4

LORRIES AND LEDGERS

Describing and mapping smuggling in the field

Nikki Philline C. de la Rosa and Francisco J. Lara Jr.

Introduction

The inherent complexity in the nature and characteristics of smuggling makes it notoriously difficult to study. Early efforts to shine the light on the underbelly of cross border trade with its hidden activities, shadow networks, and violent entrepreneurs were fraught with many difficulties and challenges. People who knew or were involved in smuggling were unwilling to divulge its operations because they benefitted from the continuance of this illicit trade and they knew the threats that lay behind exposing the shadow authorities and criminal networks behind the enterprise.

Traders are understudied because of their tendency to lie, evade, or not talk at all (Harris 1992, p. 138; Mines 1972, p. 47; Neale et al. 1965, p. 33). Consequently, research on trade, whether legal or illegal, is often descriptive in nature, limited in scope, and offers few explanations beyond notions of illicitness and embeddedness and the role of kinship ties and customs in shaping economic activity in local communities.

Meanwhile, the methods that are used to investigate smuggling are activity shaped by people's perceptions of the "dual" nature of shadow economies such as smuggling that exist and operate on the "margins of the law" (Lara and de la Rosa 2016 p. 50, 253; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, p. 9). On the one hand, smuggling often conjured images of illegality, coercion, and danger when it involved the illegal transport and entry of deadly substances and materials such as drugs, guns, and explosives. A menu of illicit goods could turn the data gathering process into a difficult, covert, and sometimes dangerous experience.

On the other hand, smuggling was foreshadowed by a vibrant cross-border trade in food items, prestige goods, and other benign consumer products long before states were formed in these areas. The reappearance of these goods as smuggled items seemed to many as merely a continuation of the previous trading arrangements that were seen as sustainable livelihoods and a form of coping or survival economy for poor communities. They were thus treated differently and often leniently by state agents.

Indeed, in many places, these enterprises were a boon to disadvantaged groups such as small women traders or indigenous peoples who had marginal capital and often transported food products across borders. The distinctive perception that such unregulated trade was

“not illicit or illegal” continues to have traction especially in places where entitlements and livelihoods have collapsed from civil wars, complex emergencies, and pandemics.¹

Distinguishing between what is “illegal” and what is “criminal” is a constant dilemma for state agents at the borders.² For many border enforcers, this is determined by the type of goods that are traded, the relative size of the transaction, and the power and influence of the smuggler, which in turn influences perceptions about what type of smuggling should be prohibited and what could be allowed.³

This chapter sheds light on the qualitative methods that are used to penetrate both the “illegal” and the “criminal” aspects of the smuggling apparatus that thrives side by side with formal cross-border trade and has been the subject of many studies of informal economies around the world. We train the spotlight on at least three of these methods, including (1) the use of participant observation to scope trade routes and uncover smuggling networks, (2) the use of in-depth interviews and dialogues to generate primary data from insiders and other key informants and, (3) the use of new mapping techniques using Global Positioning System (GPS)/Geographic Information System (GIS) technology.

Finally, there are old and new sources of secondary data including archival material and global trade databases that are examined in this chapter, including analytical approaches such as value-chain analysis and network mapping.

Brief background

Smuggling is an enterprise where criminal activities and survival strategies overlap — a peculiarity that shapes the research method used, leading to a combination of data gathering processes that include those conducted openly and aboveground, as well as those that require secrecy and stealth.

For example, tapping into the rich knowledge and experience of government officials, business groups, law enforcers, port laborers, and transport workers, to name a few, could be undertaken openly through structured or unstructured interviews, group discussions, survey studies, and field visits.

Meanwhile, secrecy and stealth may be necessary in cases where interview subjects are engaged directly in the smuggling of prohibited and deadly contraband such as narcotics and illegal drugs or illicit guns and munitions, or when researchers closely observe, examine, and monitor smuggling activities and behavior, including the accompanying corruption and violence that activity involves. In these instances, key informant interviews, mediated interviews, and participant observation are useful tools.

Qualitative studies have opened the door to the vibrant and robust existence of shadow economies and their economic logic and embeddedness, including the social networks surrounding them. In Africa, studies of illicit cross border trade used research methods such as participant observation and the mapping of entire transport and trade routes in countries such as Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC), where people and goods travelled for thousands of miles aboard lorries and trucks (McGaffey 1991), or in Nigeria, where the rise of informal yet dynamic and ethnic-based enterprise clusters produced high-quality garments and shoes that were smuggled to other countries (Meagher 2010).

In Nigeria and Somalia, armed extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Al Shabaab militias continued to engage in the national and transnational trafficking of weapons (Musa 2013; Petrich 2018; Onuoha 2013). Interviews and observations of how nomadic pastoralists and herders used specially crafted skin or thatched bags attached to camels, donkeys, and cows to conceal guns and move these across borders enabled researchers to shed light on the

smuggling of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the region. Boko Haram members are said to stuff their weapons in goods that are transported via heavy trucks, trailers, and lorries, passing security and border officials with very little or no scrutiny at all. Continued access to smuggled weapons explains why the conflict in Nigeria continues to thrive despite a series of military attacks against Boko Haram. The continued smuggling of weapons in Nigeria reveals why the security of the border is synonymous with the security of the state.

Meanwhile, studies of weapons smuggling undertaken by the El Shabaab extremist group in Somalia was made possible when they functioned as a shadow state handing out receipts for illicit payments and illegal taxes collected from gun traffickers. Access to those “receipts” would be a windfall for any researcher. “Unlike the state, al-Shabaab does not double-tax people. The group also continues to function as a shadow government in areas that it no longer physically controls, replacing the state as the provider services, including Islamic courts, humanitarian aid and healthcare” (Petrich 2018).

