Beyond Bureaucracy: Embedded, Discretionary, and Co-Produced Migrant Protection at the Mexican Consulate in Tucson

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Thesis MSc. Public Administration – Public Management and Leadership

Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs

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Capstone: Race, Gender, and Postcolonial Bureaucracy in Public Administration

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Date of submission: 8th of August 2025

Wordcount: 18, 643

ABSTRACT

In the field of public administration and migration governance, scholars have increasingly explored how migrant protection is delivered across borders. However, the discretionary and relational practices of consular institutions remain under examined. This thesis investigates how consular protection is enacted, contested, and adapted by the Mexican Consulate in Tucson, Arizona, in collaboration with migrant communities during the Trump administration. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews with consular staff, community organizations, and migrant service users, the study applies a qualitative study approach.

Using a multi-theoretical framework (street level bureaucracy, networked governance, coproduction, and social embeddedness), the research shows that protection is not simply a top-down bureaucratic function. Instead, it emerges as a hybrid and co-produced practice shaped by discretion and trust-based networks. Findings highlight the vital role of consular staff as frontline actors who navigate legal complexities, political pressure, and limited resources, while migrant communities actively participate in shaping and delivering protection. This study contributes to transnational public administration scholarship by reconceptualizing consular protection as a socially embedded, discretionary, and collaborative governance process in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Keywords

Consular Protection; Street-Level Bureaucracy; Coproduction; Social Embeddedness, Networked Governance; Mexican Consulate, Tucson, Arizona, Migration governance, Transnational Public Administration, U.S.-Mexico border.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Context

Migration is one of the most pressing global phenomena today. Rooted in historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism, contemporary migration flows are increasingly complex and dynamic (Delgado Wise, 2006). Among the various global migration corridors, the relationship between Mexico and the United States stands out as both volatile and deeply entrenched. The allure of the "American Dream" and the unique geopolitical and economic relationship between the two nations has fostered a deeply interwoven dynamic, marked by both cooperation and contention. Migration patterns between Mexico and the U.S. reflect a long-standing system of economic dependency and labour exploitation shaped by neoliberal trade agreements and unequal development, it is important to note that both undocumented and documented migrants will be addressed both as migrants. (Rodriguez 2023; Delgado Wise, Caballero Anguiano, & Gaspar Olvera, 2023). These flows are further embedded in broader structures of imperial power, which continue to shape border enforcement and migration policy in both countries (Madrigal, 2019). Additionally, historical, and social mechanisms, including entrenched migration networks and transnational ties have reinforced the persistence and complexity of this corridor (Garip & Aasad, 2019).

The Mexico-United States border spans approximately 1,954 miles (3,145 kilometres), making it Mexico's longest international boundary and the United States' second longest after the Canada-U.S. border (U.S. Customs and Border Protection [CBP], n.d.). This expansive border intersects four U.S. states (California, Arizona, New Mexico. and Texas) and six Mexican States (Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas) crossing terrains as diverse as urban centres, arid deserts, and the Rio Grande River system (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2023).

Migration across the U.S.-Mexico border has been central to bilateral relations. While historically dominated by Mexican nationals seeking economic opportunity, recent decades have seen an increase in migrants from Central America's triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) feeling violence, poverty, corruption, and instability (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). The U.S.-Mexico border is the most frequently crossed international boundary in the world, with approximately 350 million documented crossings per year, including daily commuters, tourists, and commercial traffic (CBP, 2025a). Although unauthorized crossings peaked in the early 2000s, they surged again during the COVID-19

pandemic under Title 42, and saw notable spikes in 2021 and 2022, particularly among families and unaccompanied minors (Pew Research Center, 2021; Chishti, Bush-Joseph & Montalvo, 2024). These numbers have since declined sharply; in June 2025, authorities recorded only around 6,100 illegal crossing attempts, representing a drop of approximately 93% compared to June 2024 (USAFacts, 2025). Simultaneously, U.S. border enforcement has intensified through the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies, fortified infrastructure, and increased personnel (CBP, 2025b). Despite these measures. Lawful cross-border movement remains robust, reflecting the economic and social interdependence of border communities.

In this intricate border landscape, migrant protection has emerged as a crucial concern for both countries. The migration of Mexican nationals to the U.S. is among the most significant transnational movements in recent history. Over time, the U.S.-Mexico border has transformed into a contested space, where humanitarian needs, immigration enforcement, and bilateral diplomacy intersect. Since legislative reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, and more dramatically after the 9/11 attacks, U.S. immigration policy has adopted a deterrence focused approach emphasising surveillance, militarization, and criminalization (Longo, 2017). These policy shifts have disproportionately affected Mexican migrants who remain the largest immigrant group in the U.S. (Hiemstra, 2019). Policies like the "zero tolerance" initiative, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP, or "Remain in Mexico"), as well as expedited removal processes have intensified the vulnerabilities of undocumented migrants (American Immigration Council, 2025). *A detailed summary of each policy Appendix (See Table 1*). These frameworks have fostered systemic exclusion and cycles of dependency and fear, restricting migrants access to health care, legal aid, and social services (Martinez-Schuldt, 2020). As Hiemstra (2019) argues, these measures have not stopped or reduced migration, but rather entrenched migrants in "permanent precarity" undermining their rights and dignity.

In response, the Mexican government has developed robust strategies to protect its nationals abroad, most notably through an expansive consular network across more than 50 U.S. cities (Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores [SRE], 2023). These consulates go beyond traditional diplomacy, practicing a form of consular diplomacy that merges foreign policy, diaspora engagement, and migrant protection (Cicero Fernandez, 2019; Okano-Heijmans, 2010). Through documentation services, legal aid, victim assistance, and civil registry functions, consulates play a critical role in defending migrant rights and well-being (Gonzales Gutierrez, 2019; SRE, 2023).

The Mexican Consulate in Tucson, Arizona provides a unique case study for this thesis. Located along one of the deadliest corridors of the U.S.-Mexico border, the Sonoran Desert, it operates in a region defined by harsh geography, high migrant mortality, and intense enforcement (Binational Migration Institute, 2020). The consulate engages in initiatives like the Mexican Interior Repatriation Program (MIRP), coordinates with ICE to ensure humane deportation procedures (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2013), and provides legal guidance and emergency aid to detained migrants. It also partners with community groups, health centres, local businesses, and universities to deliver outreach services, education, and health care to both documented and undocumented migrants as well as detained individuals (Consulate of Mexico in Tucson, n.d.).

The consulate's strategic use of both participation in local events as well as digital platforms, including social media, allows them to communicate key information about migrant's rights, warn about enforcement operations and connect migrants with support, this has become especially critical amid the punitive immigration climate of the recent U.S. administrations, particularly those under Donald Trump (American Immigration Council, 2025; Consulate of Mexico in Tucson, n.d.).

Research Problem

Despite growing attention to immigration enforcement and migrant experiences, there is a significant research gap concerning how migrant protection is enacted at the consular level, and particularly in collaboration with local communities, and the importance of their relationship. While consulates are often framed as static bureaucratic entities this perspective fails to capture the complex, adaptative practices employed by consular officials operating in politically volatile and institutionally constrained environments (Martinez-Schuldt 2020; Cicero Fernandez, 2019).

Protection, in this context, is not limited to bureaucratic functions such as issuing IDs or notarizing documents, it is a dynamic process shaped by formal procedures, informal strategies, and community partnerships, all of which form a collective effort. Frontline consular officials act as street-level bureaucrats, using discretion and empathy to mediate migrant's access to service and advocating for their rights (Lipsky, 2010; SRE, 2023).

In parallel, migrant communities and civil society actors are vital co producers of protection. They collaborate with consulates to spread essential information, organise events,

and create support networks that enhance migrant integration and resilience (Gleeson & Bada, 2019; Martinez-Schuldt 2020).

The Mexican Consulate in Tucson provides an ideal site to explore these dynamics, yet its day to day practices and community partnerships remain under explored, particularly in the context of recent Trump era immigration policies, which fundamentally altered enforcement patterns and consular strategies (American Immigration Council, 2025; Consulate of Mexico in Tucson, n.d.).

Research Question

This study addresses the following question:

How is the protection of Mexican migrants (through legal, diplomatic, and humanitarian strategies) enacted, contested, and adapted by consular officials and migrant communities within the institutionalized U.S. border enforcement regime, particularly during the Trump administration?

By focusing on the lived experiences of consular staff and migrant community actors, the study investigates how protection unfolds at the intersection of state authority and community agency.

Theoretical Relevance

This research contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on public administration, migration governance, and diaspora engagement by conceptualizing Mexican consular officials as street-level bureaucrats. While **street-level bureaucracy frameworks** have traditionally been applied to domestic welfare and administrative contexts, this study extends it to the transnational domain. It highlights how consular staff interpret policy and exercise discretion in conditions of legal complexities, limited resources, and emotional labour (Lipsky, 2010; Thomann, James & Deruelle, 2024). Although migration and the work of consular officials are embedded in complex legal environments; this study does not focus on the legal or normative dimensions of consular protection. Instead, it adopts a public administration perspective to examine the discretionary, relational, and managerial practices through which protection is enacted. Consular representatives must navigate overlapping mandates and cultural expectations across at least four jurisdictions: international law, the national directives of the Mexican state (shaped by political leadership), the polarized partisan context of U.S. politics,

and the subnational frameworks of local governments where consular offices operate (Bada & Gleeson, 2023). Their discretionary decisions are not merely administrative, they are also moral and relational acts that shape migrants access to protection, state legitimacy and the everyday experience of rights.

