its bilateral relations with both Guatemala and the United States (Hidalgo, 2007; Barachina & Monjaraz, 2013). It wasn't until the 1980s, coinciding with Belize's independence, that Mexico shifted its attention to this border due to security concerns arising from political instability and warfare in Central American nations.

Belize has emerged as a significant interlocutor for Mexico in the Caribbean, not only due to geographical proximity but also because of its strong ties with southeastern Mexican states (Quintana Roo, Yucatán, and Campeche). It serves as a pivotal link to the wider Caribbean region. Belize's Ambassador, Oscar Lorenzo Arnold, posits that Belize's status as a former British colony, with English as its official language, might explain why many Mexicans perceive a more distant relationship with Belize compared to the rest of Central America. Additionally, the positioning of Belize's new capital, Belmopan—merely 220 km from the Mexican border—might also exert some influence.

Belize is a melting pot of ethnic groups, languages, cultures, and traditions, with a distinct dominance of British-Caribbean and Hispano-Mexican or Central American-Mexican influences. The latter, combined with its geographical position on the Central American isthmus, brings it closer to its neighbors and facilitates its relationship with Mexico (Hidalgo, 2007).

Furthermore, significant economic and tourist activities have emerged, especially on Belize's part. This includes establishing a free trade zone at the border point with Subteniente López and initiating the launch of casinos in the area. Given their prohibition in Mexico,

these casinos have become a major tourist attraction. In early 2007, Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced an agreement with Belize to delineate maritime boundaries in Chetumal Bay. Initially, this sparked widespread rejection by the public in Quintana Roo due to reports suggesting a territorial concession to Belize that would encompass mainland areas (Gray, 2016). Such episodes underline the necessity for careful and transparent diplomacy in managing the relationship between Mexico and Belize. Effective communication and dialogue are vital to prevent misunderstandings and maintain border stability.

On another note, joint initiatives in areas like trade and tourism suggest a broad potential for mutual benefit through enhanced integration and cooperation. Both countries should persist in exploring and capitalizing on opportunities in these and other domains. Ultimately, the relationship between Mexico and Belize exemplifies how borders can serve as spaces for interaction and collaboration rather than mere dividing barriers. The Mexico-Belize border is a testament to how effective border management can promote regional integration and fortify binational ties. This experience might offer a model for other border regions, emphasizing the significance of robust diplomatic relations, economic cooperation, and mutual respect for the successful management of border relationships.

## **MEXICO-BELIZE BINATIONAL COMMISSION, BACKGROUND**

The Binational Commission stands out as a primary mechanism to foster binational cooperation. Within this framework, the Binational Seminars serve as essential activities aimed at strengthening academic collaboration between the two countries. The inauguration of these seminars took place in 2016 in Belize City, focusing the discussion on mobility and connectivity topics.

The subsequent seminars, the second and third, were held in Chetumal in November of 2016 and November of 2017, addressing the themes of academic cooperation and health, respectively. The fourth edition took place in October 2018 in Belmopan, with a focus on sustainable development. The fifth edition occurred in 2019 at El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), Chetumal, where water was discussed as a strategic resource for regional development.

The sixth Binational Seminar was conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its central theme was 'An Assessment of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mexico and Belize'. The purpose of this event was to promote human empowerment, social cohesion, and mutual binational understanding through the exchange of research and academic activities between participating institutions.

These seminars are exemplary of the vitality and potential harbored by academic interactions in the region. More recently, from June 6 to 8, 2022, the 7th Mexico-Belize Bi-

national Seminar was held. This seminar focused on 'Coral Reefs: Current Status, Risks, and Perspectives', analyzing their significance from ecological, economic, social, and recreational standpoints for both countries.

The Binational Commission has the following challenges to promote effective governance:

- Strengthen the viability of academic proposals with greater articulation with the government and private sector based on a common agenda for competitiveness and well-being.
- Create mechanisms to improve the management of the Belize/Chetumal/Bacalar/Guatemala border in accordance with its commercial, tourism, security, educational, migratory, drug trafficking, environmental, conservation and water dynamics.
- Reduce the effects of the different "English" (strict) regulations (semi-bureaucratic), in comparison to the Mexican (more flexible) and with a tendency to a greater migratory or commercial control.
- Define an agenda for the immediate future of the FBCB based on a governance approach for sustainability based on its water wealth, with ecosystems, conservation and a tourism node.