In Southeast Asia, the practice of documenting illicit payments made in various coastal trading outposts in the Southern Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia across the Sulu and Celebes Seas followed similar processes common to Africa (Quitoriano 2019; Villanueva 2016). Granular studies about the smuggling of drugs, gems, motorcycle vehicles and other transport vehicles, including endangered animals saw the use of cross-border transactions and in-depth interviews with border guards to ascertain the existence of a parallel “globalization from below” (Van Schendel and Abraham, 2005).

Studies about the smuggling of weapons and their licit and illicit links in domestic gun markets are crucial. Cukier and Schropshire (2000, pp. 105–26) state how on the global level, “information about the legal firearm trade is limited,” but the “information on illicit trafficking is even more incomplete.” They used primary data gathered from field observations including CCTV footage, and secondary data from customs reports, purchase orders, and invoices documenting import and export transactions. They found out from field reports that the cross-over of firearms from the international to the local level matched the same period when the cross-over from the legal-formal to the illegal occurred. Their study exposed how army stocks of weapons and munitions are plundered, straw purchases and resales of weapons are made, export documents are falsified, and the reactivation of decommissioned weapons is undertaken.

Lorry riders and maritime voyagers

Robust observations of smuggling behavior, practices, and networks were generated through a data-gathering and documentation process that gathered granular details from long and painstaking fieldwork on land and seagoing vehicles.

Three investigative methods have been used to capture their dynamics. The first entails researchers joining lorries and truck convoys as *participant observers* to monitor and determine the scale of formal and informal payments in stations and checkpoints along the way (MacGaffey 1991; Scheele 2012). The second entails *locating yourself at a particular boundary crossing* or major port to observe, monitor, and sketch the flow of goods and examine the various actors involved in the smuggling process (Quitoriano 2019). The third entails examining the content and volume of goods transported by informal freight vehicles to be stored in stockpiles, warehouses, ice plants and cold storage facilities before comparing these with customs duties and port authority collections (Villanueva 2016).

Using informal interviews and participant observation techniques saw many researchers boarding lorries and trucks or joining seagoing vessels that traversed maritime borders to observe the commodities, transactions, and actors engaged in illicit trade.⁴

Some researchers went beyond mere observation and directly engaged in the procurement and transport of tradeable food and clothing products through borders without paying duties so they could intimately study the smuggling process.⁵ Lower-middle class women, oftentimes teachers or local government employees, were also involved in the smuggling of consumer goods such as rice, cooking oil, and petroleum across the Sulu and West Philippine Sea and shouldered the increased overheads from bribing customs and port authority agents.

The use of ledgers to record minute as well as major transactions is important in documenting both qualitative and quantitative data that can be parsed to determine temporal trends in the prices of goods and the different mark-ups that bloat the price of smuggled items as they move towards their destination. The women traders are eager to record their transactions in such ledgers or notebooks that are rich sources of data. Their notes are also important in drawing up a cost-benefit analysis of transactions to indicate where most of the profit goes after overhead costs, including illegal payoffs are accounted for.

Observations on the road and on the sea also became a familiar method for evaluating the activities of indigenous economic networks operating behind smuggling activities. In fact, trucking and lorry-rider studies were so effective that even The World Bank (2006) engaged in the monitoring of tollgates in Aceh, Indonesia, and in other landlocked areas of Central and Western Africa to determine the amount of illicit taxes or illegal toll fees paid by entrepreneurs and traders across trade routes. Researchers were able to calculate and document the total amount of bribes collected in various checkpoints and the added overhead costs that were shouldered by traders.

A study on the economics of extortion in Aceh (Olken and Barron 2009), used the same methodology of participant observation by local Acehnese research surveyors and enumerators accompanying Indonesian truck drivers on 304 trips to and from Aceh. The research observed over 6,000 illegal payments to police, soldiers, and weigh station attendants. Results revealed that bribe rates were sensitive to critical changes in the external context, such as the political agreement between Indonesia and Aceh and the withdrawal of over 30,000 police and military troops from Aceh province. Bribery rates also fluctuated due to factors such as the distance of toll gates and checkpoints to point of origin, the type of trucks used, and the different geographical borders along their route.

Border observation methods in studying trader activities in informal cross border trade in Africa quantified trade flows at border crossings and the rents needed for smooth entry and exit of goods and people (Morrissey et al. 2015). Granular data from direct observation and inferences from secondary data were crucial sources of information for understanding the intricacies of illicit trade.

Other studies were based upon observations on a seagoing vessel traversing the Sulu Sea carrying smuggled rice and other commodities that enabled researchers to draw detailed flowcharts of illicit transactions (Quitoriano 2019; Villanueva 2016). In the port of Tawi-Tawi, data gatherers stationed themselves near warehouses to count the number of *pokol-pokol* trucks carrying sacks of rice from ships at anchor towards their destination warehouses and later compared the volume of rice traded with the public records of imported rice and their corresponding duties.

The researchers were able to identify the most sought-after goods that were transported across the sea from Malaysia and Indonesia that were allowed entry without duties, the marginal cost of transporting goods at each stage of the journey, and the different set of actors (state and non-state) that facilitated the entry of these goods and their distribution.

Travelling by boat across maritime borders allowed researchers to observe and interview traders to distinguish the different types of vessels, the types of goods being transported, and the

routes used – between pernicious and deadly and the coping trade of foodstuffs, beauty products, and fighting cocks. Group discussions with the women traders produced graphic value chain maps and detailed cost–benefit analysis.