The study further draws on **social embeddedness theory**, to recognize how consular protection is not delivered in isolation but is deeply rooted in interpersonal networks, shared community norms and relational trust (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021). These informal structures are essential in extending consular reach, especially in environments where formal institutions may be distrusted or inaccessible, or in the case of Mexico, where the government is not always trusted or seen as effective (Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024). Migrants' decisions and outcomes are shaped by these embedded social systems, which serve as infrastructure for accessing services, spreading information, and mobilizing support.

Through the lens of **networked governance** (O'Toole, 1997), the research situates the consulate within a broader ecosystem of actors including shelters, legal aid organizations, advocacy groups, and local authorities. These networks are critical for delivering services and navigating the symmetries of transborder power. The research also applies **coproduction** theory (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia 2017) to examine how migrants are not passive recipients of state aid but active co-creators of protection. Migrant participation, through peer education, mutual aid, and collaboration with consular outreach, reconfigures the boundaries of public service delivery and transforms protection into a shared, adaptive process.

Additionally, the study engages **New Public Management (NPM)** (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020) perspectives, not as a dominant logic but as a partial influence on how the Mexican consular system has adopted reforms such as digitalization, decentralization, and specialization, aiming to deliver better quality services. By considering the border as a unique space, and observing these elements embedded in a relational ethic, could help enhance responsiveness and trust (SRE, 2023; Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024).

Finally, this research incorporates **consular diplomacy,** understanding consular work as a strategic, relational extension of foreign policy. Additionally, by analysing how interactions with consular officials can shape migrants' perception of belonging trust and recognition. These everyday interactions function as symbolic and emotional interfaces between the migrant and the state, reinforcing or eroding the legitimacy of protection. In doing so, this thesis contributes to a growing body of work that reimagines public delivery service as a site of discretionary ethics, networked coordination and relational governance within

transnational spaces and complex situations (Okano-Heijmans, 2010; Laglagaron, 2010; Moynihan & Soss, 2014; Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024).

Methodological approach

This research employs a qualitative single-case study of the Mexican Consulate in Tucson Arizona. The study is based on semi structured interviews with consular officials and staff, past employees of the consulate, as well as leaders and participants from local organizations involved in migrant protection, healthcare, education, and community engagement, including Mexican migrants. This methodological approach allows for an exploration of the preventive, adaptive, and relational dimensions of consular protection, illustrating how consular officials coordinate services and exercise discretion in contexts marked by legal complexity, political risk, and resource scarcity.

The data collected is grounded in real life, on the ground practices and serves both to address gaps identified in the literature and to advance theoretical and practical understandings of migrant protection. The research design is informed by narrative analysis and guided by the theoretical frameworks of street-level bureaucracy, social embeddedness and co productions. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and risk mitigation, are central to the study and have been carefully integrated throughout the research process.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into 6 chapters. Chapter One introduces the research problem, outlines the study's objectives and establishes its relevance. Chapter Two reviews the existing literature and presents the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. Chapter Three details the research methodology including data collection and analytical strategies. Chapter Four presents the findings derived from the fieldwork. Chapter Five connects the findings to the theoretical framework, highlights key themes and study's contributions, acknowledges its limitations, and proposes directions for future research. Chapter Six concludes the thesis. The appendix includes the interview guides, anonymised list of interview participants, tables used, figures and the confidentiality letter provided to participants.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Critical evaluation of the literature

The study of migration governance has experienced a critical shift in the recent decades, as scholars have increasingly interrogated the securitization of borders, the expansion of enforcement regimes, and the racialized discrimination of migrants. Following 9/11, U.S. immigration enforcement started adopting punitive policies that reflect and reinforce border systems of control (Longo, 2017). Scholars such as Hiemstra (2019) and Martinez-Schuldt (2020) detail how agencies including ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and CBP (Customs and Border Protection) operate through racialized logics that produce migrant precarity and institutionalize exclusion. Hiemstra's analysis places detention and deportation within broader profit-driven and disciplinary regimes, framing them as not anomalies but as part of a normalized infrastructure of control. These policies are legitimized through narratives that mix legal status with criminality, despite empirical evidence showing lower crime rates among undocumented migrants (Cicero Fernandez, 2019; Martinez, Martinez-Schuldt & Cantor, 2018). The resulting enforcement landscape is more than a legal apparatus, it is a discursive and institutional field shaped by fear, race, and nationalism, turning the border into a site of overlapping authority, social tensions, and complexities.

Proposition: migrants as Co-Producers of consular protection

This thesis puts forward a central proposition: that Mexican migrants in the United States are not simply beneficiaries of consular protection, but co-producers of it. Their participation, knowledge, and networks are foundational to the success, legitimacy, and responsiveness of Mexican consulates, especially in the complex setting of the U.S.-Mexico border. This view challenges dominant paradigms that conceptualize protection as a unidirectional service delivered by the state to passive recipients. Instead, the proposition argues that consular apparatus depends upon migrant initiative, collaboration, and community infrastructure to carry out its functions effectively.

Migrants contribute in multiple, often informal ways, which have yet to be included in more academic literature. Their embedded presence and participation in community organizations, workshops, legal support groups, and advocacy coalitions strengthen the ability of consular officials to reach vulnerable populations, build trust, and respond rapidly to emergent crises. Migrants also help consular staff navigate social dynamics that lie outside

formal state frameworks, extending the reach of consular protection into spaces where institutional access may be limited.

By highlighting migrant agency, and considering the voices of both consular officials, former consulate employees, as well as migrants themselves and community leaders, this thesis argues that the Mexican consular network in the U.S. owes its effectiveness not only to the institutional design of foreign policy, but to the relational and coproduces nature of its work. Consequently, theoretical frameworks seeking to understand consular governance must include migrant voices as part of the policy making and service delivery process, Public administration, migration studies, and diplomacy scholarship all benefit from more fully recognizing how protection is constructed from below, through networks of trust, solidarity, and shared responsibility between state and non-state actors. This proposition guides the theoretical and analytical choices in the rest of the chapter. It also orients the investigation that follows, which focuses not only on what the consulate does for migrants but on what consular protection becomes through its entanglement with migrant communities.

Context is crucial to understanding the environment in which consular protection takes place. While this study does not focus on enforcement institutions per se, it positions them as key structural forces in which consular officials navigate. The marginalization of migrants by the U.S. creates space of protection that consulates attempt to fill, not only through service delivery, but also through strategic, often discretionary interventions (Martinez-Schuldt, Hagan, &Weissman, 2021). Public administration can provide an understanding of how consular protection operates at the intersection of state power, migrant vulnerability, and institutional adaptation.

Street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010) provides a foundational lens. It conceptualizes frontline workers as policymakers who exercise discretion in conditions of ambiguity, scarcity, and political constraint. In Tucson, consular officials embody this role since they respond to complex legal and humanitarian situations with considerable autonomy. As Thomann, James, & Deruelle (2024) and Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta (2024) argue, discretion is not neutral, it can entrench inequality or serve as a tool for justice, depending on n how it is exercised. In the consular context, discretionary decisions are often deeply ethical, shaped by community expectations, personal commitments, and institutional missions.

However, discretion alone does not explain the full extent of consular protection. Officials operate within interdependent networks that transcend organizational boundaries. O'Toole's (1997) theory of networked governance is critical here, showing how public service increasingly relies on collaboration across sectors to address complex challenges. Migrant protection in Tucson is one important challenge. Consular officials coordinate with legal aid groups, community shelters, faith-based organizations, and even U.S. authorities to navigate emergencies and fill protection gaps. These relationships are often informal and trust-based, functioning more through relational capital than formal authority. The networked model thus reframes the consulate as not just a service provider, but a focal actor embedded in a web of local institutions and community structures.

This intersection of discretion and networks invites an additional lens: coproduction. As Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia (2017) argue, public services are not produced by professionals alone, they emerge through collaborative processes involving service users and civil society. In the consular space, this is particularly evident. Migrants co-design and co-deliver protection initiatives, they share legal knowledge, participate in workshops, build community and networks to advocate for their own rights. These practices illustrate how protection is not delivered "to" migrants but constructed "with" them. Co production theory helps to explain how trust, participation, and shared responsibility become central to consular effectiveness, especially in the border or in contexts where formal power is shared or limited and there are various external factors.

The final theoretical thread is social embeddedness, which ties together these dynamics. Developed by Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993), embeddedness theory examines how social behaviour is shaped by interpersonal ties, trust, and community norms. Recent extensions by Sha (2021) sees migration as a socially embedded process, and frames migrant networks as infrastructures of resilience. Embeddedness is not simply a social backdrop; it is a structural condition of effective consular practice and migrant protection. This protection is enacted not just through state mechanisms, but also through trust, reciprocity, and solidarity within migrant communities.

Additionally, this thesis draws on the work of Okano-Heijmans (2010), who conceptualises the transformation of traditional consular assistance into what she terms "consular diplomacy". Historically, consular services were viewed as low profile,

administrative tasks such as document issuance or assistance during emergencies. However, in response to rising globalization, security concerns, and public scrutiny, consular activities have evolved into strategic instruments of foreign policy. According to Okano-Heijmans (2010), consular diplomacy reflects the increasingly politicised and visible role of consular officials as frontline diplomats, actors who must protect nationals abroad while also representing state legitimacy in high stakes international and domestic fields. This shift blurs the lines between high politics (treaties, alliances) and low politics (service deliveries), suggesting that consular actors now operate at the intersection of public diplomacy, crisis management, and state-citizen relations (Okano-Heijmans, 2010). In Tucson, this from of diplomacy is deeply relational and situated, reinforcing the need to understand consular protection as both a diplomatic strategy and a local governance practice.

