

## Peruvian-Bolivian Trade in the Border Town of Desaguadero. An Approach to Economic and Social Dynamics from the Point of View of the Retailer

Javier Santos Puma-Llanqui<sup>1</sup>, Duverly Joao Incacutipa-Limachi<sup>2</sup>, David Benjamín Antezana-Bustinza<sup>3</sup>, Julio Fitzgerald Zevallos-Yana<sup>4</sup>, Olimpia Tintaya-Choquehuanca<sup>5</sup>

### Abstract

*The objective of the research is to analyze the commercial activity and the exchange of products on the border, analyzing the economic dynamics and the strategic role of commercial exchange in the cities of Desaguadero, a similar name for both border cities of Peru and Bolivia. The method used is qualitative, using in-depth interviews and direct observation as a research technique, which allowed us to analyze the strategies of exchange, commercial interactions and their impact on the economic life of local families in both countries. The results reveal how cross-border trade exchange contributes to the complementarity of the family economy in the region, boosting the economic dynamics of adjacent rural communities. However, the vast majority of products do not pass-through customs regulations, being classified as contraband. This trade is rooted in a tradition of commercial exchange that dates back to before the formation of Peru and Bolivia as independent countries. In conclusion, the complementarity observed in consumption and production patterns between Peru and Bolivia in this region underlines the importance of the cities of Desaguadero as a vital axis for the economic sustainability of rural communities along the border, strengthening family economies and promoting regional economic development.*

**Keywords:** *Border Trade, Informal Trade, Local Development, Culture, Perceptions.*

### Introduction

This research analyzes the relocation process and the commercial dynamics turned into a commercial exchange strategy in the border town of Desaguadero between the countries of Peru and Bolivia. García indicates that “being a territorial strip that divides the neighboring country Bolivia and Peru, it becomes an important space for its export and import trade, *border areas are social constructions of the people*” (García, 2015, 122); traders use the public roads of the city of Desaguadero of both countries to sell their commercial products, being the days of the fair on Tuesdays and Fridays, another feature that attracts buyers are the low prices of the products (Arraya, 2022).

The city of Desaguadero, a place of commercial exchange becomes a strategic scenario of Peruvian and Bolivian product exchanges, as one of the dynamizing activities of the local economy and therefore, promoters of local development (Nájera, 2020), especially of complementarity of the economies in Desaguadero families of both countries, building a base of economic articulation and interdependence (Jiménez, 2019, 38). In addition, depending on the type of local economy, other forms of labor incorporation of locals are created.

The economic actors are people dedicated to the commercial activity that move from different cities of Puno, Juliaca, Moquegua, Tacna and Arequipa, the same happens on the Bolivian side, they come from the cities of La Paz, El Alto, Oruro and Sucre and Cochabamba, between buyers and sellers converge on Tuesday and Friday fair days and thus the commercial exchange occurs in large quantities of fruits, plastic containers, artifacts, clothing, tools. Arraya (2022) indicates that Desaguadero mainly exchanges foodstuffs, clothing and cleaning products.

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<sup>1</sup> Universidad Nacional del Altiplano Puno, Peru, E-mail: [jspuma@unap.edu.pe](mailto:jspuma@unap.edu.pe), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0323-7890>.

<sup>2</sup> Universidad Nacional del Altiplano Puno, Peru, E-mail: [djincacutipa@unap.edu.pe](mailto:djincacutipa@unap.edu.pe), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0067-3147>.

<sup>3</sup> Universidad Nacional del Altiplano Puno, Peru, E-mail: [dbantezana@unap.edu.pe](mailto:dbantezana@unap.edu.pe), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5167-5767>.

<sup>4</sup> Universidad Nacional del Altiplano Puno, Peru, E-mail: [jzevallos@unap.edu.pe](mailto:jzevallos@unap.edu.pe), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5173-8433>.