Key-informant interviews and dialogues

Primary data generation from key actors who know about or are directly involved in smuggling can be generated through in-depth interviews, life histories, and “mediated conversations” or “dialogues.” Interviews can be layered according to the nature of the goods and the type of trader-actor and state agent involved. There are at least three layers of respondents that can be interviewed to examine the links between the formal-legal, illegal, and the criminal.

The first layer includes those respondents embedded in the formal trade apparatus and are knowledgeable about all the legal institutions and processes that need to be examined to acquire an understanding of how the system is supposed to operate. Potential respondents include officers of government agencies such as treasury and customs officials and port authority personnel. Another vital source of information are the banks and other financial intermediaries that provide credit and capital. Finally, they include revenue and licensing offices of local government units who know the strengths as well as the loopholes in the system that allows smuggling to thrive.

The second layer refers to the illegal traders who smuggle food commodities, fuel, and other non-lethal but strictly regulated commodities. The big buyers that stockpile supplies for the wholesale and retail markets belong in this category, together with the thousands of small entrepreneurs, mostly women, who are engaged in a trading business that is embedded in kinship ties and various social networks. They are the traders who traffic prohibited goods and evade all duties and taxes on their entry, conspiring with the drivers and captains of vehicles and vessels and their crew. It is that side of cross-border trade that “depends heavily on personal relations because of the importance of trust for activities that are often outside the law and which therefore lack its sanctions” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, p. 7)

Finally, there is the third layer of respondents who are often covert, armed, and very capable of using deadly force to penetrate regions and countries to trade their illegal contraband. They possess considerable resources and assets, including a fleet of vehicles, ships, and aircraft and strategically located warehouses to transport and stock their contraband. Some of them are regionally connected such as the Triads and the South American cartels and they buy protection from local police and security forces. They trade various weapons, drugs, protected wildlife, and are sometimes engaged in human trafficking as well. Some are involved in trading nuclear material and chemical agents sanctioned under international laws.

Key informants and unstructured in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are often used throughout these layers because the method offers a “far wider and more open-ended” elaboration of the topic (Nichols 1991, p. 13). In contrast to the structured interview that is often used in survey studies, in-depth interviews are unstructured, and are especially useful for lengthy discussions about the nature of a particular business, their open and hidden aspects, and the participation of numerous actors in transactions.

The interviewer begins by first sketching the outline of a particular trading transaction from the procurement of the commodity, its transport and distribution, the gauntlet of rent seekers from source to buyer, and the prices at the end of the transaction. The sketch is then used to arrive at a list of issues and questions that serves as a guide for the interviewer’s examination,

instead of a fixed set of questions. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with various actors in an entire smuggling chain, the researcher will be able to determine the total cost of corrupting the various state and non-state actors or shadow authorities along the way.

Family histories

In-depth unstructured interviews can also be utilized to produce a family history of actors engaged in the business of illicit trade. Individual and family life histories are critical in the study of illegal economies embedded in kinship ties and identity groups. This is particularly important and useful in places such as DRC, where “traders rely on personal ties based on the bonds of kinship, ethnicity, friendship, religion, and nationality” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, p. 110). In their remarkable study of transnational traders, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000, pp. 111–116) demonstrate how illicit trade and smuggling was undertaken using family histories and kinship ties from the DRC to Paris, France. Using case histories of family businesses, they described and explained three histories of people importing African foodstuffs to Paris through the help of family members living in Africa.

The use of life histories has also been used to determine the effects on youth socialization of the illicit trade in weapons. Lara (2014, pp. 88–89) describes the life history of a young Muslim and how the smuggling of AK-47 rifles to support the Moro insurgency revealed the class cleavages in Muslim society and made him aware of the rival identities that rewarded some insurgents with the best rifles, while the others had to contend with old M14 and M16 rifles.

Mediated interviews or trialogues

Finally, mediated interviews or trialogues are “difficult” conversations that can only be conducted with the participation of a third party who is known and trusted by the respondent.⁶ Trialogues are utilized when confidential in-depth interviews of key resource persons, including persons formerly or still involved in smuggling, are sought for the insights that they can provide. The method has been used in investigating and studying dangerous smuggling enterprises such as the illicit weapons and drugs trade, human trafficking and smuggling, or kidnap-for-ransom activities (Gutierrez 2014; Quitoriano 2016).

The mediated interview fills the trust gap between the researcher, who is new, to the respondent, who is involved in what is considered a criminal activity that could be penalized with a steep fine or imprisonment. For example, in the case of illegal guns, the risk of punishment is high. Even those legally involved in gun trading and smuggling were reluctant to divulge their identities. The conversations were repetitive, requiring two or more meetings with a subject over a fortnight to get in-depth details and enable the researcher to debrief with the third-party interviewer and adjust guide questions as the topic progressed and new insights were uncovered.

Access of the researcher to trusted interlocutors to mediate conversations with actors in the trade was key. Trust between the researcher and the interlocutor and trust between the respondents and the interlocutor determined the level of information and the quality of analysis that was generated.

The mediated conversations were primarily organized around the time, location, topic, and pace determined by the respondents. The choice of respondents was determined by mediators who possessed personal, professional, and functional links to the subjects. The mediators were in turn chosen based on the level of trust they had established with the researcher.

In one study of gun smuggling, the mediator was himself a part-time trader in guns, particularly the low-cost guns preferred by low-income buyers such as taxi drivers. Because of the sensitivity of the theme and the nature of the interviews done, a blind list of all respondents whose names and interview dates were withheld for security purposes, and later submitted by the researcher to the editors and the academic consultant of the research for proper verification (Quitoriano 2016).