These theories (street-level bureaucracy, networked governance, coproduction, social embeddedness, and consular diplomacy) are not isolated; they interact and mutually reinforce each other. Discretion is shaped by the networks in which officials are embedded. Networks are built and sustained through coproduction and social trust. Embeddedness amplifies discretion by giving officials relational legitimacy, while coproduction transforms that legitimacy into collaborative action. Consular diplomacy also adds a crucial geopolitical layer, showing how the practices at a "lower" level reflect larger shifts in the strategic role of consulates within foreign policy and transnational governance (Sha, 2021).

Together, these frameworks allow for a multidimensional understanding of consular protection, seen as a hybrid negotiated practice enacted across borders, institutions, and social fields. Importantly, these theories also expose gaps in the literature, Street level bureaucracy has rarely been extended to transnational actors like consular officials. Networked governance theory often ignores power asymmetries. Coproduction remains under theorized in migration studies. Embeddedness is usually explored in migrant communities rather than formal state institutions. And consular diplomacy is rarely linked to frontline discretionary practice. By integrating these frameworks together, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how migrant protection is enacted through relational strategies, institutional innovation, and collaborative governance.

Identification of Gaps

Despite important advances in the literature on migrant protection, several theoretical and empirical gaps remain what this study seeks to address. While recent scholarship has traced the institutional evolution of consular protection and its strategic expansion in response to harsh enforcement regimes, deeper engagement with public administration theory remains limited. Frameworks such as street-level bureaucracy, networked governance, coproduction, and social embeddedness have yet to be fully integrated into the study of transnational protection practices. By situating the Mexican Consulate in Tucson within this layered theoretical approach, this thesis offers new insights into how consular actors navigate complex, cross border governance environments.

First, the application of **street level bureaucracy theory** remains confined to domestic settings. This means that the main theory (Lipsky, 2010) assumes street level bureaucrats preform in stable policy environments. However, consular officials operate within a transnational enforcement regime, which could be characterized by legal ambiguity, political volatility, and humanitarian urgency. In this context, discretion is not only response to resource scarcity, but a crucial mechanism for navigating overlapping and often conflicting policy expectations across both U.S. and Mexican jurisdictions. Traditional models of citizen-state interaction assume that individuals engage with public institutions with their rights intact and a baseline of trust, as reflected in much of the existing literature.

However, when applied to the case of migrants, who often face legal precarity, fear and institutional mistrust, these assumptions are not always true. The urgency and difficulty accessing services in such conditions fundamentally reshape how street-level interactions unfold. This, in turn, affects how bureaucrats exercise discretion, make decisions, and adapt their roles in response to migrant vulnerability. While recent work (Thomann, James, & Deruelle, 2024; Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024) expands the moral and strategic dimensions of discretion, little attention has been given to how street level actors function in the blurred space between diplomacy and service delivery. The Mexican consular system, particularly in border regions like Tucson, remains an underexplored site for understanding how discretion operates under conditions of binational accountability, shifting enforcement priorities and emotional labour.

Second, although **networked governance** is often cited as a solution to administrative complexity, much of the literature assumes functional equivalency and symmetrical relationships among actors. Governance networks, especially regarding migrant protection, are

deeply shaped by power asymmetries, fragmented mandates, and uneven resources (O'Toole, 1997). In Tucson, consular officials must navigate overlapping relationships with U.S. immigration authorities, local police and law enforcement, service providers and migrant communities, all with divergent goals, accountability structures, and legitimacy. These networks are not only formal but deeply relational, relying on trust, interpersonal ties, and historical collaboration. Yet, most governance literature fails to account for how informal authority and institutional agility function in contexts of asymmetry and mistrust. This thesis contributes to rethinking networked governance by focusing on how consular officials negotiate, sustain, and mediate within these uneven terrains.

Third, the concept of **coproduction** has been widely theorized in public administration, but it is not utilized as much in migration governance. Migrants are often portrayed as passive recipients of protection, rather than as active contributors in shaping the services they receive. This perspective neglects the agency migrants exercise through peer support, informal advocacy, and legal self-education. In practice, consular officials rely on migrant knowledge and participation to reach vulnerable individuals, disseminate information and design adequate and effective interventions. Drawing on Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia's (2017) typology, co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment, this thesis applies coproduction to the consular setting, emphasizing the collaborative and dynamic nature of protection work, especially under restrictive legal conditions. Migrants, consular staff, and community actors coproduce responses not by following fixed mandates, but by negotiating access, trust, and shared goals in real time.

Fourth, although **social embeddedness** has been extensively applied to migrant decision making, identity formation, and economic integration, its role in state-migrant interactions remains under-theorized. Much of the literature focuses on how migrants embed themselves in host societies, but few studies examine how actors, particularly consular officials, rely on these networks to deliver services, access populations that may be hard to reach, and build legitimacy. Portes and Sensenbrenner's (1993) mechanisms of embeddedness (bounded solidarity, reciprocity, and enforceable trust) offer a useful framework for analysing how consular protection is sustained not only through institutional design but through relational infrastructures within migrant communities. In Tucson, embeddedness enables the consulate to amplify its limited formal power by leveraging long standing partnerships, established relationships and informal alliances. Yet embeddedness also presents limitations: strong internal ties can reinforce dependency, limit external mobility, or reproduce exclusionary

norms or negative traits become harder to change overtime. This study argues that embeddedness is not only a condition of migrant resilience, but a central mechanism through which protection is enacted, constrained, and legitimized.

Finally, most literature overlooks how these frameworks interact empirically, Discretion is shaped by the networks in which consular officials operate. Those networks are sustained through embedded relationships, which in turn enable coproduced responses to systemic gaps. Few studies have examined how these theoretical dimensions overlap in a single institutional setting. The Mexican consulate in Tucson, operating at an intersection of diplomacy, humanities, and local governance, offers a unique point of view for bridging these literatures. Its consular staff must interpret shifting policy signals, negotiate binational partnerships, respond to migrant needs, and maintain institutional credibility, all while operating within an enforcement heavy environment (Lapuente, & Van de Valle, 2020; Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024). By studying this site, the thesis brings theoretical and empirical clarity to how migrant protection is not just delivered but constructed through layered, adaptive, and socially embedded practices.

Conceptualization of the Terms Used

To guide this study's analysis of consular protection in Tucson, several interrelated concepts are operationalized not simply as definitions, but as analytical tools that capture the relational, discretionary, and transnational character of migrant protection. These terms reflect the theoretical work through which the consulates' role is understood as bureaucratic, diplomatic, embedded, and co-produced.

The concept of **street-level bureaucracy** (Lipsky 2010) anchors this framework by highlighting the centrality of frontline public servants in policy implementation. In the consular setting, protection officers, legal advisors, and administrative staff are not passive channels of state policy but are active interpreters and negotiators of institutional mandates. They hold responsibility, respond daily to migrants in distress (for example those facing detention, violence, family separation or legal uncertainty) often under tight resource constraints and legal ambiguity. As recent scholarship (Thomann, James, & Deruelle, 2024; Nieto-Morales, Peeters,

& Lotta, 2024) argues, **discretion** is not merely a functional necessity but an inherently moral and political tool. In the case of consulate officials, discretion is exercised within a complex web of binational pressures, public expectations, and institutional priorities, making their role both ethically charged and strategically adaptive.

Networked governance (O'Toole, 1997) expands this view by conceptualizing consular protection not as a unidirectional state service, but as the outcome of multi-actor collaboration. The Tucson consulate operates within a dense landscape of local and transnational partnerships, with legal aid groups, shelters, schools, hospitals, law enforcement and other consulates. Rather than centralizing authority, these networks distribute responsibilities across actors with unequal power and resources. For this, they need trust, coordination, and shared purpose. Networked governance is not a backdrop, it works as a structure that shapes the delivery, legitimacy, and limits of consular action. To account for the active roles of migrants in these relationships, the framework turns to **coproduction**, defined by Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia's (2017) as the collaborative creation of public services by state and non-state actors. The diverse ways in which migrants can co-create protection is not only by accessing services, but by sharing knowledge, attending workshops, legal advocacy, and providing peer support. Co production occurs at multiple levels, individual (example: direct casework), group (migrant led outreach), and collective (campaigns involving consulates and communities). Especially under enforcement heavy regimes, coproduction allows protection to extend beyond the formal capacities of the state, relying on trust and lived experiences to build alternative pathways to safety.

These practices are grounded in **social embeddedness**, which explains how institutions and individuals are shaped by networks of trust, obligation, and shared identity. Portes and Sensenbrenner's (1993) challenge rational-choice economic models by arguing that immigrant behaviour, particularly in the economic sphere, is embedded within social relationships, community norms and cultural values. Building on Sha (2021), this study views migrant networks as forms of social capital key infrastructures that both enable and shape migration. These networks not only provide practical support, but also establish normative frameworks that guide behaviour, expectations, and mutual obligations. This research conceptualizes migrant networks as infrastructures of resilience, informal systems that facilitate access to services, circulate critical information, and help legitimize state actors. As Sha (2021) emphasizes, these networks are multilayered, compromising not only personal ties but also connections to community organizations, diaspora associations, and informal institutions. Such

embeddedness fosters belonging and identity across borders and influences migration outcomes, including employment opportunities, integration trajectories and long-term settlement. For consular officials, embeddedness enables rapid sensitive and credible action. Yet it also introduces concerns about dependency on informal ties, potential exclusion of those outside the network, and the limits of relational governance.

