

**AFRICAN BORDERLANDS  
RESEARCH NETWORK (ABORNE)**

Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS)



# Introduction

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The European Science Foundation (ESF) is an independent, non-governmental organisation, the members of which are 79 national funding agencies, research performing agencies, academies and learned societies from 30 countries.

The strength of ESF lies in the influential membership and in its ability to bring together the different domains of European science in order to meet the challenges of the future.

Since its establishment in 1974, ESF, which has its headquarters in Strasbourg with offices in Brussels and Ostend, has assembled a host of organisations that span all disciplines of science, to create a common platform for cross-border cooperation in Europe.

ESF is dedicated to promoting collaboration in scientific research, funding of research and science policy across Europe. Through its activities and instruments ESF has made major contributions to science in a global context. The ESF covers the following scientific domains:

- Humanities
- Life, Earth and Environmental Sciences
- Medical Sciences
- Physical and Engineering Sciences
- Social Sciences
- Marine Sciences
- Materials Science and Engineering
- Nuclear Physics
- Polar Sciences
- Radio Astronomy
- Space Sciences

Half a century after the crest of the wave of decolonisation rolled across Africa, one of the most ingrained truisms about the continent is still routinely invoked: namely that the boundaries of African states were drawn arbitrarily by Europeans and that their basic artificiality renders the very foundations of African states inherently unstable. This argument is not without some merit, but scholars are increasingly questioning whether it can be taken as the last word on the subject. In the past ten years, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in African borderlands, as scholars and practitioners have come to appreciate that some of the most important issues of the day are taking place along the continent's international borders. This includes international migration; conflict and displacement; global pandemics like HIV/AIDS; the trafficking of contraband; initiatives towards regional economic integration; and shared access to scarce resources such as water and grazing.

African borderlands mostly lie at the geographical margins of the state, but they are far from being of marginal importance. These zones are typically dynamic social spaces that attract a diverse range of actors seeking to take advantage of the opportunities that borders present. Moreover, border towns typically face in two directions at once, and are commonly embedded in networks that extend not merely to the respective capital cities, but also to cities in Europe, Asia and the Americas. The challenge is to understand the complex local dynamics of border areas, whilst at the same time situating them within these larger networks.

Although border studies constitute a well-established cross-disciplinary sub-field in North America and Europe, Africa has thus far been marginal to the debate. This Research Networking Programme starts from the premise that African border regions contain their own unique features, but that they also shed light on processes that can be witnessed across the globe. Making African data speak to borderland studies is therefore an important aspect of the underlying intellectual rationale.



# What is ABORNE?

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The African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE) was founded in June 2007 by a small group of committed scholars. Following the launch of the ESF ABORNE Research Networking Programme, its registered membership has grown to close to 200 individual and institutional members mostly based in Europe, Africa and North America.

ABORNE is an interdisciplinary network of researchers interested in all aspects of international borders and trans-boundary phenomena in Africa. The emphasis is largely on borderlands as physical spaces and social spheres, but the network is also concerned with regional flows of people and goods as well as economic and social processes that may be located at some distance from the geographical border.

The programme brings together established scholars with an international reputation in the field and doctoral students whose data is fresh from the field and whose analysis is on the cutting edge of trans-disciplinary social sciences. Through researcher exchange, workshops, PhD seminars and joint publications, ABORNE will develop a common theoretical perspective on African borderlands and communicate it to scholars, policy makers and students. It will thus contribute to an improved understanding of states and their borderlands in general and inform important policy decisions in Europe, Africa and elsewhere.

- ABORNE is primarily a forum for academic researchers aiming for a better understanding of African borderlands, but it also welcomes individual members and institutions whose work is of a more applied nature.
- It provides a lively platform for debate, the sharing of knowledge and the coordination of research activity, conferences and publications.
- ABORNE integrates insights derived from different sub-fields of knowledge – including history, anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, development studies, migration studies and refugee studies – that have tended to produce a fractured body of knowledge about African borderlands.
- The programme engages with scholars and policy makers working on other parts of the world and endeavours to bring new insights to bear on borderland studies in general, both at the conceptual and the empirical levels.
- It seeks to develop borderland studies as a sub-field in its own right and to promote research activity as well as programmes of study at the under- and post-graduate level.
- ABORNE and the African Union Border Programme (AUBP) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to formalise their working relationship, which includes co-financing of ABORNE activities in order



African borderlands in the making.  
Map by Henry Schenck Tanner, 1823.

to enable the participation of Africa-based scholars and continuous exchange on issues of scientific and policy relevance.