<sup>5</sup> Universidad Nacional del Altiplano Puno, Peru, E-mail: [otintaya@unap.edu.pe](mailto:otintaya@unap.edu.pe), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6204-3570>

One of the main actors and object of study are the people in charge of moving the merchandise called stevedores, which in Aymara term called “q'ipiri”, are those citizens who come from different communities and partialities near the city of Desaguadero, people of both sexes and different ages, They are qualified and trained in the transport of informal merchandise and have the physical and manual skills to transport products in large quantities, an activity that allows them to generate economic gains and thus acquire goods for family consumption, pay for their children's studies, and assume various family and communal expenses.

Given the importance of the commercial activity that promotes the consumption of local products and the commercial approach as a meeting point between Bolivians and Peruvians, they are a very important source in the economic dynamics of the region, both in the increase in the generation of direct jobs for local families, as well as the provision of goods for the family economy in the region (Anguiano, 1998).

This research is organized in the first place to address the commercial exchange activities on the border between Peru and Bolivia, the strategies for the transfer of merchandise on the Desaguadero border, and the commercial activity and its contribution to the regional economy.

It is necessary to mention that one of the limitations of the research is that the Aimara population of the district of Desaguadero is very sensitive to political events and the abuse of power against the communities by the current government and avoids addressing issues related to informal trade.

## Methodology

The research is conducted from a qualitative interpretative ethnographic approach seeking the meaning of the realities constructed from the point of view of the actors (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014), for the study, traders, stevedores and families directly involved in the commercial exchange.

Data collection was carried out using the in-depth interview technique and direct observation, which were compiled in field notes. Likewise, for the complementary data, a photographic and audiovisual record of the interviews was taken, having previously informed about the objectives of the research and having the consent of the participants.

The field data were analyzed using the criteria proposed by Straus and Corbin (2002) until saturation of the information was reached, which allowed us to approximate the understanding of the commercial exchange, thus giving consistency to the findings. Likewise, the research team included researchers with a high command of the Aimara language, which facilitated the research process.

The information gathered in the same scenario and the interviews conducted with Peruvian and Bolivian actors allowed us to record relevant aspects to achieve the objectives set out in the research.

### *Study Area*

The study area is located in the district of Desaguadero, in the province of Chucuito Juli, department of Puno, at the mouth of the beginning of the Desaguadero River, a Peruvian and Bolivian border point joined by two international bridges, one for human transit and the other for vehicle use.

## Results

### *Commercial exchange activity on the border between Peru and Bolivia*

The border is understood “as the geographic space in which the territories of one or more countries, separated by a conventional or natural limit, are put in contact (Bravo Acevedo, 2024, 132), therefore, they turned out to be liminal places, ‘confines of the homeland’ forced to look towards ‘the vital nuclei’ of the nations (Dilla Alfonso & Contreras Vera, 2021, 5), then we will find points of convergence, divisions and administrations so important that it generates an interdependence of both towns of the district of Desaguadero.

First of all, it is necessary to build a historical view of the relationship and complementarity of economic activities between Peru and Bolivia, from another perspective. The reference found in the document Diagnóstico socioeconómico del distrito de Desaguadero-Perú, indicates that:

“Formerly, it is said, in the town of Desaguadero there were no bridges because the river was a short channel to jump, then by increasing the volume of the waters of Lake Titicaca the river was growing and the Inca Mayta Capac arrived with his army to subdue the Aymara Lupacas after achieving his goal, to cross the river he built a *chaka* based on reed rafts (*titora*) and called it Chacamarca” (PIGARS, 2005, 2).

Beyond the historical details, there is clear evidence that it was one of the geographic points of exchange and complementarity of agricultural production of products from the jungle and products from the highlands in the pre-Hispanic period.

Later, with the Spanish invasion and subsequent geopolitical division, the exchange relations were modified and broke down (Incacutipa et al., 2022), since Spanish subjugation was oriented towards mining activities.

After a time jump, we find in the same document that the commercial activity, even in the Republican era, the commercial exchange was maintained through the barter that comes to make an exchange of products, becoming a strategy of survival and complementarity historically practiced in the highlands of Puno.