Consular diplomacy, as theorized by Okano-Heijmans (2010), reframes consular work as a strategic, relational extension of foreign policy. In Tucson, this means balancing traditional diplomatic functions with urgent humanitarian response. The consulate must simultaneously advocate with U.S. institutions, engage migrant communities, and manage its reputation, all while operating in a complex landscape. This form of diplomacy blurs the line between high level negotiations and everyday services like ID issuance or legal intermediation. The ability to perform this role depends not only on political skill, but also on relational credibility within the community and among institutional partners (Gleeson & Bada, 2019).

This evolving role of the consular officials and the consulate itself resonates with key insights from **New Public Management (NPM)**. Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020) highlight how reforms aimed at improving responsiveness and efficiency have also fragmented public services and heightened the role of discretion at the front lines. In the Mexican context, public distrust has often accompanied perceptions of inefficiency or corruption (Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024). Despite corruption and mistrust in Mexican government and institutes, the Mexican consulate in Tucson has emerged as a trusted and responsive actor, in part by integrating NPM ideals such as flexibility, service orientation, and citizen engagement, with a broader, community-based strategy. The concept of disaggregation in public service delivery further illuminates how large state structures are broken down into semi-autonomous units, such as consulates, that must operate with considerable independence. This structure gives consular officials space for innovation, adaptation, and responsiveness, but it also creates vulnerabilities to unequal treatment, administrative burdens, and potential misuse of authority. Discretion under disaggregation becomes both a resource and a risk (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020).

Taken together, these concepts (street-level bureaucracy, discretion, networked governance, coproduction, social embeddedness, consular diplomacy, disaggregation, and New public management) form a multidimensional analytical framework. They allow this study to theorize consular protection not a static service, but as a relational and negotiated practice, carried across institutional boundaries and in partnership with the very communities it seeks to protect. This framework provides the conceptual grounding for analysing how protection is enacted, imperfectly, adaptively, and often informally, within one of the most politically charged spaces of state-migrant encounter: the U.S. Mexico borderlands.

Importantly, as Laglagaron (2010) highlights, Mexico has institutionalized this broadened notion of **protection** through the institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME), which expands consular functions into health care, education, and financial literacy, areas traditionally managed by the receiving state. This shift not only redefines the consular role as one of binational integration but also deepens the embedded and networked nature of protection, particularly in a U.S. context marked by exclusion and enforcement.

Formulation of Thematic Narratives

This study seeks to answer the following research question:

How is the protection of Mexican migrants (through legal, diplomatic, and humanitarian strategies) enacted, contested, and adapted by consular officials and migrant communities within the institutionalized U.S. border enforcement regime, particularly during the Trump administration?

By focusing on the lived experiences of consular staff and migrant community actors, this thesis approaches consular protection as a relational and adaptive practice situated within a binational field of governance. Traditional models that isolate policy from implementation or state from society are insufficient to capture this complexity. Instead, this study builds on a multi theoretical framework to explore how consular protection emerges through discretionary decisions, trust building, inter organizational collaboration and migrant agency.

The analysis proceeds through two thematic narratives that structure expectations:

1. Community resilience and trust
2. The border as a third country

Each theme is examined through four analytical dimensions: Actors involved, critical points of action, Cases and examples, and Challenges.

Theme 1: Community resilience and trust

Consular protection is expected to rely fundamentally on the resilience of migrant communities and the trust cultivated between consular staff and those communities. Migrants are not viewed as passive recipients of aid, but as active contributors to protection strategies, doing so by leveraging peer support, sharing knowledge and social practices to expand institutional capacity.

Actors involved

Consular officials and consulate employees, community organizers, legal advocates, and social workers are anticipated to collaborate closely, forming an ecosystem of protection. Migrants, especially long-term residents and community leaders, are expected to serve as cultural brokers, informal counsellors, and intermediaries, helping the consulate establish legitimacy and navigate sensitive and complex cases. For this study, both undocumented and documented individuals are referred to migrants, unless otherwise specified.

Following Delano Alonso and Mylonas (2019), this study disaggregates both the state and the diaspora by recognizing that neither consular institutions nor migrant communities are uniform entities. Within the consulate actors differ in rank, training, and discretion. On the other hand, migrants vary by legal status, generation, socioeconomic backgrounds, and degree of community embeddedness. Acknowledging this heterogeneity enables a more nuanced understanding of how protection is enacted through overlapping and adaptive roles within consular migrant networks.

Critical points of action

Protection is likely to materialize through actions that blend institutional intervention with symbolic and affective labour, such as supporting families during deportations, attending vigils, issuing documents under pressure, coordinating with other authorities, as well as organizing and participating in outreach events. Street-level bureaucrats at the consulate are expected to exercise discretion beyond formal protocols, often guided by empathy, urgency, and relational trust (Moyinhan & Soss, 2014). Many Mexican migrants retain home-country citizenship and maintain transnational ties, enabling them to seek support from consular institutions when navigating crises in the U.S. In this context, consular protection functions as

transnational form of public service, combining bureaucratic support with culturally grounded relational care (Martinez-Schuldt, Hagan, & Weissman, 2021).

Facing different critical points of action in each case, Mexican consulates often aid beyond documentation, helping migrants understand their rights, offering language aid, legal referrals, and coordinating responses with local organizations. In later stages, consular staff may also act as intermediaries between migrants, legal advocates, and government agencies. These interventions, both administrative and symbolic, underscore the evolving role of the consulate as a site of adaptive, responsive, and networked protection for migrants in critical situations (Martinez-Schuldt, 2020; Cicero Fernandez, 2019).

Cases and examples

Anticipated examples include consular responses to diverse types of migrant needs, ranging from deaths, detention crises or joint community events addressing legal rights. These encounters are expected to reveal how protection unfolds not only through legal mechanisms, but also through emotional solidarity and informal problem-solving.

Challenges

Building and maintaining trust is expected to be difficult and uneven. Undocumented migrants may hesitate to engage with any state-linked institutions, while local organizations may face burnout or resource constraints. Trust is expected to be constantly negotiated, particularly under conditions of heighted enforcement or political hostility, such as present administration in the U.S. under Trump. Other general challenges expected may include limited economic resources, limited human capital and time to deal with volatile situations.

Theme 2: The border as a third country

The study conceptualizes the U.S. Mexico border as a hybrid and institutionalized "third space," where jurisdictional ambiguity, overlapping policies and cross-border social dynamics reshape the boundaries of protection. Within this space, consular officials must reconcile diplomatic roles with frontline service delivery, while migrants navigate layered identities and legal grey zones. Borders are not just legal limits; they have material embodiment paired with long history and important context. They are not only sites of authority, but also control (Longo, 2017).

Actors involved

Actors involved in migrant protection span national, institutional and community boundaries. These include U.S. and Mexican government agencies, binational families, Central American consulates, mixed-status communities, international migrant organizations, and human rights NGOs. The Mexican consulate is expected to function as a diplomatic and humanitarian interface, mediating between enforcement systems, service networks, and the communities it serves.

While federal agencies like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs Border Protection (CBP) have traditionally led immigration enforcement, amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1996 and post 9/11 policies have increasingly shifted enforcement responsibilities to state and local officials. Different programs have enabled cooperation between ICE and local law enforcement, significantly expanding the government's capacity to place individuals in removal process. These developments have drawn criticism from scholars and civil society for raising serious concerns about civil rights violations, public safety, and humanitarian impact (Martinez, Martinez-Schuldt, & Cantor, 2018).

Critical points of action

Critical points of action in consular protection often hinge on cross border interventions such as detention centre visits, diplomatic mediation with U.S. immigration agencies, or advocacy in family custody disputes. These actions require consular officials to navigate conflicting institutional mandates and exercise discretion across overlapping legal jurisdictions (Gleeson & Bada, 2019). At the U.S.-Mexico border, such discretionary efforts unfold within an environment where administrative practices frequently sideline the legal claims of vulnerable migrants, in favour of expedited detention and deportation, often without due process. This compels consular staff to respond through urgent, sometimes extra-legal support. As Elias and Stivers (2024) suggest, activist interventions at the border can be understood as forms of "counter-conduct" and "counter-knowledge" democratic acts of resistance that challenge dominant enforcement logics. These grassroots efforts, often supported or mirrored by consular action, highlight the potential for rights-based governance to emerge from the margins and reshape official practice.

Cases and examples

Expected examples include assisting migrants detained near the border, advocating in deportation cases, or providing documentation under time-sensitive circumstances. Regrading documentation, work closely with other Mexican institutions and agencies responsible for

documentation in different states or in case of non-existent documentation, aiding migrants through administrative processes. These examples of embeddedness are expected to demonstrate how consular officials act as brokers of rights, which in turn promotes the migrants' sense of belonging and identity across borders, consular officials interpret complex binational policies and translate them into protective outcomes (Sha, 2021).