In another study, interviews with law enforcers and retired military officers revealed the smuggling of hardware, electronics, dry goods, and pirated merchandise, as well as the trade in black-market petrol, stolen four-wheel-drive vehicles, ivory, horns of rhinoceros, gold, arms, and drugs. A discharged former military man stated that “Over time, I understood that, even if the border zones are poor, one nonetheless makes big money there” (Roitman 2005, p. 155).

Mapping and geo-tagging techniques

Capturing the complex market information essential to exposing smuggling requires an interoperable approach to monitor, track, and document the trafficking of goods across land and sea. The use of mapping and GIS technologies is one such interoperable system that can monitor and geotag smuggling-related sightings and incident reports, enabling the identification of smuggling routes, the tracking of vehicles and vessels carrying illicit goods, and the potential ports of entry and exit of prohibited commodities.

In the much-traversed Sulu and the South China Sea where all seagoing vessels *en route* to China from the Indian Ocean pass, naval and coast guard authorities have used the mapping and geotagging of incidents to produce spatial maps that graphically show where smuggling activities are happening.⁷

The process entails the gathering of secondary data from customs and port authority officials of smuggling incident reports on land and sea and geotagging the location of those incidents on a land and sea map.⁸ Once they are placed on a map they can demonstrate where smuggling incidents are happening and provide leads to where these incidents will re-emerge. They can geographically reference data that could then be overlaid to other datasets. They are also a useful fusion of both evidence gathering and presentation processes of data and visualization.

Secondary data in archives and global databases

Studying smuggling entails the gathering of robust secondary data that can provide information about incidents, actors, and costs. Researchers can look back in time and assess historical data about the bustling entrepôts where cross-border trade occurred over time and look at archival material that can be a rich source of ethnographic material, narratives, and stories about the porous borders where people traded freely from pre-history to the contemporary period.

Other researchers have used financial reports from customs and port authorities in mainland, air, and coastal ports where smuggling incidents abound. Cases of smuggling, especially those that lead to violent conflict, can also be found in police and military incident reports, and in newspaper and other media reports. These reports include data on the date when the smuggling incident occurred, when and how it was disrupted, the actors involved, the type and volume of commodities seized and their estimated market prices.

Archival documents

Using personal accounts in historical source documents is important in the depiction of the actors themselves of the realities observed temporally and contextually. These source documents include original letters and reports, diaries of colonial residents, appeals for support, reward, and promotion, long-winded recommendations, and decrees inspired by local obstruction of government goals (Scott 1976).

They also include historical records of smuggling activity that were accompanied by violent clashes between smugglers and border guards as the demand for consumption goods grew in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For example, Kwass (2014, p. 5) pointed to the evolution of the consumer revolution in France and its links to the global context to explain, through the use of after-death inventories and probate records “that list, in exquisite detail all the movable goods an individual possessed at the moment of his or her death,” revealing how “probate inventories placed French consumption on the map.”

Kwass looked at these historical records as important sources of evidence about the causal impact of consumption on the trade of goods, but he also admonished researchers about the inadequacy of the data because “inventories reveal little about where goods came from, who produced them, and what path they took before reaching consumers.” The missing data may hide smuggling behavior, requiring additional research to understand the “boisterous and often violent world of production and exchange that brought goods to market in the first place.”

Meanwhile, Andreas’s (2013, pp. 9–15) classic study of American smuggling underscored the significance of smuggling activities in America as both a barrier but also an enabler of rapid development. He argued that despite the paltry quantitative data available, historical accounts provided other sources of data that were just as important. Historians trained the spotlight on the “uneven balance in cargo between incoming and outgoing ships, private correspondence, and travel accounts.” Their studies showed the “magnitude of the illicit trade in molasses is revealed by the discrepancy between official imports and the amount of molasses actually needed to keep colonial distilleries running.” These findings would help usher the wider use of global trade data.

In pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Mindanao in the Southern Philippines, genealogical documents such as the *tarsilas* of Muslim families and clans, including maps, descriptions of scientific findings and colonial governance structures, maritime journals, and historical accounts of incidents and patterns of smuggling and border formation are plentiful and have been used in scholarly work.⁹ These historical journals, dating at least a century-old, uncover the authentic early descriptions, terminologies, and references to routes and places, motivations, and personalities involved in cross-border trade (Majul 1977; Scott 1978, p. 174; Tagliacozzo 2005).

New insights can also be culled from these old and original documents – or pieces of “incidental intelligence,” – referring to data that was unintentionally gathered, or mentioned in passing, that contain more historical relevance than what the authors wanted to say (Scott 1978: 182). Correspondingly, such accounts from historical source documents, written or visualized in maps, illuminated border formation and the evolution of what is licit and illicit – such definitions are a reproduction of colonial power – and how illicit trade was also a form of resistance by the colonized (Schendel and Abraham 2005; Tagliacozzo 2005).

Global database

Another robust source of secondary data are the descriptive statistics made available by recently established global databases containing data that graphically reveals the hidden income streams and profits from smuggling activities.

In the past two decades, quantitative data has been used as a powerful component of qualitative research. The establishment of the United Nations Commission on Trade (UN Comtrade) has been a helpful secondary source of data that can give leads on the importance and magnitude of certain commodities that are traded and their effects on revenue generation, or the lack of it, in countries where smuggling is rampant. It widened the possibilities for comparative analysis of country performance in monitoring cross-border trade.

The UN Comtrade institutionalized the harvesting of official and hence formal country trade data that can be used for comparative assessments of trade output and to determine trends in the expansion or contraction of commodity trade in the world.¹⁰ It speeded up the work of other multilateral financial, developmental, and security agencies involved in determining smuggling activity, corruption in customs taxes and other revenues, money laundering activities, including drug trafficking.

