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Institutional asymmetries in border crisis response: state constraints and non-state adaptability in the 2023 Peru-Chile migration emergency

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The 2023 migration crisis at the Peru-Chile border revealed critical patterns in humanitarian response capabilities that challenge traditional assumptions about border governance. Through analysis of local media coverage, institutional communications, and humanitarian reports, this study examines how the crisis exposed both structural weaknesses in governmental response mechanisms and unexpected strengths in non-state humanitarian coordination. The evidence demonstrates that despite geographical proximity and historical cooperation patterns, institutional constraints fundamentally limited effective cross-border cooperation, while humanitarian organizations demonstrated superior operational flexibility.

KEYWORDS

asymmetries, border, crisis, migration, emergency, Peru, Chile

1 Introduction

Border spaces inherently function as natural laboratories for analyzing cross-border cooperation and paradiplomacy, particularly during crises that demand coordinated responses between subnational governments (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Moreover, paradiplomacy and cross-border articulation encompasses the interconnection of diverse subnational actors, including local governments, civil society organizations, and private entities, all of which establish links and cooperation mechanisms that transcend national boundaries (Clemente, 2018). While this form of interaction has been increasingly facilitated by decentralization processes and the growing autonomy of subnational units within the context of globalization, it nevertheless frequently encounters significant limitations imposed by national centralism (Kuznetsov, 2015; Silva-Sandes, 2020).

The unprecedented 2023 Peru-Chile border crisis emerged within the broader context of Venezuelan migration across South America, one of the largest displacement phenomena in the region's recent history. Since 2014, over 7.7 million Venezuelans (~20% of the country's population) have left due to political instability, economic collapse, and humanitarian deterioration (UNHCR, 2024). By 2023, this exodus had significantly reconfigured regional migration patterns, with Peru hosting 1.5 million Venezuelans (becoming the second-largest recipient globally) and Chile ~440,000 (UNHCR, 2023a). The Tacna-Arica border corridor, historically characterized by fluid mobility and intense cross-border exchange, became a critical pressure point in this regional migration system.

The crisis itself was marked by a significant bottleneck of Venezuelan migrants in the Tacna-Arica border region, triggered by a series of restrictive migration policies: Chile's deployment of 600 military personnel (Decree 78) and Peru's response with 200 police and 300 military forces effectively militarized both sides of the border (BBC, 2023). This militarization created a humanitarian emergency in the desert borderland, where ~250 migrants became stranded daily without access to basic services or shelter, while regular migration flows through Tacna plummeted from 233 to 130 people daily (GTRM, 2023). Desperate families, including a significant proportion of children (20% of total migrants), typically attempted border crossings three times, predominantly at night (62%), seeking family reunification (67%) or employment (52%) (UNHCR, 2023b; Encuentros, 2023).

The framing of this migration situation as a "crisis" in early 2023 stemmed primarily from the political decision to redefine border management through a security lens rather than from an actual surge in migration volumes. This shift in governance approach—from humanitarian management to militarized control—occurred precisely when both countries faced domestic political pressures regarding migration policy (Radio Uno, 2023a; La Estrella de Arica, 2023a). In this sense, the resulting humanitarian emergency reflected not an inevitable consequence of migration itself, but rather the specific policy choices that prioritized territorial security over human mobility management (Pari Bedoya and de la, 2024).

While scholars have extensively examined regional migration dynamics (Chávez, 2022; Jiménez, 2019) and border policies (Stefoni et al., 2022; Thayer et al., 2022; Ovando and González, 2018), Pari Bedoya and de la (2024) analyzed this humanitarian crisis through Agamben's "bare life" concept, revealing how stranded migrants experienced severe rights deprivation and biopolitical control in this critical South American corridor. This study builds on this foundation by adopting a qualitative approach based on comprehensive document analysis, examining local media coverage (Radio Uno, La Estrella de Arica, Sin Fronteras, Correo), institutional reports (UNHCR, IOM, GTRM, government communications), and humanitarian organizations' assessments.