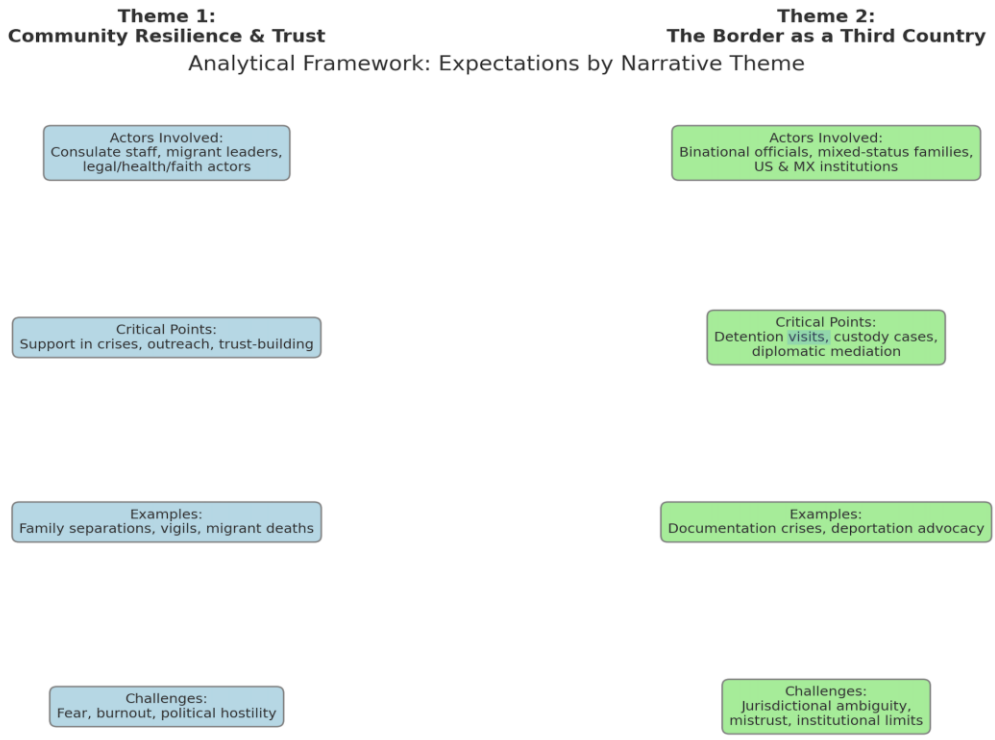
Challenges

This third space (the border) is characterized by institutional incoherence and contested authority. Consular staff may encounter inconsistent cooperation from the U.S. counterparts, limited recognition from Mexican agencies, and mistrust from migrants themselves. The precariousness of the consulates position, both as a state institution and a community ally, is expected to be a recurring theme, especially when discretionary decisions expose stand to political scrutiny or legal constraint. In general terms, binational coordination is expected to be the main challenge in migrant protection in Tucson, Arizona.

Together, these thematic expectations position consular protection as a hybrid practice that blends diplomacy, service delivery, emotional labour, and community co-production. Migrant agency, institutional trust, and relational discretion are not peripheral but central to how protection is enacted, especially in the enforcement heavy and legally fragmented space of the U.S. Mexico border. This study anticipates that the Mexican consulate in Tucson operates not through rigid bureaucracy, but through flexible, context sensitive engagement, deeply embedded in the communities it serves and the networks it navigates.

Figure 1. Analytical framework: Formulation of Thematic Narratives

1. This figure outlines the two central themes guiding the analysis (*Community resilience and trust*, *The border as a third country*), each structured around four analytical dimensions: Actors involved, critical points of action, *Cases and examples, and Challenges*. These themes reflect the study's theoretical grounding in street-level bureaucracy, networked governance, coproduction, and social embeddedness. Together, they frame the expectations regarding how consular protection is enacted, adapted, and contested in the context of the Mexican consulate in Tucson, particularly under conditions of legal ambiguity, institutional asymmetry, and political constraint during the Trump administration.



Chapter 3: Methodological Approach

Research setting and context

This study is situated in the Sonora-Arizona borderlands, a complex geopolitical and humanitarian corridor shaped by transnational migration, intensified enforcement, and binational governance. This region encompasses the Mexican state of Sonora and the U.S. state of Arizona, linked through formal ports of entry and informal migration routes. At the heart of this landscape lies the Sonoran Desert, arid and dangerous terrain spanning southern Arizona and northwestern Mexico (Consulate of Mexico in Tucson, n.d.). As a result of U.S. enforcement strategies such as “prevention through deterrence"” adopted in the 1990s, unauthorized migration was deliberately redirected into remote and dangerous areas, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner recorded the recovery of at least 3,356 remains in the

desert on southern Arizona between 1990 and 2020, without counting the number of bodies unable to be recognized or recovered (Binational Migration Institute [BMI], 2020).

Approximately 60 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border, the city of Tucson Arizona serves as a key hub in the nation's immigration enforcement infrastructure. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Tucson falls within one of the busiest Border Patrol Sectors in the country, covering approximately 262 miles of the Arizona Sonora border and staffed by around 3,700 agents operating from nine stations (CBP, n.d.) Beyond field operations, Tucson also functions as a regional centre for detention, removal proceedings, and deportation logistics, hosting multiple federal facilities and support services. Simultaneously, Tucson has emerged as a critical site of humanitarian response, migrant advocacy, and community resilience. The city hosts a dense network of civil society organizations, legal aid providers, and human right groups, which support migrants in transit, detention, or crisis. This dual role makes Tucson an emblematic setting for examining the tensions and possibilities inherent in border governance (Consulate of Mexico in Tucson, n.d.).

Operating within this high-risk corridor, the Mexican consulate in Tucson plays a pivotal role in migrant protection and diplomacy. In addition to issuing documents and offering routine services, the consulate is deeply involved in humanitarian coordination with U.S. authorities and civil society actors. It actively participates in the Mexican Interior Repatriation Program (MIRP), a bilateral initiative with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) designed to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of apprehended Mexican nationals. Under MIRP, consular officials meet with detained individuals to ensure humane treatment, inform them of their rights, and assist with repatriation (ICE, n.d.; Consulate of Mexico in Tucson, n.d.).

Beyond repatriation, the consulate provides critical support in cases involving abuse, family separation, medical emergencies, and deportation. It offers legal orientation, coordinate with local organizations and conducts centre visits. This multilayered engagement positions the consulate as more than a diplomatic institution, it is a front-line actor in the high stake's governance of mobility, protection, and enforcement (Hiemstra, 2019).

The Mexican consulate is Tucson is one of 49 consulates across the United States, the largest diplomatic network maintained by Mexico worldwide (Accesso Latino, n.d.). Its jurisdiction spans several counties, detention centres, and urban and rural communities across southern Arizona. Staffed by career diplomats from the *Servicio Exterior Mexicano* (SEM), the consulate includes departments for Protection, Legal Affairs, Documentation, Cultural and Press Affairs, and Community Affairs (Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores [SRE], n.d.; U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, 2009). These departments work collaboratively to respond to an array of migrant needs, with the Protection Department being most central to this study.

Protection officers at the consulate play a vital role in safeguarding the rights of Mexican nationals in detention or crisis. Their responsibilities range from conducting visits and advocating in legal proceedings to organizing legal orientation workshops and responding to migrant deaths or disappearances. Their work, emotionally draining and legally complicated, is carried out under conditions of urgency, limited resources, and moral pressure (Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores [SRE], 2024).

Institutionally embedded in the *Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores* (SRE) and diplomatically credentialed. Consular staff must also navigate the informal and relational terrain of humanitarian governance and consular diplomacy. They frequently collaborate with other actors such as shelters, legal organizations, churches, schools, and other consulates, including Central American consulates (Acceso Latino, n.d.) This hybrid positioning, as both a formal state agents and local humanitarian responders, renders the consulate as a key institutional actor in the borderlands.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design, focusing on the city of Tucson, especially on the Mexican consulate in Tucson. This methodological choice enables a holistic and context-sensitive investigation of an institution situated at the intersection of migration governance, humanitarian response, and diplomatic service. Case studies are particularly well suited for exploring complex social phenomena in real life setting, where boundaries between the phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2018). By narrowing the focus to a single city and consular site, the research captures both the internal variation of protection practices and

the external influences of U.S immigration policy, transnational advocacy networks, and migrant precarity.

The study draws on interpretive and inductive qualitative approaches, emphasising the meanings actors assign to their practices, as well as the discretionary and relational dimensions of governance. Rather than seeking generalizability, the research prioritizes thick description and theory development through empirical detail (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012; Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach supports the goal of understanding both formal structures (consular protocols and state mandates), and informal everyday practices aimed at continuous trust-building in the community and consular field. Discretion is not treated here as a quantifiable variable but as a socially embedded and context dependent phenomenon. The research traces how consular officials interpret policy, negotiate institutional constrains, and responds to migrants needs through interpersonal dynamics and community collaborations (Sha, 2021) In doing so, the case study contributes to a more grounded understanding of how migrant protection is enacted, adapted and contested in localized settings marked by legal complexity and humanitarian urgency.

Operationalization of concepts

This study is guided by the theoretical frameworks of **street-level bureaucracy** (Lipsky, 2010), **social embeddedness** (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021), **co-production** (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia., 2017), **networked governance** (O'Toole, 1997), and **consular diplomacy** within transnational governance contexts (Okano-Heijmans, 2010; Laglagaron, 2010; Nieto-Morales, Peeters, & Lotta, 2024). Additionally incorporating **New Public Management (NPM)** perspectives (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). These frameworks shape the operationalization of key concepts.

Street-level bureaucracy informs the analysis of consular officials as frontline actors exercising discretion in navigating competing mandates and constrained resources. In the coding process, instances of discretionary action were identified through language indicating flexibility, moral judgement, improvisation, or divergence from formal rules, for example "we made an exception," "we could not follow the protocol," or "I decided to act based on urgency." *To ensure transparency in the analytical process, a full codebook with definitions, theoretical links and sample indicators is included in appendix C.*

Social embeddedness highlights the relational networks between consular officials, migrants, and community organizations that co-produce protection, creating successful protection initiatives. This was operationalized by tracing references to trust, long-term relationships, informal collaboration, and emotional proximity, such as “we know them personally,” “we know them personally,” “we have worked with that shelter for years,” or “they always come to us when something happens.”