In the case of gun smuggling in the Philippines, UN Comtrade data was crucial in exposing how (1) weapons were being smuggled into the Philippines through the ports of Manila rather than from the porous borders of the Sulu Sea and (2) that there was a yawning gap between the numbers and prices of weapons exported to the Philippines versus the official reports of importation at the border (Quitoriano 2016). Meanwhile, the use of UN Comtrade data in Myanmar exposed smuggling in the gems market (precious and semi-precious stones, except diamonds) when contrasted with reports of exports and imports of gems to China, Thailand, and other importing countries.

Analytical approaches

Value chain and network analysis are useful analytical approaches for assessing the data on illicit cross border trade. Value chain analysis involves a process of meticulous investigation and analysis of the entire structure of production, trade, and distribution and assessing the importance or value (monetary or otherwise) of each stage in the process. Illicit trade can be better understood if each stage of the process is subjected to a cost-benefit analysis, including the flow of contraband among a different set of actors.

In gathering the evidence to test how costs and profits are distributed in illicit cross-border trade, many studies of smuggling across the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia featured cost-benefit studies to establish the amount of income/profit generated from illicit trade among value chain actors (i.e., small traders, brokers, *kumpit* boat operators, state regulatory agencies, port operators/owners, laborers and haulers) using mainly primary data from personal accounts and life stories of small traders and key informant interviews with customs and trade officials, local government officials, port personnel and laborers, drivers/haulers, warehouse owners, and wholesalers and retailers¹¹ (Figure 4.1).

The studies discovered the huge rents that accrued to state agents, and the beneficial income streams that flowed to various stakeholders including vessel owners and laborers, women traders, and youth workers hired to prepare the vessels. Profits range from 100% to 150% of investments made prior to each maritime “shopping trip” and back across the Sulu and Celebes Seas (Villanueva 2016). The value-chain analysis also revealed the various social networks based on true and fictive kinship ties built on trust established over many years of dealing with each other across “free trade areas” such as the Sulu Sea.

Other studies of smuggling presented modes of organization built along clan, ethnic, or tribal linkages that were central to successful involvement in illicit cross-border trade. Studies by Gallien (2019), Chouvy (2013), Olken and Baron (2009), and Schendel and Abraham (2005) examined the distinct and efficient modes of organization that fitted the nature of the activity

Figure 4.1 Economic value chain of cross-border trade in Sulu and Tawi-Tawi (Villanueva 2016).

being undertaken. For example, traders engaged in the transport of benign products had their own social network and distinguished themselves from the ‘truly unlawful’ and ‘highly illegal’ elements of the cross-border trade engaged in kidnap for ransom, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and illicit weapons.

Other studies of network economies were also the focus of the study of livestock marketing in Northern Kenya. Mahmoud (2008) used case history and participant observations of livestock markets and travelled in livestock trucks on a 48-hour journey along the Moyale–Nairobi road to uncover and understand trust relationships embedded in horizontal social networks as an effective risk-minimizing strategy for traders in highly economic and politically volatile contexts.

Limitations in qualitative studies of smuggling

Despite the strength of the qualitative methods mentioned above, there are several challenges and limitations for each of these methods and processes that need to be understood to enable researchers to avoid mistakes, mitigate weaknesses, avoid pitfalls, and to be honest in declaring the strengths and limitations, the nuances and caveats of each study. Four of the more important limitations are discussed here.

One, *there is always a challenge in making claims about the nature of the general population engaged in cross-border trade based on the limited observations that can be generated in qualitative studies*. The frequent use of unstructured, in-depth interviews and participant observation leads to smaller observations that can be criticized for providing evidence that is seen as wanting, when it comes to the creation of anti-smuggling policies and actions.

In addition, the use of mapping techniques cannot produce real-time information, as access to satellite technology is expensive and often beyond the reach of the researcher, except if the study is funded by the government.

However, these may all be true, but big-N studies are not really a requisite in understanding smuggling and in countering or prevent it. Qualitative data, despite its limitations, has been used to identify loopholes and leakages in tax collection and has enhanced revenue generation. A good case in point is cigarette smuggling in Europe and the networks around the world that feed the illicit enterprise. Joossens and Raw (1998, pp. 66–69) showed how a simple comparison of exports and imports plus the monitoring of smuggling routes and some arrests helped bring about the tighter regulation of cigarette trade, including an international transport convention, and a total ban on transit trade – sale by the manufacturers to dealers, who sell on to smugglers.

Indeed, unstructured interviews, mediated dialogues, and participant observation are methods that can enable an explanation of the logic behind smuggling, the processes and outcomes that occur, the costs and benefits, and most importantly, the actors and networks involved – with more certainty and reliability than quantitative studies can deliver. Besides, looking at the conceptual is as important as assessing the empirical and understanding the logic of the illegal, as opposed to the criminal, represents a new way of conceptualizing smuggling. Moreover, a solid analysis from small observations is infinitely better than an erroneous interpretation of large datasets.

Nevertheless, to mitigate concerns about the validity of the evidence, quantitative studies such as surveys can be undertaken, including attitudinal and perception studies with the use of Likert scales. Mapping that uses Google Earth and ARC-GIS software can reproduce maps more easily and can be made more widely available by governments.

Two, *knowing what information is needed and what indicators are available is burdened by the few secondary quantitative studies that can provide leads for deeper qualitative analysis*. Indeed, studies of smuggling fall into the set of subject matters that “lies beyond the margins of calculation” (Duffield 2001, p. 143) and is seen as impenetrable to social scientific investigation because robust data is difficult to get, and the true picture is not recorded in national accounts.