2 Crisis response patterns

The emergency revealed distinct operational patterns across different institutional actors, with varying levels of effectiveness and constraints. Local governmental response showed significant limitations in basic crisis management across multiple dimensions. In Tacna, authorities struggled to manage public spaces effectively, with more than half the migrant population ending up homeless in city squares and parks, leading to increased informal economic activity (Encuentros, 2023). The municipality's response capacity was severely constrained, as evidenced by their need for central government approval for basic operational resources including four lighting towers, four power generators, 12 portable reflectors, and eight campaign tents for police personnel (Radio Uno, 2023b). Even basic sanitation efforts faced bureaucratic obstacles, as demonstrated when Tacna's municipality attempted to organize

border area cleaning operations but could not extend activities into Chilean territory due to authorization requirements (Sin Fronteras, 2023a).

Local authorities' operational limitations extended beyond resource constraints to affect strategic planning and coordination. When the Regional Government attempted to establish temporary shelters near the border complex, the initiative required multiple layers of approval despite its urgent humanitarian nature (Radio Uno, 2023c). Similarly, even routine security operations required complex coordination: the deployment of special police units from Lima involved $\sim\!50$ agents and necessitated ministerial-level authorization (Radio Uno, 27/04/2023). These bureaucratic requirements created significant delays in crisis response, particularly evident in cross-border coordination efforts.

Non-governmental organizations demonstrated notably different operational capabilities, establishing more comprehensive and agile response mechanisms. UNHCR and IOM developed multi-faceted assistance programs, providing emergency kits, food, hydration, and coordinating shelter for vulnerable populations (GTRM, 2023). Their operational superiority became particularly evident when UNHCR had to provide the Peruvian Foreign Ministry with 51 professional staff to support crisis response activities (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2023). These organizations successfully coordinated the transfer of ~450 migrants to shelters through direct collaboration with Chilean authorities (Radio Uno, 2023e), demonstrating an ability to navigate bureaucratic constraints more effectively than local government institutions.

Religious institutions implemented specific, effective coordination mechanisms that bridged both institutional and national boundaries. The Catholic Church, through Bishop Marco Antonio Cortés Lara, established direct negotiations with transportation companies for humanitarian transfers and coordinated population censuses with international organizations (Correo, 2023). The dioceses of Tacna, Moquegua, and San Marcos de Arica facilitated emergency meetings that brought together the Regional Government, National Police, neighborhood councils, IOM, and UNHCR (Radio Uno, 2023d), demonstrating superior convening capacity compared to official channels. Their ability to rapidly establish cross-border pastoral activities (La Estrella de Arica, 2023c) proved particularly effective in addressing immediate humanitarian needs while formal diplomatic channels were still being activated.

This effective transborder coordination reflects a long-established pattern of religious cooperation that predates the 2023 crisis. The Catholic dioceses of Tacna and Arica have maintained formal cooperation mechanisms for decades, including joint celebrations of national holidays, shared pastoral activities, and coordinated humanitarian responses. During critical moments of potential bilateral tension, such as the 2014 International Court of Justice ruling on maritime boundaries, these dioceses played a stabilizing role by emphasizing fraternity and shared faith through joint statements and religious ceremonies (Andina, 2014). This institutional collaboration was further formalized through the establishment of migrant reception centers on both sides of the border, supported by international organizations like

IOM, which in 2017 helped implement shelter houses operated by the Scalabrinian Congregation in Arica, Tacna, and Santiago (IOM, 2017). By 2024, this cross-border religious cooperation had evolved into regular "Triple Border Bishops' Meetings," creating established channels for coordinated humanitarian response (CELAM, 2024). This historical context explains why religious institutions could mobilize effective cross-border responses when governmental coordination mechanisms failed during the 2023 crisis.

3 Institutional innovation and adaptive responses

The crisis catalyzed significant institutional innovations that emerged through both formal and informal channels. A key formal innovation was the development of the SEMÁFORO system, implemented following the November 2023 CIDF meeting, which established new protocols for 24/7 border operations (DIFROL, 2024). This system represented a significant departure from previous border management approaches, introducing real-time coordination mechanisms between border facilities at Santa Rosa and Chacalluta (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2023).

Parallel to these formal innovations, novel coordination networks emerged through informal channels. When traditional diplomatic mechanisms proved insufficient for managing the estimated 15,000 migrants moving through the border area (La República, 2023), local actors developed alternative communication channels. A particularly innovative approach emerged through the establishment of direct coordination mechanisms between humanitarian organizations and transportation providers. This was evidenced in the successful coordination of emergency assistance delivery systems that operated independently of formal state channels while maintaining necessary oversight (GTRM, 2023).