Coproduction theory is used to examine how protection is collaboratively enacted, rather than delivered unilaterally. Relevant codes included mentions of shared planning, migrant participation, peer support, or co created events, using expressions like “we organized it together,” “they helped us reach others” and “we asked migrants what they needed.”

Networked governance provides a lens to understand multi-actor coordination in a fragmented policy shape. It was identified through interview content referencing inter-institutional cooperation, coordination efforts, or shared responsibilities across actors, including terms such as “they called us,” “we coordinated with the police” or everyone had a role.” Consular diplomacy frames the consulate as a site of intersection between formal state sovereignty and informal humanitarian advocacy. This concept was operationalized by coding for language that reflected dual roles or political sensitivity, such as “we had to be careful,” “we were representing Mexico” or “we had to balance diplomatic and human concerns.”

Based on these concepts and frameworks, the data collection and analysis focus on identifying mechanisms of co-production, discretionary practices and relational governance that emerge in consular-migrant interactions.

Data collection

Data collection relied primarily on semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 15 participants, selected to ensure a diversity of perspectives within the consular protection ecosystem. The participants included five consular officials occupying various roles and different ranks, six leaders and staff members of local migrant serving community organizations (some of whom were former consular employees) one healthcare provider who is also part of the migrant community, and three community members who have engaged with consular services.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish to foster participant comfort and linguistic accuracy, lasting between 30 to 40 minutes each. Participants provided informed consent, with

confidentiality assured through anonymization and secure data storage. Recruitment utilized publicly available contacts, professional networks, and snowball sampling. Scheduling was facilitated through digital tools, primarily using Calendly. Participants were able to select a time that suited their availability, and upon doing so, they were provided with a consent form that they were required to accept before confirming their participation (A*ppendix C*). An interview guide rooted in the theoretical framework was followed. The interview questions explored experiences of discretionary decision-making, service demand, and inter-agency relations (with CBP, ICE amongst others) (A*ppendix B*) Supplementary data included policy documents from the Mexican and U.S. governments, as well as the key border enforcement policies (*Appendix A*) for contextualization.

Data analysis

Narrative analysis served as the primary data analysis method, allowing for a deep and interpretative examination of how consular officials and community actors construct meaning around their work, identities, and institutional roles. This method helps understand not only the content of what is said, but also how it is communicated, through tone, metaphors, sequencing, silences, and emotional aspects. It emphasises stories not only as reflections of experience, but as active constructions shaped by power relations, organizational culture, and normative expectations.

Narratives were analysed for their structure and affective content, as well as for the moral and ethical reasoning embedded within them. This involved tracing how interviewees articulated their positionality within the consular bureaucracy, how they justified their decision, expressed ethical tensions, and navigated conflicting demands between diplomatic mandates, legal constraints, and humanitarian imperatives. Particular attention was paid to recuring patterns of language that revealed underlying logics of action, such as appeals to institutional loyalty, moral duty, or bureaucratic limitation. This approach is also helped surface what was not immediately said, hesitations, emotional cues, or absences that hinted at institutional pressures, internal conflicts, or strategic silences. These discursive elements provided insight into how discretion operates not only as a technical decision-making process but as an emotionally charged practice shaped by the relational context of the encounter (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012; Eisenhardt, 1989).

Overall, narrative analysis aligned with the study's theoretical orientation by treating discretion as a socially embedded and affective practice. It enabled the unpacking of how

consular protection is experienced, narrated, and contested by those on the frontlines, offering a textured understanding of the negotiation of state authority, professional identity, and migrant rights within the consular setting.

Reflections on reliability and validity

To enhance reliability and validity, the study employed several strategies. Triangulation combining interview data with policy documents, helped cross validate findings and situate them within broader institutional and geopolitical contexts. Member checking involved informal feedback from participants during and after the interviews to ensure interpretations resonated with their experiences. Reflexivity, through continuous self-refection on researcher positionality and potential biases, mitigated subjective distortion on certain topics or points of view. Thick descriptions provided detailed narrative accounts and contextual information that promote transferability and depth of understanding. While the qualitative approach limits generalizability, the case study and focus design prioritizes rigor and depth, which provides a base for nuanced insight into consulate protection dynamics.

Ethics and positionality

This study adheres to core ethical principles of qualitative research: informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and reflective accountability. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose and methodology and consented to recording and anonymization protocols to protect their privacy.

As a bilingual, binational researcher from Tijuana, Baja California, with subjective experiences of family deportation, consular intervention, and migrant support networks, I approach this research not as an outsider, but as an embedded participant observer. My lived experience, bilingual fluency, and prior residence in Tucson provided me with both access and interpretative depth, fostering trust and openness during interviews. This positionality offered unique insight into the micro dynamics of consular encounters and framed the research process as a dialogical and engaged practice. Guided by Hook's (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy, rooted in care, reciprocity, and ethical presence. Rather than treating participants as data sources, this orientation recognizes them as co producers of knowledge and resists extractive research practices.

Drawing on my prior internship at the Mexican Consulate in Tucson, I witnessed firsthand the solidarity, improvisation, and care that characterize everyday protection work. Officers often relied on informal network and personal relationships to navigate bureaucratic blockages, responded to emergencies with limited institutional tools, and provided emotional and legal support with deep commitment. These experiences shaped my understanding of the consulate not as a static bureaucratic entity, but as a dynamic, adaptive, and relationally embedded actor. This makes the Tucson consulate an interesting site to examine how consular protection is enacted, co-produced and continuously negotiated within a transnational governance regime known for its complexities.

Institutional context and actors

Mexican consulates in the United States represent the largest and most strategically component of Mexico's diplomatic infrastructure, with 49 offices across U.S. territory (Acceso Latino, n.d.). These consulates are staffed by members of the *Servicio Exterior Mexicano* (SEM), a professional foreign service corps composed of diplomatic-consular and technical administrative personnel (Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores, n.d.). Headed by a Consul General, typically a SEM officer trained at the Instituto Matias Romero, each consulate is internally structured into specialized departments, including Protection, Legal Affairs, Documentation, Cultural Affairs, and Community Outreach (LMT Online, 2023).

In addition to administrative tasks such as issuing passports and processing documentation, consulates carry out mobile services, they organise mobile consulates that get closer to those who cannot travel to the consulate, they provide legal assistance, and respond to humanitarian emergencies, participate in events and are present as much as possible in community gatherings (Acceso Latino, n.d.). They operate under the authority of the *Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores* (SRE) which translates to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and they collaborate with the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., as well as multiple U.S. agencies and local institutions (U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, 2009). Increasingly, their operations reflect principles of New Public Managment, emphasizing decentralization, responsiveness, and service efficiency through local partnerships (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020), and align with coproduction frameworks that involve community actors and migrants in the design and delivery of services (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia, 2017).

Consular staff across divisions (Protection, Legal, Documentation and Community affairs) navigate overlapping bureaucratic hierarchies, diplomatic sensitivities, and public service demands. Their work requires discretion, empathy, and coordination under conditions of resource scarcity and legal ambiguity. Community based organizations, including legal aid institutions, health centres and clinics, religious organizations, shelters, and migrant led advocacy groups all function as critical intermediaries, extending the consulate's reach and providing culturally grounded support. In addition to all these groups and formal institutions, migrants play a key role in protection, they are not passive recipients of aid, their feedback and efforts to create adequate programs build the governance ecosystem, they do this through networks and experiential knowledge to access and shape services (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021).

This research pays attention to both the formal and informal dimensions of the consular environment. Formally, it examines documentation practices, bilateral agreements, and national directives from the SRE. Informally, it analyses how consular staff and community partners make use of discretionary practices, affective labour, and improvisational strategies in daily operations. These include off the record interventions, emotional support, trust building gestures, and creative problem solving in response to potential institutional gaps (Martinez, Martinez-Schuldt, & Cantor, 2018). Together, these dynamics position the consulate as a hybrid institution, balancing diplomatic mandates with grassroots engagement. The study approaches the institutional context as a fluid and relational governance space, where protection is continuously co-produced by various actors responding to complex legal, political, and social issues.

Sample size and saturation

The study's qualitative dataset consists of 15 interviews, balanced to ensure depth and diversity of perspectives: five consular officials (including department heads and frontline staff); six leaders and employees of community-based organizations; one health care professional; and three migrant community members. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit participants. Data saturation was evaluated incrementally,

with ongoing analysis guiding the conclusion of data collection once no new themes emerged, ensuring comprehensive yet efficient coverage of the research question.

Chapter 4: Results and analysis

This chapter presents the empirical findings that address the research question:

How is the protection of Mexican migrants (through legal, diplomatic, and humanitarian strategies) enacted, contested, and adapted by consular officials and migrant communities within the institutionalized U.S. border enforcement regime, particularly during the Trump administration?

Drawing from 15 semi structured interviews with consular staff, civil society actors, and migrant community members, this chapter documents how protection unfolds as both a formal mandate and a lived practice. The findings reflect diverse roles, strategies, and tensions embedded in everyday consular world and grassroots collaboration. The presentation is non-interpretative and structured around two central themes: **Community resilience and trus**t and **the border as a third country**, each broken down into four analytical subcategories: Actors involved, Critical points of action, cases and examples, and challenges.

The interviews were originally conducted in Spanish and later translated for the purpose of this study. All quoted material is presented verbatim or has been lightly edited for clarity, with careful attention to preserve original meaning and cultural nuance. Tables and figures are

included to illustrate patterns and relationships among actors. Key quotes are thematically organized to support and guide the analysis.