Some tactics that have been used include “doorstepping,” where the researcher goes directly to the target respondent in the hope of getting an extensive interview, which of course is easier said than done.¹² Another method is the conduct of repeated interviews starting with pre-pilot and pilot interviewing. In contrast to doorstepping, the piloting process promotes a no-rush approach, taking time, and doing a baseline interview (Olsen 1992, p. 67).

Another way is to start with media reports or journalistic studies, which may in turn lead to questionnaires and interview guides. However, journalistic methods must be used with caution as they may entice respondents to shut up, instead of warming up to the interviewer. What really helps in these circumstances is to get the respondent to lead you into the discussion and to enumerate the leads themselves. An inductive approach can go a long way in identifying the key issues that could be discussed in-depth.

Three, *mediated dialogues rely on finding traders to talk to, and in learning to manage conversations and meetings with them* (Harris 1992, pp. 139–147). The problem arises from the typically low sample of traders that are willing to talk and are actually chosen in a sample to talk. Another problem is managing conversations and meetings in private and getting the respondents to behave in a way that enables the researcher to get the information needed.

Finding traders who are genuinely knowledgeable about the hidden world of smuggling and can provide valuable knowledge of all three layers of formal, illegal, and criminal trade is difficult. Catching one is often treated as a singular chance to interrogate a key informant and to employ mediated dialogues to keep them engaged and comfortable.

However, oftentimes the respondent refuses to be recorded or will only allow the use of some and not all the information gathered. There are additional challenges in recording the process while conducting the interview as well, especially in the absence of technical support. The bigger challenge also lies in recalling or remembering all the valuable and necessary details that emerge.

Additionally, managing meetings with traders is difficult because they have acquired a style and tendency to test the interviewer’s knowledge of trade, so tricking the interviewer is common and unavoidable. It is the result of years of partaking in subterfuge and the consequent “wisdom of the streets.”¹³

One way of mitigating this difficulty is to conduct iterative interviews with subjects to enable the researcher to return to the salient topics discussed, not only to check the validity of the recorded conversation, but also to instigate the respondent to add more detail, or to get wider consent for the type of information that can be shared. Mediated dialogues can also be planned in such a way that the third person in the room takes on some of the tasks of recording the discussions.

Four, *there are clear ethical issues about field research, especially the use of participant observation methods or mediated dialogues that may entail breaking the law, which is clearly the case when one participates directly in smuggling activities (even if the contraband is not criminal in nature), or meets with a crime lord on the run from authorities*. Even in cases where the researcher is only indirectly involved as an observer, there is still a thin line here between observing something illegal taking place and tolerating it by not reporting it to the authorities.

Another ethical danger is to be an “advocate” on behalf of those who engage in the illegal yet socially embedded feature of smuggling activity, which redounds to tolerating illegality or illicitness because “they are not of a criminal nature.” Among others, James Scott’s (1985, 1976) studies have suggested that these activities can be viewed as “weapons of the weak” or part of an alluring “moral economy” where social capital abounds. A related danger here is “brokerage,” where a non-partisan and non-controversial researcher provides information about a covert

world, for example, and justifies releasing sensitive and confidential information because you believe that your role is to interpret that world (Wilson 1992, pp. 179–184).

All of these are well and good, but they do not lessen the fact that smuggling does exacerbate the nature of fragile and weak states and is certainly a drag on the state-building project. Also, it is important to recognize that engaging in brokerage can be misinterpreted and misused. It is always important to recognize that your knowledge and judgement as a researcher is limited, and it is better simply to let the subjects speak, instead of speaking on their behalf.

Indeed, the most effective response to the ethical dilemma is to ensure that direct participation in illegal activity is avoided and observation and advocacy are only directed towards raising the voice that is unheard and the profiles that are not seen. In short, participant observation can be ethical if it goes beyond proclaiming good and evil, but instead “enables the reader to hear the voices and appreciate the actions of as many of the different people involved as possible.” Other practical steps can also be undertaken, such as getting consent from the respondents before each interview, revealing the interests and organizations behind the study being conducted, and guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity to all respondents.

Conclusion

Smuggling and other forms of illicit trade are difficult to trace and deter, not because they are hidden from view, but because few have undertaken qualitative studies that reveal the logic and inner workings of smuggling activities beyond the analysis that comes from quantitative data that is at best inadequate, and at worse, misleading. There are few studies that link trade to market changes, political opportunities, or the social milieu that surrounds trade, whether illicit or not (Chouvy 2013). This inadequacy leads to two outcomes: *one*, data is concealed; *two*, trade flows become invisible.

Recent years have seen greater strides in exposing smuggling activity through the use of qualitative research. At the same time, states, development workers, academics, and community organizers are generating fresh data that offer the numbers and the stories that deepen our understanding of smuggling activities. These methods have been tested repeatedly by researchers around the world to strengthen their academic and policy research and the creation of countervailing strategies and organizational responses against smuggling.

The use of in-depth interviews and participant observation in the analysis of smuggling, plus wider access to archival or historical accounts remain the mainstay in studies of illicit cross border trade. Some enhancement is happening through new mapping and geo-tagging techniques provide clearer visual evidence of smuggling. New global databases such as the UN Comtrade provide secondary data that can be compared and contrasted to help expose the illicit flow of goods and monies generated from smuggling.

There are new discoveries and counter-intuitive findings of how smuggling operates, how much of it is hidden, and how much of it is part of an effective governance toolbox for managing supply and demand of vital or deadly commodities, preventing crisis and unrest, or strengthening legitimacy and authority.