The crisis also prompted the development of hybrid institutional arrangements that combined formal authority with operational flexibility. The Regional Government of Tacna, for instance, established an innovative coordination framework that integrated international organization capabilities with local administrative structures. This arrangement facilitated the deployment of 51 UNHCR technical staff within the Foreign Ministry's operational structure (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2023), representing a novel approach to institutional capacity building during crisis situations.

These adaptive responses extended to the development of new operational protocols. While initial border management relied heavily on military presence—with 600 personnel deployed by Chile and 500 by Peru—subsequent adaptations focused on developing more sophisticated coordination mechanisms. A notable innovation was the establishment of joint humanitarian response protocols that allowed for coordinated action between state and non-state actors, as demonstrated in the successful transfer of 450 migrants to shelters through collaborative arrangements between international organizations and Chilean authorities (Radio Uno, 2023e).

The crisis also catalyzed innovations in resource mobilization strategies. When traditional funding channels proved insufficient, new mechanisms emerged for leveraging private sector resources through public-private partnerships. This was particularly evident in the coordination between religious institutions and transportation companies for humanitarian transfers (Correo, 2023), establishing a precedent for more flexible resource mobilization frameworks in future crises.

Inter-institutional learning emerged as another significant adaptive response. The experience gained through managing joint operations led to the development of new standard operating procedures, particularly evident in the protocols established for cross-border sanitation operations (Sin Fronteras, 2023a). These innovations, though initially developed as emergency responses, have begun to be formalized into more permanent institutional arrangements, as demonstrated by the incorporation of non-state actor coordination mechanisms into official border management frameworks (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2023).

4 Emerging governance models

The crisis catalyzed the emergence of novel governance models that transcended traditional institutional boundaries and hierarchies. These new arrangements emerged through both formal channels and innovative local initiatives, demonstrating varying degrees of effectiveness in managing the humanitarian emergency. The experience revealed three distinct but interconnected patterns in governance innovation: multilevel response frameworks, cross-border coordination mechanisms, and hybrid institutional arrangements.

The most significant innovations in multilevel governance emerged from diverse local initiatives. Arica's mayor pioneered an ambitious multilateral approach, proposing humanitarian corridors that would coordinate actions across multiple countries (La Estrella de Arica, 2023b). Meanwhile, Tacna's authorities developed alternative proposals, including the conversion of military facilities into temporary shelters (Radio Uno, 2023c). Both initiatives represented attempts to transcend traditional bilateral approaches, though their implementation faced significant bureaucratic challenges. This was evidenced when Tacna's municipality attempted to organize border area cleaning operations but could not extend activities into Chilean territory due to authorization requirements (Sin Fronteras, 2023a).

These local initiatives catalyzed the development of flexible coordination structures that bypassed traditional bureaucratic hierarchies. When conventional channels proved insufficient, requiring multiple approvals between regional government, national migration authorities, and foreign ministry offices (Radio Uno, 2023a), alternative governance models evolved. Religious institutions emerged as particularly effective intermediaries, with the Catholic Church establishing direct negotiations with transportation companies and coordinating population censuses with international organizations (Correo, 2023).

Resource mobilization patterns revealed additional governance innovations. When Arica's delegation president implemented integrated control measures combining multiple security forces (La Estrella de Arica, 2023a), it created new operational synergies.

However, resource constraints remained significant, as evidenced when municipal authorities had to seek central government approval for basic operational resources including lighting towers, power generators, and campaign tents (Radio Uno, 2023b). These limitations prompted the development of alternative resource mobilization strategies, particularly evident in the coordination between religious institutions and transportation providers.

The integration of non-state capabilities into formal governance structures produced distinctive hybrid operational models. While some local authorities explicitly deprioritized shelter provision as a "circumstantial issue" (Radio Uno, 2023b), international organizations established comprehensive assistance programs that operated parallel to state institutions. This approach proved particularly effective when these organizations coordinated the transfer of ~450 migrants to shelters through streamlined processes (Gestión, 2023). The success of these arrangements was further demonstrated when the dioceses of Tacna and Moquegua facilitated emergency meetings that brought together the Regional Government, National Police, neighborhood councils, and international organizations (Radio Uno, 2023d).