1. Community resilience and trust

Consular protection in the Tucson district is not the product of one single institution, but a collaborative effort sustained by consular staff, U.S. and Mexican agencies, civil society organizations, and migrant communities. It emerges not from top-down bureaucratic design alone, but from the everyday labour of building trust, improvising care, and collaborating across a wide network of actors. Rather than functioning as a standalone agency, the consulate operates at the intersection of formal authority and informal relationships, where legitimacy is earned through responsiveness and connection. In this adaptive ecosystem, protection is co-produced by a diverse range of actors who contribute resources, knowledge, and credibility. Community resilience and institutional trust form the backbone of these efforts.

1.1. Actors involved

Interviewees described a dense web of coordination that cuts across institutional, national, and social boundaries. As one staff memeber explained, *"There are broad categories of actors... government agencies, federal or local, ICE, CBP, the Border Patrol, Homeland Security... then at the local level we have the sheriffs, the city police... each consulate works with their local police"* (Interviewee 1). Ehen asked about other types of actors, most interviewees mentioned how relationships even extend to medical institutions, which despite not being enforcement bodies, hold considerable influence due to government funding and legal obligations. *"Especially hospitals and clinics"* noted one official, *"because even though they are not properly an authority, they receive funds from the government ... so certain impediments are generated*" (Interviewee 2).

Civil society plays an equally vital role in this landscape. Across Arizona and Sonora, a network of U.S. based NGO's, religious groups, and migrant led initiatives provide legal aid, shelter, psychological care, and community outreach, often stepping in where public institutions fall short. These actors make protection tangible, not necessarily through formal policy, but through daily acts of solidarity. As one consular staff member reflected, *"Civil society (in the U.S.) many times duplicate their objectives, but each one has a different resource. Their relationships to each other, and with us (the consulate) is incredibly positive because they end up complementing each other... in addition to what we can do"* (Interviewee 5). Many

of these organizations benefit from federal funding that support programming in health, education, and community development. *"Local NGO's often have access to resources guaranteed by the U.S. federal government... for example educational programs"* (Interviewee 10), and some are even physically embedded within the consulate, such as Clinica del Rio, and the YWCA (Interviewee 4). These embedded partnerships enhance both efficiency and trust.

The network of care extends across the border into Mexico, where shelters, religious and migrant aid organizations, especially in Sonora, form part of a binational safety net. These groups often support not just Mexican nationals, but migrants from central America as well. *"Many civil society organizations we know in Mexico are religious in nature, they help all migrants, sometimes they are also from other countries in central America, but they help them all"* (Interviewee 2). This cross-border collaboration reflects how migrant protection transcends rigid national frameworks, and the consular officials knowing about these shelters across the border is an insight into how close their relationship is and how they try to be aware of what is happening on both sides.

At the centre of this protective web are migrants themselves. Families, interpreters, cultural leaders, and informal networks often act as first responders, their local knowledge and personal relationships can determine whether protection is accessed at all. One official described the instability migrants face: "*they are passed from custody t custody... from the border patrol to ICE, then to the marshals, and then back to ICE... many migrants have a long and confusing journey"* (interviewee 3), and the consulate sometimes represents the only constant actor in a fragmented system.

In the most sensitive cases, such as deaths or disappearances, longstanding partnerships become critical. *"We (the consulate) work with the coroner's office to identify the body, recover the persons belongings, contact the family, give them a dignified service, we take care of all those cases, and there are a lot of people involved in making it work...*" (Interviewee 3).

Ultimately, consular protection in the Sonoran borderlands is not delivered from above, it is built through relationships. It is a co-produced socially embedded, and deeply human practice that relies on trust, collaboration, and care. Migrants are not passive recipients but active participants, navigating and shaping these networks of support. Protection here is not just a bureaucratic function, it is a lived reality made possible through people working in both sides of the border, institutions, and everyday life.

Table 1: Key Actor Categories in Migrant Protection and their relationships with Mexican Consulate

Actor category	Examples	Relationship with Mexican Consulate
Internal consular divisions	Protection, legal, documentation, community affairs	Provide direct services, legal aid, document issuing, community events, outreach to Mexican nationals, healthcare
U.S. Federal agencies	ICE, CBP, Border Patrol, Homeland Security	Coordinate around detention, deportation, consular notifications
Local authorities	Local Police, Sheriffs, courts	Notify consulate in arrests, collaborate on humanitarian issues
Medical Institutions	Clinica del Rio, Pima County Clinics, St Joseph's Hospital	Report critical cases, notify consulate when there is a migrant in need of help, enable health related consular support
U.S. Civil Society Organizations	YWCA, *Aliados*, *Amistades*	Resource sharing, case referrals, emotional support, co-hosted events
Mexican Civil Society Organizations	Religious shelters, advocacy groups in Sonora	Provide humanitarian aid and collaborate on repatriation and cross-border issues, communicating with the Mexican families

Binational institutions	UNAM, University of Arizona, Hometown clubs, Mobile Health Units	Academic collaboration, cultural and legal education, mobile service delivery
Migrant community members	Families, youth, cultural leaders, interpreters	Active in self-advocacy, information sharing, community mobilization

Note: this table summarizes the types of actors identified across interviews and illustrates how protection emerges from collaborative practice.

1.2 Critical points of action

Protection is not a single event, it is a continuous process that unfolds across institutions, timelines, and emotional terrain. One of the most important aspects to consider is that consular protection must be requested by migrants. It can also be declined, consulates may offer their services, but not at all migrants choose to accept them, often due to fear or mistrust. One migrant community leader noted: *"The recommendation I always give everyone is: if something happens to you, ask them to notify the consulate. Because it's our choice if we want to notify them or not, I think it's important we do...*" (Interviewee 9).

Interviewees described how protective interventions often begin in moments of crisis: detentions, hospitalizations, legal trouble, or confusing during migration. What starts as a bureaucratic task quickly becomes personal, requiring presence, empathy, and discretion. Initial contact with the immigration system often triggers these interventions. When migrants are detained, consular staff conduct direct outreach. *"We go to the detention centres... we openly ask, is there any Mexican here who wants consular assistance?"* (Interviewee 3). Many migrants are unaware of their right to protection of fear claiming it, making personalized attention critical. As one official emphasized, *"personalized face-to face service remains the most effective form of communication. But they must trust us*" (Interviewee 5). Without trust, protection cannot begin.

Protective actions span legal, humanitarian, and symbolic dimensions. One of the most fundamental is issuing identity documents. *"Issuing identity and travel documents... is the first act of protection we do for Mexicans"* (Interviewee 5). Documentation enables migrants to

access services and affirms their national belonging. Staff also describes proactive strategies aimed at prevention and empowerment. *"We do a lot of preventive work"* one said. *"It's cheaper to go to talk to people than paying a lawyer... communication is the most important action..."* (Interviewee 1). Outreach includes informing migrants about dual citizenships, saving plans, and family emergency preparations. *"You can get dual citizenship for your children, start saving, and have everything ready in case you have to move back"* (Interviewee 4).

Special attention is given to vulnerable groups, especially minors. Officials shared how they interview unaccompanied children, verify family ties, and coordinate with U.S. authorities to ensure safe placements. "We ask where they're going, where they come from, where their families are..." (Interviewee 3). In these cases, the consulate becomes both a legal actor and a compassionate guide in an often-impersonal system.

Protection is not just about legal tools it is about responsiveness, timing, and human connection. "Issuing identity and travel documents to Mexicans, regardless of their immigration status... is the first act of protection we do for Mexicans" (Interviewee 5) in the words of one consular official: *"Protecting migrants requires respect for their human rights, providing appropriate information and guidance, intervening in situations of abuse or vulnerability and facilitating access to services that contribute to their wellbeing"* (Interviewee 1). These narratives show that protection is an adaptive, trust-based practice that unfolds through the everyday discretion of those on the frontlines.

1.3 Cases and examples

Hile formal mandates outline the structure of consular protection, its deeper meaning emerges in specific, often morally complex cases. Interviewees recounted stories marked by vulnerability, discretion, and care that stretch far beyond institutional obligations, revealing how consular officials serve not only as state representatives, but also as human responders to the unpredictable realities of migrant life and death.

Death related cases were especially prominent. Migrant fatalities in the desert or in custody require consular officials to assist with body identification, repatriation, and support for grieving families. "*I've also managed deceased children... (Interviewee 10) we help migrants repatriate bodies, identify body, recover the persons belongings, work with funeral homes to send bodies back to Mexico... we can even do an assessment and if it's possible give*

the family a sum of money to support them in the situation... the consulate can do many things" (Interviewee 3). These are not just bureaucratic procedures, they are symbolic acts of repatriation and dignity.

In some moments, protection calls for ethical improvisation. One official recalled taking an unaccompanied, dehydrated girl into their home after she was found alone in the desert and transferred into a U.S. hospital, after being hospitalized and in the middle of a migration process, one consular official acted: "*I took her home, she didn't trust anyone and was so scared... no one told me to do it, it was not part of my duties, but no one told me not to do it... Sometimes cases like that are hard to manage, and we are human after all...*" (Interviewee 9). Such moments illustrate the emotional labour and moral discretion embedded in frontline consular work.