Indeed, it is important to recognize at the outset that smuggling is not completely outside the gaze of the state, as evidenced by different studies showing how illicit activities are undertaken in both a clandestine or open manner by actors who might also be agents of the state (Schendel and Abraham 2005; Villanueva 2016). Empirical data can also be distinguished as to whether smuggling economies are pernicious and criminal or are mainly coping and survival in nature, hence illuminating the interplay between the illicit and clandestine, and the “embedded and instituted” nature of these economies.

These distinctions are important and sensitivity to the dualistic nature of smuggling is crucial in insulating the scholar or researcher from being turned into an accomplice in the state's business of curtailing all forms of economic informality (Lara and Schoofs 2016; Lara and de la Rosa, 2016).

This chapter has reinforced the importance of qualitative methods for examining smuggling activity around the world. Examining smuggling remains difficult and challenging, and still requires a lot of flexibility and adaptation, combined with a fair measure of luck and the use of investigative skills to generate data. Smuggling will continue to involve different degrees of circumvention, secrecy, and rule breaking, and a stronger effort must be made to open this sector to research and investigative studies.

Notes

- 1 Villanueva (2016, p. 272) notes how traders and law enforcers categorize contraband goods smuggled into the porous borders of the Sulu Sea as either "allowable" or "highly illegal." Ford and Lyons (2012) note the same perceptions about smuggling in their study of Riau Islanders who engage in trade between Indonesia and Singapore. For the Islanders, smuggling is viewed as a legitimate response to local needs and the perceived failures of the national government and legal system—a fact that points to the need to explore local ecologies of licitness (and illegality) not just in terms of community perceptions but also in terms of different levels of the state.
- 2 Mayer (2018) makes the same argument in the case of West Africa. She points out that media and policy reports often portray human smuggling or irregular migration as a greedy and unscrupulous enterprise, despite the fact that "many migrants from countries such as Senegal treat their handlers as friends rather than criminals and do not see themselves as "smuggled," but rather as people "making calculated choices to migrate based on a host of social factors."
- 3 Interview with a Philippine Port Authority officer. Zamboanga City. Name and date withheld.
- 4 Losby et al. (2002) underscored the difference between what is illegal and what is criminal. The informal economy includes both illegal and legal aspects that are often defined by the nature of the enterprise or the goods and services concerned. Many of these enterprises are "not intrinsically unlawful" but violate some rule or law, such as the failure to pay taxes or license fees for micro-enterprises. They are illegal but not necessarily criminal.
- 5 Harris (1992, p. 142) argues that "in the field study of trade, the researcher is necessarily always an outsider ... as the 'participant observation' of trade is never undertaken."
- 6 Interview with a professor from the Mindanao State University in Tawi-Tawi, Mindanao who has made countless trips from Tawi-Tawi to Sabah and Sandakan to engage in the so-called barter trade. Name and date withheld.
- 7 These are difficult processes because they require strict confidentiality and even stealth especially if the key informant is on the run. It is normally used in cases where the respondent is directly involved in smuggling activity that is criminal in nature, as in the smuggling of narcotics and guns. Journalists are skilled in conducting trialogues.
- 8 Active Philippine Coast Guard Officer interviewed about the smuggling of weapons and the entry routes used by ISIS militants in the Sulu Sea towards Sulu and Zamboanga. The same official noted how they mapped the location of floating cocaine bags picked up by fishermen from the sea to interdict cartel operations in the surrounding waters of Mindanao. Name and date withheld.
- 9 International Alert Philippines (2015) Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS) report included smuggling incidents recorded in police conflict data with latitude and longitude information that enabled the identification of smuggling-related conflict incidents in the high seas.
- 10 The *tarsila*, *zarzila* or *tarzila* is a genealogical map that traces the ancestry of Muslim clans and is often annotated by economic and political signifiers.
- 11 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. (2020). Download trade data. UN Comtrade. Available at <https://Comtrade.un.org/data/>.
- 12 *Kumpit* are sea-faring vessels that regularly traverse the maritime borders and can carry as much as 200 tons of cargo. *Pokol-pokol* refers to the flatbed lorries that are usually powered by a Toyota 4K engine and used to transport goods over land.

- 12 “Doorstepping consists simply of knocking on someone’s door, talking your way inside and subsequently emerging triumphantly with the desired information” (Johnson-Thomas 2000, p. 13).
- 13 They tried to get me to pay for the costs of food and some liquor at the start of an interview, which I refused. However, they got me inspired when they started talking and revealed who among the government authorities had the real “vetting powers” in the illegal import of weapons. I succumbed to their request and gave them a round of beer Filipino researcher-writer on cross-border trade (name and date withheld).