In conclusion, the Binational Seminars and the efforts of the Binational Commission have proven to be effective mechanisms for nurturing cooperation and understanding between Mexico and Belize. These platforms have facilitated the exchange of ideas, findings, and proposals in areas of significance for both the academic community and the governmental and societal spheres of both countries, thereby enhancing bilateral dialogue and relations.

Furthermore, these binational seminars have acted as a means to address pressing issues and shared challenges across a range of domains, such as sustainable development, health, and the strategic management of natural resources. Through the collaborative discussion of matters of mutual importance, Mexico and Belize have had the opportunity to strengthen their ties and work together in pursuit of viable and effective solutions.

Given the effectiveness of these meetings, it is anticipated that collaboration between Mexico and Belize will continue to deepen and expand in the coming years. The sustenance of these academic and diplomatic initiatives will be crucial to boost synergy in bilateral cooperation, not just to address current challenges but also to anticipate future hurdles and explore new collaboration opportunities. The continuous evolution of these seminars underscores the transformative potential of binational academic cooperation, emphasizing

the importance of dialogue and intercultural, interdisciplinary collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

## **CROSS-BORDER DYNAMICS AND COLLABORATIVE PATHWAYS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BELIZE-MEXICO RELATIONSHIP**

In a bilateral context, the United States stands out as Belize's primary trade partner and main source of economic resources (Bulmer-Thomas, 2020). In 2016, 29% of Belizean exports were directed to this country, which also accounted for 37% of its imports. It's estimated that approximately 120,000 Belizeans reside in the United States, of which at least 30,000 were born there, naturally forging a broad array of connections (Hidalgo, 2007; Correa Angulo & Ramírez Romero, 2020). This situation underscores the preference of stakeholders in Belize's capital to cultivate commercial and academic ties with the United States, often at the expense of cross-border cooperation with Mexico (Cunin & Hoffman, 2019). However, one should not overlook the various bonds formed through the border relationship with Chetumal, Bacalar, and Cancún.

Cooperation initiatives arise, among other sources, from commitments and agreements set in the Tuxtla Dialogue and Agreement Mechanism, the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Puebla Panama Plan (PPP), and those implemented by the Mexican Commission for Cooperation with Central America and the Caribbean (Hidalgo). Yet, the structural issue with these initiatives is their feasibility in promoting development and mitigating shared border challenges.

Another factor strengthening the ties between border countries is the construction of the international bridge over the Hondo River. This stands as the sole formal crossing connecting the neighboring towns of Subteniente López, Quintana Roo (Mexico), and Santa Elena, Corozal (Belize), facilitating the transit of vehicles, individuals, and goods (Hidalgo, 2007). From this emerges the importance of bolstering border infrastructure as a means to enhance commercial ties and overall economic activities.

Mexico has eased the entry of Belizeans by issuing the Migration Form for Local Visitors (FMVL), colloquially known as the tourist card or "mica." This document allows Belizeans to cross the border and stay in the state of Quintana Roo for up to seven days, enabling visits to Quintana Roo, Yucatán, Campeche, Tabasco, and Chiapas without the need for an additional travel document (Interview with Luis Gilberto Montero Maldonado, Honorary Consul of Belize in Chetumal) (González, 2021).

There is a pertinent call to propose a dual system: on one hand, the binational entity legally mandated to regulate a border region; and on the other, the establishment of a non-governmental institution that plans and implements conservation and protection

programs, overseeing projects to be developed therein. This proposition is grounded on the existence of a regional conservation and hydrological system, part of the International Reserve, allowing a focus on sustainability. To make this non-governmental mechanism feasible, political will is necessary, alongside recognition of the multidimensional significance of the Belize-Mexico border and an effective management, governance, and policy model for competitiveness and well-being.

It's imperative for the political and social actors of both countries to recognize the importance of efficient management of the Belize-Mexico border. A governance and management model that fosters competitiveness and well-being in the region can significantly drive socioeconomic development, encourage investment and job creation, and enhance the quality of life of border communities.

Both binational mechanisms and non-governmental institutions play a crucial role in this regard. They can not only provide an effective legal and regulatory framework for cross-border cooperation but also facilitate knowledge exchange and best practices, encouraging the adoption of innovative solutions for shared challenges.

Moreover, it's essential for these mechanisms and institutions to adopt a bottom-up approach, actively involving local communities in the decision-making process. Such an approach can help ensure policies and interventions aptly address the unique needs and priorities of border populations, effectively contributing to their well-being and development.