“Trade in the town of Desaguadero began with the barter of the fairs of San Andrés every November 30 of each year that lasted up to fifteen days, then the Sunday fairs appeared around 1900, where money did not circulate but rather there was barter, this exchange consisted of exchanging Bolivian fruits with Peruvian agricultural products such as: chuño, quinoa, *cañihua*, brought by the peasant women” (PIGARS, 2005, 35).

Until now, in the circumlacustrine highlands of Aymara and Quechua communities, the neighboring country of Bolivia, becomes a place of access to food and the solution to the problems that Peru presents, in the last years of quarantine it was a space of nutritional solutions for many Peruvian families. This is what Micaela tells us: “*When we don't have anything to eat in Peru, we go to Bolivia, we always find food there, and when there isn't any in Bolivia, they come here*”. This is how the informant Micaela is a mother who tells us about her experience of exchanging products on the border between Peru and Bolivia. At the same time, it becomes “an area in which the population has adapted different structures to survive and develop in an adverse environment, a scenario in which mobility and the complementarity of resources in all dimensions are indispensable” (Espinoza Collao & Ovando Santana, 2023, p. 10)

Therefore, commercial exchange in the border city of Desaguadero is framed under a historical process of coexistence between the surrounding towns with a common history. In this way, “The daily and historical relations between both cities, anchored under the same logic of Andean vertical territoriality (Jiménez et al., 2024, p. 18) and currently, with the dynamization of trade, commercial exchange has multiplied, generating spaces for informal trade and smuggling.

Our interest is to address the commercial dynamics reflected by PIGARS (2005), that 4.7% of merchants are wholesalers, which eventually requires another treatment, since they generate large profits with tax evasion. Our interest in the research is the 95.3% who are largely informal retailers, whose profits are mainly destined to boost the family economy, generate food security and generate self-employment opportunities and educational opportunities for future generations. Furthermore, in a space lacking job, educational and health opportunities, where the state has shown its disinterest in the rural and remote populations of Peru, “the policies of national governments that frequently directly or indirectly limit the creation of jobs in the economy formal” (OIT, 2002, 6). So, in the face of a critical situation, this activity is a respite for the family economy.

### *Desaguadero Trade Fair*

The city of Desaguadero, the name taken by two border cities of Peru and Bolivia separated by an international bridge over the Desaguadero River, hosts the most important border fair in the south of Peru, a commercial activity carried out on Tuesdays and with greater intensity on Friday of each week.

People dedicated to commercial activity in the Puno region go to the city of Desaguadero in the early morning hours, at some merchants a day before the fair with the purpose of acquiring their products at a lower price, as Felicitas tells us “*To go to Desaguadero we leave at midnight or some of my colleagues travel the day before, the fair starts at 2 am. At that time the wholesalers are already selling their products, we have to arrive early to select the best product*”, Felicitas is a merchant dedicated to selling clothing in the city of Puno for more than 30 years.

The setting where the product sales fair takes place and where sellers and buyers among Bolivian and Peruvian citizens come together, “are open-air markets that are set up in the streets of both cities” (Arraya, 2022, 49) considered as an international fair for bread-and-bread products and small-scale trade.

In their commercial establishments or open-air commercial stalls they sell products, which becomes a setting conditioned for the purchase and sale of products (Carrión, 2011) “a diversified complex of commercial exchanges, legal and illegal, which have superior links to cross-border territories” where consumers of Peruvian nationality are merchants or so-called “smugglers” who come from different cities such as Puno, Juliaca, Tacna, Moquegua Ilo, Arequipa, Cusco and the city of Lima, the fact of entering their products into the territory without registration in customs controls is considered for (Hernández, 2021) “a smuggler is a subject that transits between the legal and the illegal, so smuggling is not positioned outside the legal economy, but is part of it, as a gray economy” (p. 07), “likewise, “the fair, as a place of learning, mobilizes both numerical and communicative skills and capacities, in addition to skills related to entrepreneurship” (Jiménez et al., 2024, 17)