The running period of the ESF ABORNE Research Networking Programme is five years from April 2009 to September 2014.

## Objectives

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The success or failure of policy measures designed within the framework of sovereign states is often crucially affected by processes that cut across borders. In spite of a large body of existing literature on borderlands in Africa, these processes and practices are still not sufficiently conceptualised to allow for a theoretical framework that cuts across disciplinary boundaries and informs real-world policy decisions. ABORNE will bring together different strands of existing research and develop African borderland studies as a multidisciplinary field of knowledge in its own right. ABORNE is designed to bundle and focus the vast empirical knowledge of European researchers working on African borderlands in cooperation with Africa-based colleagues. Its ultimate aim is to provide insights that can help address some of the most urgent challenges Europe's neighbour, Africa, is facing today – challenges that often have a large impact on Europe itself. ABORNE will thus simultaneously develop a new field in social science research, bring crucial aspects of current social change in Africa to the agenda of policy makers and serve as a one-point stop for expertise on border issues in Africa.

From the outset, collaboration within ABORNE has shown that the quality of individual contributions is greatly enhanced by the comparative perspective developed in a team of researchers drawn from different disciplinary and regional backgrounds. In a relatively new field of study, this mutual input is absolutely vital to identify crucial topics and important developments in the field. The following headline topics will set the agenda for research and publication of ABORNE over the duration of the ESF Research Networking Programme.



Traders in the borderland of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. © Wolfgang Zeller

## Topic Areas

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### 1. Partition, Secessionism and Irredentism

Most borders in Africa are an outcome of the continent's colonial partition at the end of the nineteenth century and once more after the First World War. There have been a number of detailed studies of particular borders where researchers have sought to assess their importance for the lives of those concerned. Most of these studies have come to compatible conclusions, namely that regardless of their origins, boundaries have created vested interests and divergent social practices. The net result is that borders now matter a great deal – not least in the minds of those who live in proximity to them. Africa's borders have been remarkably stable since independence, but the deduction that it was the Organization of African Unity's commitment to the inviolability of inherited colonial boundaries that was decisive has never been terribly convincing. In comparing experiences, ABORNE seeks to improve the understanding of the durability of many borders on the ground, but also the specific dynamics that have encouraged secessionist activity in some cases and nourished irredentist claims in others.

### 2. Migration and Refugees

Since colonial times, African border regions have been characterised by high levels of mobility, as a result of migrant labour systems, resettlement and flight from taxation and labour demands, and more recently as a result of substantial refugee flows. The ESF Research Networking Programme is concerned not merely with comparing these human flows through border spaces, but also in assessing the extent to which borders are themselves shaped by mobility. The emergence of a discourse of indigeneity across a number of African countries has particular implications in border locations. The members of ABORNE are also interested in exploring the differences between types of mobility (e.g., floating populations as opposed to migration paths) and how these relate to forced migration. The most dramatic conflicts of recent times have all involved enormous human flows. The Rwandan genocide led to massive displacements into the Congo and Uganda; the Congolese crisis that ensued and the Liberian and Sudanese civil wars have led to the flight of millions of people into neighbouring states. All these examples of human flight have involved the use of borders as sanctuaries not only for victims but also perpetrators, thus underlining the complexity of insecurity often associated with border zones.

### 3. Borders and Violent Conflict

Contrary to popular perceptions, there are relatively few cases where borders themselves have been in contention in Africa. However, the Eritrean- Ethiopian

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war emerged out of a border dispute, while Nigeria and Cameroon came to the brink of war over Bakassi before deciding to invoke international arbitration. Border regions remain problematic because of the ways in which guerrilla movements often seek protection behind the screen of national sovereignty. In addition, guerrillas have been drawn to relatively unregulated spaces, especially where valuable resources (e.g., diamonds) can be mined and traded for weapons. The unsettled nature of many border zones has permitted a contagion effect, as conflicts spread from one border setting to the next. Less dramatic forms of conflict also often emerge out of everyday activities in borderlands like cattle rustling. The ESF Research Networking Programme seeks to explore and explain the ways in which conflict is constitutive of power dynamics in border settings and why in some borderlands conflicts escalate, whereas others simmer at relatively low intensity over long periods of time.