Furthermore, cross-border cooperation should not be confined to the governmental realm. Businesses, academic institutions, and civil society can also play an active role in fostering economic, social, and cultural ties between Mexico and Belize. These stakeholders can bring valuable resources and unique capabilities, enriching cross-border dialogue and collaboration.

In conclusion, it's vital for Mexico and Belize to continue strengthening their cooperation in strategic areas such as trade, mobility, and natural resource management. The close interdependence between these two nations, emphasized by their geographical proximity and strong historical and cultural ties, renders their bilateral relationship of utmost importance. Through effective cooperation and constructive dialogue, they can work together to overcome shared challenges and seize joint opportunities for a sustainable and prosperous future.

## **POST-PANDEMIC BORDER REOPENING: ECONOMIC AND MIGRATORY INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN BELIZE AND MEXICO**

The economy of the capital Chetumal critically depends on the return of Belizean visitors, which entails a significant responsibility in managing these circumstances. It is im-

perative to strengthen the historically maintained relationship with Belize. According to the Secretariat of Economic Development of the Quintana Roo government, border trade reached 60 million dollars annually before the pandemic. Moreover, since 2012, Belize has facilitated bilateral trade with Mexico by establishing a list of 34 tariff classifications that can be introduced into the country without the need for import permits, significantly benefiting producers from the Yucatán Peninsula and the southeastern Mexico, including Tabasco and Chiapas.

After two years with the border closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Belize reopened its doors to Chetumal, Quintana Roo, on February 7, 2021. Rigorous health protocols were applied, along with the presentation of a complete vaccination scheme, and the requirement of either a passport or a Regional Visitor Card (RVC), as reported by Luis Gilberto Montero Maldonado, honorary consul of Belize in Quintana Roo. This decision resulted from intensive negotiations and collaborations between the Belize and Mexico governments, seeking to ensure the safety of their citizens and promote the economic revival of border areas. During the shutdown period, both economies faced significant challenges, especially in the tourism and trade sectors traditionally dependent on the steady flow of visitors and traders.

The reopening, albeit cautious, was welcomed with optimism by local residents and business owners who saw in this move a chance to resume activities, strengthen commercial ties, and re-establish the fraternity that historically characterized these neighboring regions. However, authorities kept a close eye on the situation to ensure that the measures implemented were effective and to adapt to any eventuality in this new post-pandemic coexistence context.

Before the pandemic, approximately 30,000 Belizeans entered Mexico, primarily through Chetumal, overland. With the reopening of the borders, it is expected that these visitors will return, gradually strengthening the economic, migratory, and bilateral dynamics between Mexico and Belize. The relationship between Belize and Mexico, especially in the Chetumal region, has historically been strong, marked by a constant exchange of goods, services, and culture. Belizeans, when visiting Chetumal, not only seek products and services but also cultural, educational, and leisure experiences offered by this destination. Conversely, Chetumal traders and entrepreneurs have adapted their businesses over the years to cater to Belizean visitors' needs and preferences. Now, with the reopening, a revival of trade and tourism is anticipated. Still, it also emphasizes the importance of strengthening health and safety cooperation to ensure smooth and safe transit for all. Authorities from both countries are working together to promote awareness campaigns and preventive measures, ensuring

the border's reactivation not only brings economic benefits but also strengthens the bonds of friendship and collaboration that have defined these neighboring nations for decades.

Apart from the maritime limit in Chetumal Bay, the land border between Mexico and Belize stretches for about 150 km, mostly delineated by the Hondo River. Three border checkpoints regulate transit between the two countries. In 2019, more than 560,000 entries were recorded at the Mexico-Belize border. These checkpoints have been crucial in facilitating commercial, tourist, and cultural flow between the two nations. Interaction in these areas has resulted in a unique blend of cultures, with communities sharing traditions, cuisine, and values. The connectivity provided by these checkpoints has allowed entrepreneurs on both sides to establish lasting business relationships and families to strengthen their ties through shared visits and celebrations. However, the high traffic has also led to the need to enhance infrastructure and services in these areas and implement stricter security measures and customs regulations to ensure smooth and legal transit. Binational cooperation has been crucial in managing these challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by such an active and dynamic border.

With the recent post-pandemic reopening, a resumption and potential increase in the flow of people and goods are anticipated, highlighting the importance of collaboration and mutual understanding between Mexico and Belize for the welfare and development of the border region. The trade relationship between the two countries, which generated about 139 million dollars last year, is also significant, especially for Belize, which counts Mexico as its second partner after the United States. Mexico is, for instance, the primary electricity provider and the second-largest natural gas supplier for Belize, which must purchase over 50% of the national energy for its population (Hidalgo, 2017).