These emerging governance patterns collectively suggest a shift toward more adaptive, network-based approaches to border crisis management. The successful coordination achieved by various actors, despite initial resource limitations and bureaucratic constraints, indicates that effective crisis response may depend more on institutional flexibility and network integration than on traditional hierarchical structures. This observation has significant implications for the development of future border governance frameworks, particularly in regions prone to humanitarian emergencies.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The transformative dynamics observed during the 2023 Peru-Chile border crisis illuminate profound contradictions in our understanding of border governance and institutional response capabilities. Contemporary theoretical frameworks that emphasize enhanced cooperation through paradiplomacy (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Clemente, 2018) confront a stark reality: deeply embedded centralist traditions not only persist but actively neutralize the presumed advantages of geographical proximity and historical interaction patterns in cross-border cooperation (Kuznetsov, 2015; Silva-Sandes, 2020).

Perhaps most revealing is how the crisis challenges conventional wisdom regarding institutional capacity. The remarkable effectiveness of non-state actors in navigating and responding to the emergency (Ovando and González, 2018) suggests a fundamental misalignment between traditional governance structures and the fluid realities of border dynamics. Within these "territories of circulation" (Tapia et al., 2017), non-governmental organizations demonstrated an unprecedented ability to transcend institutional constraints, pointing toward an accelerated evolution in state-non-state relationships that extends beyond existing theoretical frameworks (Stefoni et al., 2022).

This institutional adaptability paradox merits deeper consideration. While scholarly literature has documented the inherent flexibility of migration patterns and mobility practices (Contreras et al., 2017), institutional responses remain conspicuously rigid. The persistent gap between migrant populations' demonstrated adaptability and institutional response capabilities (Hidalgo et al., 2021; Jiménez, 2019) raises profound questions about the nature of institutional design in border regions. How might we reconceptualize governance frameworks to harmonize the legitimacy of state authority with the operational agility demonstrated by non-state actors?

The case of religious institutions during this crisis offers a compelling illustration of the institutional adaptability paradox discussed above. The historical depth of cooperation between the Catholic dioceses of Tacna and Arica exemplifies how non-state actors can develop effective cross-border governance mechanisms that outperform formal state structures during emergencies. While local authorities in Arica explicitly declared they would "not allocate any regional resources to address the crisis" (Sin Fronteras, 2023b), and Tacna's municipal authorities dismissed shelter provision as merely a "circumstantial issue" (Radio Uno, 2023b), these religious institutions activated transborder networks cultivated through decades of formalized cooperation. Their operational effectiveness-demonstrated in coordinating humanitarian transfers and facilitating multistakeholder emergency meetings—stemmed not from spontaneous adaptation but from institutional relationships established through joint celebrations of national holidays, shared pastoral activities, and previous humanitarian collaborations that predated the crisis (Andina, 2014; IOM, 2017; CELAM, 2024). This case demonstrates how effective border governance may depend less on formal authority and more on institutional memory and established patterns of cross-border cooperation that transcend both national boundaries and the bureaucratic constraints that limit governmental responses. Such findings reinforce the need for theoretical models that recognize the complementary strengths of diverse institutional actors and the value of flexible, network-based approaches to humanitarian border governance.

The evidence suggests that effective border governance may require a fundamental shift away from formal structural emphases (Aranda et al., 2010) toward more nuanced frameworks that embrace network diversity and adaptive capacity. This reconceptualization, building upon emerging understandings of subnational integration spaces (Ovando and Álvarez, 2011), points toward a more sophisticated theoretical model: one that recognizes the complementary strengths of state and non-state actors while acknowledging the complex realities of humanitarian response in border regions. Such an understanding may prove crucial for bridging the enduring gap between theoretical frameworks and practical crisis management.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: https://radiouno.pe/, https://diariosinfronteras.com.pe/, https://www.estrellaarica.cl/impresa/2025/02/23/papel/, https://www.r4v.info/es/peru, https://www.gob.pe/institucion/rree/noticias, https://www.encuentros-sjs.org/informe-anual-demonitoreo-de-proteccion-regional-2023.

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