References

- Andreas, P. (2013). *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chouvy, P. (ed). (2013). *An Atlas of Trafficking in Southeast Asia: The Illegal Trade in Arms, Drugs, People, Counterfeit Goods and Natural Resources in Mainland Southeast Asia*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Cukier, W. & Shropshire, S. (2000). ‘Domestic gun markets: The licit-illicit links’ in Lumpe, L. (ed.). *Running Guns: The Global Black Market in Small Arms*. London: Zed Books.
- Duffield, M. (2001). *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books.
- Ford, M. & Lyons, L. (2012). ‘Smuggling cultures in the Indonesia-Singapore borderlands’ in Kalir, B. and M. Sur (eds). *Transnational Flows and Permissive Politics: Ethnographies of Human Mobilities in Asia*, pp. 91–108. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Gallien, M. (2019). ‘Informal institutions and the regulation of smuggling in North Africa’. *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 492–508. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gutierrez, E. (2016). ‘Bandits, Villains and Bosses: Kidnappers of Southern Philippines’ in Lara, F. and S. Schoofs (eds). *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*. Quezon City: Bughaw.
- Harris, B. (1992). ‘Talking to traders about trade’ in Devereux, S. and J. Hoddinott (eds). *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- International Alert Philippines, (2016). *Violence in the Bangsamoro and Southern Mindanao, 2011-2015*. Quezon City, Philippines: International Alert Philippines.
- Johnson-Thomas, B. (2000). ‘Anatomy of a shady deal’ in Lumpe, L. (ed.). *Running Guns: The Global Black Market in Small Arms* London: Zed Books.
- Joossens, L. & Raw M. (1998) ‘Cigarette smuggling in Europe: Who really benefits?’. *Tobacco Control*, vol. 7, pp. 66–71.
- Kwass, M. (2014). *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Lara, F. (2012). ‘The new face of Mindanao’s strong men: The politico-economic foundations of legitimacy in Muslim Mindanao’. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, vol. 48, nos. 1& 2, pp. 55–68. Quezon City: Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman.
- Lara, F. (2014). *Insurgents, Clans, and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*. Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press.
- Lara, F. & de la Rosa, N. (2016). ‘Robustness in data and methods: Scoping the real economy of Mindanao’ in Lara, F. & S. Schoofs (eds). *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*. Quezon City: Bughaw.
- Lara, F. & Schoofs, S. (eds). (2016). *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*. Quezon City: Bughaw.
- Losby, Jan, Else, J. et al. (2002). *Informal Economy Literature Review*. Washington: The Aspen Institute.
- MacGaffey, J. (1991). *The Real Economy of Zaire: The Contribution of Smuggling and Other Unofficial Activities to National Wealth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- MacGaffey, J. & Bazenguissa-Ganga, R. (2000). *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of Law*. International African Institute.
- Maegher, K. (2010). *Identity Economics: Social Networks and the Informal Economy in Nigeria*. Oxford and Ibadan: James Currey and HEBN Publishers.
- Mahmoud, H.A. (2008). ‘Risky trade, resilient traders: Trust and livestock marketing in Northern Kenya’. *International African Institute*, vol. 78, no. 4, pp. 561–581. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Majul, C.A. (1977). 'Principales, ilustrados, intellectuals, and the original concept of a Filipino national community'. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 78–97. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Diliman.
- Mayer, S. (2018). 'Out of Africa: Human smuggling as a social enterprise'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 676, no. 1, pp. 36–56.
- Mines, M. (1972). *Muslim Merchants: The Economic Behaviour of an Indian Muslim Community*. New Delhi: Shri Ram Centre. Cited in Harris, Barbara. (1992). 'Talking to traders about trade' in Devereux, S. and J. Hoddinott (eds). *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Morrisey, O., Lopez, R. & Sharma, K. (eds.). (2015). *Handbook on Trade and Development*. United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Musa, S. (2013, April 20). 'Border Security, Arms Proliferation and Terrorism in Nigeria'. *Sahara Reporters*. Available at <http://saharareporters.com/2013/04/20/border-security-arms-proliferation-and-terrorism-nigeria-lt-col-sagir-musa>.
- Neale, W., Singh, H. & Singh, J.P. (1965). 'Kurali market—a report on the economic geography of marketing in north India.' *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 13, pp. 129–168. Cited in Harris, Barbara. (1992). 'Talking to traders about trade' in Devereux, S. and J. Hoddinott (eds). *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Nichols, P. (1991). *Social Survey Methods a Field Guide for Development Workers. Development Guidelines*, no. 6. Oxford, UK: Oxfam GB.
- Olken, B. & Barron, P. (2009). 'The simple economics of extortion: Evidence from trucking in Aceh'. *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 117, no. 3. Chicago: The University of Chicago.
- Olsen, W. (1992). 'Random sampling and repeat surveys in south India' in Devereux, S. and J. Hoddinott (eds). *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Onuoha, F. (2013). *Porous Borders and Boko Haram's Arms Smuggling Operations in Nigeria*. Doha, Qatar: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.
- Petrich, K. (2018, December 18). 'Guns, pirates, and charcoal'. *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*. Available at https://globalinitiative.net/somalia_untocwatch/.
- Quitoriano, E. (2016). 'Shadow economy or shadow state? The illicit gun trade in conflict-affected Mindanao' in Lara, F & S. Schoofs (eds). *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*. Quezon City: Bughaw.
- Quitoriano, E. (2019). 'From "Canton Goods" and Rebellion to Piracy and Violent Extremism'. Unpublished manuscript.
- Roitman, J. (2005). 'The pluralization of regulatory authority' in *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, pp. 151–199. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, J. (1976). *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Scott, W.H. (1978). 'Crack in the parchment curtain'. *Philippine Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 174–191. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University.
- Scheele, J. (2012). *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schandel, W.V. & Abraham, I. (2005). *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tagliacozzo, E. (2005). 'Secret trade, porous borders: smuggling and states along the Southeast Asian frontier'. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 180–182. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- The World Bank. (2006). *Trucking and Illegal Payments in Aceh*. Available at <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/486401468048915010/pdf/376070IND0Truc1yments1Aceh01PUBLIC1.pdf>.
- Villanueva, S. (2016). 'Cross-border illicit trade in Sulu and Tawi-Tawi: the co-existence of economic agendas and violent conflict' in F. Lara & S. Schoofs (eds). *Out of the shadows: violent conflict and the real economy of Mindanao*. Quezon City: Bughaw.
- Wilson, K. (1992). Thinking about the ethics of fieldwork. in Devereux, S. and J. Hoddinott (eds). *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.