#### *Strategies For Moving Merchandise Along the Desaguadero Border*

The commercial dynamics of buying and selling products on the border are complex transactions on a large commercial scale, as indicated by Hernández (2021) there is also high dynamism in terms of flows of people and goods, forming a large chain that begins from the purchase and sale of certain products, “the so-called fairs are an icon of both cities of Desaguadero, a city that is revitalized twice a week, a place where smuggling is also expressed, associated with informality and a neoliberal border context” (Arraya, 2022) its transfer and sale of merchandise linking different actors of different ages, sexes and origins, “in such a way that the border areas are spaces of movement, exchange and integration in various forms, whose territorial development occurs in a framework that goes more beyond the political-administrative division of the States”(García, 2015).

Regarding the sale of products, there is mainly active participation of women of different ages as indicated by Jiménez (2019), since the majority of merchants are women, who are in charge of the offer and purchase of their products, it is crucial their participation in local and informal commerce, “as a social relationship that is culturally constructed, which requires attending to the transformations in socialization that assign a certain value to goods and work” (Alfaro & Brito, 2023, p. 11); On the other hand, the man is a support agent who is responsible for delivering and transferring the merchandise. His function is to load the products in it, requiring the necessary strength to move it from one place to another. On the other hand, decision-making corresponds to women “women are the ones who make economic decisions while the man respects them but assumes the decision as his own before society”(Condori, 2013, 18).

As for the act of transferring merchandise, stevedores or loaders intervene, who in Aymara are called “*q'ipiri*”, within them they diversify according to the quantity and strength of merchandise to be transferred. Firstly, the agent is considered to be the agent who only uses the strength of his arms and a restraint to carry the load on his shoulder. Secondly, these are adult men or women who have skills in manipulating a merchandise carrier called a cart or cart. And they are transported in medium quantities on foot, frequently using the cross-border bridge. Thirdly, there are the *tricyclists*, who due to their greater load capacity work in

the unit called tricycle, some work as tricycle tenants, that is, they work with rented tricycles, and they are the ones who carry out the work of transporting merchandise, Pedro states:

*“For us, the cart is the tool where we load the merchandise to take it to the boat [vessel] so that it can cross the river [the border], before the merchandise was taken to the bridge and passed little by little, in the pandemic everything has changed, “Now we take everything where we can.”*

Pedro, a young stevedore with a few years of experience, who is a member of one of the existing associations in the Desaguadero district on the Bolivian border side. On the other hand, we consider Juan's opinion exemplifies us regarding the means of work used in the transfer of merchandise:

*“For us the tool is the tricycle with three large tires (wheels), we carry more load, that's why they pay us more, then it is the cart, it has two large tires (wheels) and is the size of a tricycle, and finally the cart with small tires (small wheels) women and uncles [older people] work there.”*

Taking into consideration the words of Juan, a stevedore with more than 10 years of experience, he explains to us that the transfer of merchandise at the border begins with the purchase of merchandise from Bolivian merchants to the place called the dock, where the small boats are located. or boats, perform according to their physical condition. The elderly use the cart with two small wheels, a tool in which they transport merchandise in small quantities (see image 01), the women use the cart made up of a larger platform composed of two giant wheels and a small one that serves as a support, there they transport regulate the amount of merchandise and finally the so-called tricycles, a transport instrument used by people who are in greater physical condition, among young people and adult males, where the transfer of a greater amount of merchandise is achieved.

Following the chain of merchandise transfer, the aquatic transfer would correspond, it is carried out through the Desaguadero River, it is an aquatic line that divides the border between the countries of Peru and Bolivia, through this modality merchandise is transferred from the Bolivian Strait to the Peruvian side with the purpose of facilitating and evading customs control of both countries. The aquatic transfer is carried out using small boats, which are manipulated by people who have skill in driving them, they are the one who receives the merchandise on the banks of the river, their function is to transfer it from the Bolivian Strait to the Peruvian Strait, the transfer of products from the side also occurs. Peruvian to Bolivian a form of exchange.