#### 4. Cross-Border Trade

In recent decades, there has been mounting evidence to suggest that border regions are not economically marginal, but are the sites of important commercial activity. The decline of the formal economy in the national capitals has only served to draw further attention to the apparent dynamism of the margins where populations have often grown faster than the national average. Members of the ABORNE Research Networking Programme are concerned with mapping trade, both legal and illicit, and with evaluating its developmental potential. At the present time, the regional integration agenda of bodies like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is prioritising infrastructural initiatives (e.g., roads, railways and bridges) that promise to create new hotbeds of trading activity. Researchers participating in the ESF Research Networking Programme are especially interested in the phenomenon of border boom towns that arise out of these interventions.

#### 5. Borders and Resource Use

Some research points to the developmental impact of international borders. National policies are often influenced by concerns that roads and health facilities may be used by people from across the border, with the net result that border communities may be neglected. The way in which aid operates in practice often produces the least rational use of resources especially on a continent with a large number of micro-states. This is particularly problematic where cross-border networks serve as disease transmission routes, as has been argued for HIV/AIDS. The issue of cross-border resource use is of fundamental importance where watersheds have been used to define the borders themselves. Where borders meet on larger bodies of water, such as Lake Victoria



Opening of the Zambezi Bridge in the Namibia-Zambia borderland on May 13, 2004. © Wolfgang Zeller

or the Zambezi River, issues of equal access to fishing stocks are important concerns that are only now being taken up in a sustained way. In the context of climate change scenarios, there is a growing perception that securing joint access to resources is set to become one of the most important items on the political agenda. The ESF Research Networking Programme will assess the implications of borders for resource access as well as the long-term potential of current initiatives for ensuring shared use of pasturage and water.

#### 6. Regimes of Border Regulation

Although many border regions have been characterised by a lack of state presence, the convergence of regional integration initiatives, the creation of transport corridors and new technologies of customs control is also leading to the re-insertion of the state into many border areas, but also of privatised forms of regulation: companies providing customs and security services as well as smuggling rings and vigilante groups are active competitors, but often also intimately entwined with state officials in borderlands. The possibility that certain African borderlands will be subjected to much closer regulation than ever before is a real one. The ABORNE Research Networking Programme will be pooling diverse evidence and tracing the implications of these changes for state-society interactions in the longer term.

# Programme Activities

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ABORNE's activities are designed to facilitate a sustainable in-depth exchange among researchers and policy makers around clearly identified sub-topics, and to produce a maximum output of high-quality publications that will define the research field for the foreseeable future. To achieve both intermediary goals as well as the overall Research Networking Programme objectives beyond the individual network activities, a core group of active members communicates regularly and aims to meet face-to-face at least once a year. Key to this continuity is the work and close daily collaboration of the Programme Chair and Coordinator, who are both based in Edinburgh. Decisions about which activities to fund are taken by the Programme Steering Committee as a whole. These are based primarily on the scientific quality of detailed written proposals, and secondarily on the aim to distribute activities equally between countries participating in the funding of the ESF Research Networking Programme.

**An annual ABORNE conference** takes place in late summer/early autumn each year in different European or African locations. Over the course of the ESF Research Networking Programme, these are likely to be Johannesburg, Basel, Lisbon, Edinburgh and Addis Ababa. The conferences are not intended as mere venues for individual presentations, but as platforms for exchange on a clearly-defined conference topic. Each conference aims to address one or more specific aspects of the ABORNE agenda, as outlined under Topic Areas (see above). Paper abstracts are reviewed and selected by a scientific committee and individual papers have to be submitted in advance of the conference. Each annual conference is open to ca. 60 researchers working in the field, ca. 30 to 40 of which are funded by the ESF Research Networking Programme. While the format and content of the conferences is predominantly scientific in nature, the Steering Committee of ABORNE requires organisers to ensure knowledge transfer beyond the academic community, e.g., through extending invitations to media representatives, policy makers and other organisations with an interest in Africa and territorial boundaries.