Yet, to implement an effective non-governmental management mechanism, not only political will but also a recognition of the multidimensional significance of the Belize-Mexico border is required. Hence, promoting effective border and cross-border infrastructure as a strategy to bolster commercial ties, and in general, local, regional, and cross-border economic activities between Belize, Chetumal, Bacalar, Cancún, and Guatemala is essential.

In conclusion, it is clear that trade and migratory relations between Belize and Mexico have substantial significance in both regions' economies. The border's reopening after the pandemic has marked a pivotal moment for re-establishing this dynamic, vital for economic development and bilateral cooperation. Non-governmental management mechanisms play a significant role in this context, as they can complement and enhance government policy efficiency. However, for these to be effective, not only political will but also a recognition of the border's multidimensional importance is necessary.

This interdependence between Belize and Mexico underscores the need to promote border and cross-border infrastructure, potentially strengthening commercial ties and overall economic activities between the two regions. Exploring strategies to maximize these links and ensure mutual benefit is essential. Additionally, cooperation in energy resource management, given Belize's reliance on Mexico's electricity and natural gas, offers another opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations. Addressing these issues through effective cooperation policies and agreements is crucial.

In summary, the relationship between Belize and Mexico exemplifies economic and migratory interdependence along the border, with significant implications for regional development. Through continuous commitment, political will, and the implementation of effective strategies, this relationship can continue to strengthen for the benefit of both nations.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

This article examined the context, challenges, and opportunities of the relationship between Belize, Chetumal, Bacalar, and Guatemala concerning the promotion of cross-border cooperation processes. Furthermore, the historical context of the relationship between Belize and Guatemala has been investigated. Tensions between these two countries have spurred the strengthening of interactions between Belize and Mexico, especially with Chetumal and Bacalar.

The cross-border relationship among Belize, Chetumal, Bacalar, and Guatemala represents a complex tapestry of historical, socio-economic, and political interactions. Despite the challenges encountered, it holds significant potential for cooperation and joint development. Socio-economic interdependence, shaped by migratory dynamics and existing networks, demands diligent management addressing both global evolution and regional specificities, targeting joint sustainable development projects and bolstering institutionalized cooperation. To ensure a collaborative and prosperous future, it's paramount to capitalize on the rich shared heritage and culture, employing these as foundations to foster mutual understanding, underpinned by political will and a shared vision for regional advancement and harmony.

Of all Mexico's borders, the one it shares with Belize has perhaps presented the fewest issues. This might be attributed to the sparse population settled on both sides of the border and, more broadly, in the neighboring Central American country, coupled with the limited bilateral trade. However, on a micro-level, the Othon P. Blanco municipality showcases strong social (educational), migratory, narcotics trafficking, and economic ties (with sugarcane production standing out as one of the country's foremost), built upon networks



of Belizean, Guatemalan, and other nationalities migrants. This mirrors varied cross-border ties on a local scale with significant socio-cultural impacts.

A governance model has been proposed to understand and advance the cross-border relationship between Chetumal and Belize. The feasibility of such governance lies in defining the extent of its intervention to generate public value. In contentious contexts, it's crucial to amplify the ability to debate, persuade, and provide evidence of the advantages of nurturing minimal governance among stakeholders that advances public value. This minimum cooperation is pivotal and might facilitate a shared agenda to pinpoint the extents of conflicts and mutual cooperation. In this light, the Mexico-Belize Binational Commission has been a platform to understand and enhance cross-border relations, despite a certain disinterest from Belize's central government, attributable to the capital's distance from the Mexican border and Belize's historical ties with the British Crown and the United States, which have restricted broader cross-border engagement.

The relationship between Belize, Chetumal, Bacalar, and Guatemala stands as a complex and multi-faceted case of cross-border cooperation influenced by an array of historical, economic, and socio-cultural factors. It's evident that cross-border governance is pivotal to grasp and manage these ties. Nonetheless, the reach of such governance and its capacity to generate public value can fluctuate considerably, contingent on the context. Hence, considering these factors when devising governance strategies is essential.

Moreover, this analysis underscores that, notwithstanding challenges, there are substantial opportunities for cross-border cooperation among these entities. Notably, the presence of strong socio-cultural and economic links, despite existing conflicts, implies considerable potential for mutual cooperation and growth. However, it's also worth noting that significant barriers to cross-border cooperation exist, including the disinterest of central governments and historical tensions. Addressing these challenges demands innovative, collective solutions, along with political will.

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