Water transporters called boaters have small boats built of wooden material, whose design is suitable for transportation and easy to handle. According to the informants, they state that they are organized in associations and are differentiated by the color of the paint and the stripe design that the boats have. Each organization enjoys a space on the banks of the river built by hand from sandbags, which is the landing or so-called artisanal docks that are used for the transfer of merchandise and people, properly organized, in such a way that there is coordination between the members of an organization in order to avoid conflicts.

### *Commercial activity and dynamics of the family economy*

The commercial exchange activity has a long history in the area of the cities of Desaguadero, discussed in previous sections, which have served to strategically unite highland towns with high agricultural production with jungle or jungle towns with fruit production, corn, coca leaf, among others that are very precious in the high mountains, ensuring food security (Incacutipa et al., 2022).

As an evolution of commercial dynamics and with the development of markets in modernity, Desaguadero has become a city of high commercial activity, the surrounding residents, due to its natural effect, have become involved with the activities of the commercial dynamics of the city, several residents provide food, lodging, transportation, and currency exchange services, in this way the locals take advantage of the benefits and opportunities that the border offers; It becomes a favorable place to generate greater economic income for the family in addition to agricultural and livestock activities, for this we have Juana's statement: *"My family lives from commerce, since I was very little, I was going to sell breakfast in Desaguadero along with My brothers,*

*we have learned from the business, I did not finish my primary school studies, I do not even know how to read well, but my children are now studying at the university, if I did not know about business, what would become of us?"*

The commercial activity that is practiced on the Desaguadero border provides opportunities to improve the quality of life of local families, often reducing one of the most recurrent problems, which is the lack of economic resources to meet the needs of health (Quispe Mamani et al., 2023). This is how Jacinta tells us: *"From the communities everyone comes to sell a little something, other neighbors come to work as loaders, most of the men work with their tricycles, some of us women work with carts, some sell food."* Therefore, the commercial dynamics in Desaguadero generate economic income, which also constitutes improvements in the family food basket.

According to citizen perception, the profits obtained by people involved in the commercial dynamics of the Desaguadero border are usually used for the acquisition of their property or land, the construction of their homes, the opening of a commercial store, and other the educational training of their children, for this, we have Raúl, he tells us *"several of the boatmen's children study at the universities of Puno, Arequipa, Moquegua and Tacna; Others prefer that their children study at the universities of Bolivia because of the short distance of 2 hours, in Bolivia the prices are cheaper and the expenses are lower due to the exchange rate, in addition it takes less time to study, which is why it is advisable that our children study in Bolivia"*.

#### *Contribution of Commercial Activity to Regional Economic Dynamics*

The residents who energize the economy in the city of Desaguadero according to (PIGARS, 2007) considers from 15 to 64 years old (population participating in the economy and production) also the (National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI), 2020) This population "concentrates 65.8% of the population, constituting the potential workforce" (p. 31), thus the population of the Desaguadero district, due to its entrepreneurial capacity, (Camargo, 2018) considers it an important focus. In the development of the regional and national economy, the area recognizes the local characteristics of the territory's settlement, as well as the dynamism of its economy.

The local economy is also due to the diverse topography that contributes to the practice of agriculture in the annual campaign, making appropriate use of the climatic seasons such as temporary and rotational sowing in small plots of land through bread crops, contributed to the use of technology. Traditional for family use such as potato, barley, quinoa, broad beans and oat products.

Another activity that energizes the economy of the residents of the Desaguadero district is livestock activity, where the resident additionally raises domestic animals such as sheep, birds, cattle, and pigs, a complementary activity that contributes to family and subsistence nutrition, as explained by (National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI), 2020) sheep being the most representative species with 32.9%, including cows, sheep, alpaca and, on the other hand, The agricultural units also raise poultry (28.1%), alpaca (18.0%), cattle (12.3%), llamas (3.3%), pigs (3.1%), equine cattle (2.2%) and in a smaller quantity goat cattle with 0.1% poultry for the purpose of marketing small animals for self-consumption in families, (Camargo, 2018) it should be noted that in the analysis of the development of the social mechanisms that have accompanied the process of establishing roots of this working mass in the region.