**The annual steering committee** meetings take place in conjunction with the annual conference in order to maximise the return gained from the funds budgeted for this purpose. This measure should also ensure a high degree of personal continuity throughout the five-year ESF Research Networking Programme period.

An **exchange visit grant** gives two borderland scholars each year the opportunity to spend two months in the research centre that organises the annual conference. Their work should contribute to the annual conference and facilitate an intensive exchange over a longer time period. The grant is awarded following an open call for applications.

**Seven thematic workshops** are organised around very specific sub-topics of the research field and with a clear and viable plan for publication, e.g., as an edited volume in the ABORNE book series or as a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal. Workshops can be organised either as separate meetings or as part of larger conferences, and are budgeted for around eight ESF-funded participants per meeting.

**Two ABORNE summer schools** lasting one week each are planned for 2010 and 2012. They will transfer theoretical perspectives gained in the network into doctoral teaching, and are designed to promote borderlands research as an important field within African Studies. The challenge of developing appropriate methodologies for borderlands research features prominently in these intensive events. Junior researchers will be given an opportunity to discuss their work with each other and established experts in the research field. The latter will deliver keynote presentations on specific topics and act as discussants and supervisors. The envisaged ratio of students to senior researchers is 1:2. The summer schools also aim to stimulate efforts to develop an under- and postgraduate teaching curriculum for African Borderland Studies.

Throughout the ESF Research Networking Programme period members of ABORNE will convene and/or present at panels with a borderland focus at **other international conferences**. While participation in these meetings is not funded by the ESF ABORNE Research Networking Programme it contributes significantly to promoting the network and its scientific results by raising awareness in the wider scientific community, among applied users and policy makers about the existence and work of ABORNE and its members.

## Dissemination of results

The network's website at [www.aborne.org](http://www.aborne.org) is designed to serve as an open and lively forum of exchange for network members and the greater public. It will be continuously updated throughout the period of the ESF Research Networking Programme. Features intended to establish the website as a valuable database for both scholars and policy makers are an interactive map, members' list and bibliography. All these features can be continuously updated by all ABORNE members and are searchable by researchers' names, their geographical areas and topics of expertise. The website is expected to continue serving its function well beyond the end of the ESF-funded Research Networking Programme period.

ABORNE has entered a formal agreement with Palgrave-Macmillan to publish a **new, peer-reviewed book series on African borderlands**. This will serve to heighten public awareness of the ESF Research

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## Funding

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Networking Programme and contribute to the establishment of African borderland studies as an important field of study. Both edited volumes and monographs are accepted. For further details the call for manuscripts can be accessed through the ABORNE website.

### The Singing Network

On a lighter note, the commitment of those attending network meetings to invest long hours of passionate and concentrated work has from the inception of ABORNE been accompanied by a natural openness to bond and enjoy each others' company in an informal manner. A number of members have displayed hidden musical talents. Those participating in the network's events are encouraged to contribute their songs, voices and instruments to these meetings so that ABORNE can continue to grow not only as a scholarly, but also as a singing network.

### Opportunities to participate

In accordance with ESF rules, priority in participation in the ESF Research Networking Programme's activities will be given to researchers based in contributing countries (see below). Researchers based in ESF member countries not yet contributing to the Programme are continuously encouraged to lobby their respective national ESF Member Organisations to reconsider their decision.

The members of ABORNE are fully aware of the special nature of the historical link between Europe and Africa as a result of European colonialism. The participation of African-based borderland experts is critical to the success of the ESF Research Networking Programme and ABORNE's long-term goals of capacity building in, and sustainable exchange with, Africa. ABORNE's collaboration with AUBP (see above) is a key element to ensure African participation in Programme activities and co-ownership of the results. Steering Committee members will also consider as a key criterion for successful applications to host science meetings (annual conferences, workshops and summer schools) the availability of other local funding sources for African colleagues. Also, some of the science meetings in the ESF Research Networking Programme will be held on the African continent.

Borderland experts in North America and elsewhere are always welcome to attend ABORNE's science meetings and strongly encouraged to lobby their respective local and regional institutions for funding.

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**[www.esf.org/aborne](http://www.esf.org/aborne)**