As evidenced, the Desaguadero district is an important economic space in southern Peru (Albuquerque, 2004) "as a process in which local actors or institutions are mobilized to support different actions, trying to create, reinforce and preserve activities and jobs, using the means and resources of the territory" (p. 55), on the one hand, the driving agent allocates his time to agricultural and livestock activities and, on the other hand, becomes a local agent driving commercial exchange at the international fair, commercial activity is carried out "every day and especially on Tuesdays and Fridays of each week, million-dollar commercial transactions are carried out, a place where thousands of merchants come from other locations in the Puno region and the country" (Condori, 2013).

In border cities there is greater population growth, "they have experienced notable population growth associated with the development, expansion and diversification of their economic activities, which offer employment opportunities to both natives and internal and international immigrants" (Anguiano, 1998) on

the other hand, the operation of public sector institutions such as the National Bank, RENIEC, Public Ministry, Notary Public, Migration, SUNAT, CENASA, entities that generate greater conditions for the private sector in the opening of commercial establishments, foreign currency exchange stores, restaurants, lodging, urban transportation services, covering greater working conditions for the inhabitants, “a notable population growth associated with the development, expansion and diversification of its economic activities, which offer employment opportunities to both natives and immigrants. internal and international” (Anguiano, 1998).

The inhabitants who carry out agricultural and livestock activities in their rural villages, at the same time are involved in the economic activity on the border as transporters, retailers and/or purchasers of goods, are those who have the greatest purchasing power to acquire goods and who assume positions in the community's patron saint festivities, becomes an important component in the economic dynamics of the region, as they are people with substantially higher incomes than the rest of the population (Orraca, 2023).

Being a territorial strip joined by the narrow of two bridges, one for pedestrian traffic and the other for heavy transport, which divide the countries of Bolivia and Peru, it becomes an important space due to the commercial dynamics where the export and import of products and merchandise flows. on the one hand legal, complying with the regulations and on the other hand informally evading the customs controls of Bolivia and Peru, (Rodrigo, 2023) which implies a profound loss of legitimacy of state institutions, where it becomes a perfect scenario for the people where they perform functions. of transporter of merchandise in small quantities that accumulate large quantities of illegal merchandise, *border areas are social constructions of the towns* (García Pinzón, 2015, 122).

There is a migratory flow in the district of Desaguadero, the first considers the local flow where they move in a family environment from the rural area coming from the peasant communities to the urban one of the same district of Desaguadero of a socioeconomic nature to carry out informal work, “of which 62.0% represent self-employed workers” (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI) & Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), 2020) the other way of Migrating is temporary, when they conclude their agricultural activities in the autumn and winter seasons, in order to achieve additional income they temporarily move to boost the informal economy on the border. where it is specifically distinguished that the greatest effect of migration is in the informal segment (Castillo et al., 2024, p. 27).

#### *Limitations in the Research*

Although the research addresses the topic from the perspective of small-value merchants, it tries to collect evaluations of the activity and the contribution to the quality of life of families; there was a lot of mistrust and little openness to conversation on the subject on the part of those interviewed.

#### *Financing*

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## **Conclusions**

The research findings reflect the economic, social and cultural complementarity between border cities, both the Peruvian and Bolivian sides. In times of crisis in one country or another, residents go to find solutions across the border, which has been consolidated in the complementary consumption and production patterns of the Puno region, which underlines the importance of the cities of Desaguadero as a vital axis for the economic sustainability of cities and rural communities on the border that strengthens family economies and also promotes regional economic development.

The adaptation and search for transfer strategies, from the perspective of the retailers involved, have resulted in improvements in the quality of life of families, which would be impossible to generate in non-border cities.

The research sought the perspective of small merchants who find an opportunity for direct economic income that serves to meet immediate economic needs; However, an analysis from the economic perspective is also necessary from the institutional formality of the State, to have a balance of the benefits and harms of the activity and above all, to propose the permissible limits, so that the activity.

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