Protection also intersects with gender-based violence and family breakdowns. One staff member described how the consulate helps Mexican women navigate divorce, custody, and alimony after facing threats of deportation from partners, or physical violence in some cases *"... they are in a vulnerable situation... We help (women) with how the system works, the courts, how to fight a divorce, fight for custody, alimony as well... gender violence, domestic violence those cases are also responsibility of the consulate, if a Mexican woman needs help, we are there"* (Interviewee 3). Here, protection becomes a form of empowerment and refuge for those doubly marginalized.

Another recurrent example that illustrates community resilience and trust between Mexican migrants and the consulate relates to cases of labour exploitation. Economic vulnerability is closely tied to migration status, and the consulate often serves as the only accessible form of support. While much of the literature focuses on migrant labour rights, and the experiences of undocumented Mexican workers in the United States, the role and voice of the Mexican consulate in these matters is also particularly noteworthy. As one consular official noted: "*We receive complaints from workers who have not been paid, who have debts, work related accidents...*" (Interviewee 4)

Even seemingly minor requests carry emotional weight: detained migrants asking staff to contact family, translate for guards, or help change repatriation points. *"Sometimes it's as simple as (detained migrants saying): I have a health problem, they call the consulate and tell us: please communicate with the guard, I can't speak English, also please tell my relatives I am ok, I can't communicate with them. Please ask the immigration authority if it's possible to repatriate me through another border because I am from such place... Things like that, those*

kinds of cases are our responsibility" (Interviewee 4). Other cases described as "simple" were also recurrent: *"There is a lot of ways you can connect with the community, from a rescue in the desert in extreme cases, or to someone who is worried because they don't understand how the new changes in immigration policy will affect them... there is people who want to go on vacation and need information on visas.. It's a wide range of services... but in Tucson we provide a lot of services oriented towards cases of protection for migrant crossings, detained or about to be deported. It's the nature of the region"* (Interviewee 1). These gestures, reveal the importance of being seen, heard, and accompanied in tough times.

Consular advocacy is also crucial in settings where migrants face institutional neglect. One nurse described discriminatory treatment in hospital, especially when migrants were accompanied by law enforcement: *"Discrimination was evident*" he noted (Interviewee 15). In such contexts, the consulate serves as a shield against invisibility and mistreatment.

Finally, the emotional highs of protection work are seen in moments of reunification. One official recalled a child rescued by border patrol and reunited with his family: *"A child who crossed the border with a group... the group got separated, sometimes children get lost, the border patrol arrived and rescued him... When he was reunited with the father and family, well it's a beautiful thing...those cases are especially important to us"* (Interviewee 10). These moments reflect the profound human stakes behind protective action.

Taken together, these stories show that consular protection is not simply about executing a policy. It is a moral, affective practice, one shaped by discretion, care, and the human choices made daily in a high-risk, high-stakes environment.

1.4 Challenges

Despite the dedication of consular staff and their partners, migrant protection in the Tucson district is marked by persistent and layered challenges, logistical, emotional, and systemic. These difficulties stem from a fundamental mismatch between high community needs and limited institutional capacity, affecting both the structure and spirit of the consular system.

A central obstacle is the lack of accessible information. Many migrants remain unaware of their rights or the services available to them *"...the lack of information can isolate people because they are unaware of the same mechanisms that already exist for them... spreading information*

is difficult, getting to the right audience..." (Interviewee 12). This information gap breeds vulnerability, especially in moments of fear and crisis.

Even when information is available, structural underfunding and rising demand limit the ability to respond. *"There isn't enough money in the world to support it... and in immigration cases, even less so, they are very very complex"* (Interviewee 8). Policy volatility, particularly during the Trump administration, further destabilized the system. *"People already had their hearings scheduled... but out of fear they are not showing up. Changes cause fear, and the system is affected"* (Interviewee 10).

Legal inconsistency is compounded by the discretion of frontline officials. *"There is a lot of misinformation regarding rights people have, and the scope authorities can take... depends a lot on each officer as well, their attitude towards migrants... how they treat them..."* (Interviewee 14). Migrants' experiences are shaped not only by policy but by the attitudes of individual gatekeeps.

Within the consulate itself, emotional strain is a recurring reality. Officials described the psychological toll of managing traumatic cases under constant pressure. *"There is a lot of burnouts,"* one participant shared. *"Consular officials have been exposed to brutal cases...we have to maintain our mental health, but it's difficult"* (Interviewee 13). Another echoed, *"The demands and expectations are too high... we do all we can, but the demand is too high and here is not enough time or staff to cover all the cases"* (Interviewee 3). Still, staff continue to act as connectors and advocates, often extending beyond their mandate to link migrants with lawyers, shelters, schools, and clinics. *"They can't do everything all the time"* one respondent said, *"but they help... there is a giant list of resources the consulate can connect migrants with"* (Interviewee 11)

In this context, resilience takes on dual meaning: it reflects both the survival strategies of migrant communities and the endurance of consular officials operating under strain. Resource scarcity, emotional fatigue, and policy instability define the terrain of protection, but it is precisely in response to these limits that creative, relational, and discretionary practices emerge.

While protection efforts in Tucson are shaped by relationships, discretion, and resilience, they are also profoundly influenced by the border itself, not just as a physical boundary, but as a defining context. The challenges and strategies described by consular staff do not unfold in a neutral setting; they take place within a complex and contested space that demands constant adaptation. To understand how protection is enacted, we must also understand the nature of the

U.S.-Mexico border, not merely as a line between nations, but as a dynamic zone of governance, culture, and interaction.

2. The Border as a Third Country

Protection in the Sonoran borderlands does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it takes place within a unique legal, cultural, and institutional zone that defies easy categorization. The U.S.-Mexico border is not simply a geographic line, it is a social and political space shaped by overlapping jurisdictions, blurred roles, and deeply embedded binational relationships. Participants consistently described the border not as a place of separation, but as a place that unites many. This border has also been described as a "third country" because it represents a hybrid space where rules are inconsistent, communities are intertwined, and consular protection requires adaptation, negotiation, and creativity

2.1 Actors involved

Protection at the border is not the task of a single institution, but the product of a web of relationships that involve government and non-governmental actors. The actors operate across national frameworks, forming a fluid and adaptive network where trust, credibility and long-term collaboration are often more decisive than formal mandates.

As one official noted, *"Everyone is Mexican. Most people in Tucson were either born in Mexico and are citizens of the U.S. or born in the U.S. but their family is from Mexico, they are children of Mexican parents, or even Americans that have a Mexican partner..."* (Interviewee 13) this reflects deep community ties and binational identities that blur the border and foster shared responsibility. Working across sectors requires building close, personal relationships, often sustained not through official protocol but through familiarity and friendship, both qualities are very representative of the Mexican and migrant community in Tucson.

These connections extend into other spaces. Examples from the interviews were Hometown clubs, student groups, and migrant networks who start ideas or projects which are established later, eventually working alongside the consulate. *"...hometown clubs... it was an initiative where people from the same city or state on Mexico get together, for example from the state of Mexico, the municipality of Tlalnepantla... They start to get together in a friendly manner, they start to organise, make networks and they later go to the consulate, make events...*

all of this has an impact on the consulate (Interviewee 4). Years of experience and everyday interaction allows consular staff to develop these personal relationships with migrant communities. Other examples mentioned included relationships with individuals from Border patrol, or ICE, having professional relationships, as well as personal ones. "Working *with local agencies, nonprofit, private agencies, government public agencies... it's about working with all of them and maintaining a very close relationship, even with the media... we know of people that work in U.S. authorities, sometimes acquaintances, sometime friends... these relationships make all the difference in what we can do for migrant protection"* (Interviewee 3). Consular officials and former consular employees describe these relationships as crucial and "very handy" when faced with difficult cases. These ties are based on mutual understanding and routine cooperation.

Coordination between the Mexican and U.S consulates plays another key role. In border regions like Tucson and Nogales, one interviewee explained: *"...there very good relationships with the consuls on the other side of the border, meaning the American consulate in Mexico and the Mexican consulate in the U.S. in border regions, for example Tucson and Nogales, Sonora they know each other, they are in constant communication and their relationship is important as well"* (Interviewee 8). In addition, local context also influences and shapes the ecosystem, as one interviewee described: *"There are a ton of nonprofit organizations and places where people can volunteer, Tucson is also a university town, truly diverse, full of young people... the University of Arizona is especially important. There is a lot of students, they tend to be more progressive understanding migration... they are volunteers, so there is a lot of people involved in the community*" (Interviewee 14). Many people share language, lived experiences, this makes the border zone not only institutional but also relational. As seen in Table 2, these actors reflect the binational character of migrant life and the consulates efforts to navigate the overlapping legal and social terrains.

Table 2: Cross-border actors and institutions in the Sonoran borderlands

Actor type	Examples	Role / Relationship in the border context
U.S. Federal Agencies	ICE, CBP, Border Patrol, Homeland Security, Immigration Courts	Detention, deportation, consular notifications, case transfers across jurisdictions

Mexican Consular Network	Mexican Consulate in Tucson, American consulates in Nogales, the consuls in charge	Coordinate on information, policy changes, protection cases, humanitarian aid, diplomatic interventions
Local U.S. Institutions	County attorneys, local police, American hospitals, and clinics	Report incidents to the consulate, facilitate access to detainees, cooperate in community outreach
Binational Health and Education	UNAM, University of Arizona collaborations, mobile health units from the consulate, nursing students, public health schools	Provide medical support, volunteer work, education, psychological assistance across the border
NGO's (U.S. and Mexico)	Shelters, indigenous alliances, Sonora based religious organizations	Sut migrants in transit, or in legal process, reunification, emotional care, return coordination, coordination in Mexico-U.S.
Academic and Cultural Actors	University programs, cross border festivals, events, local researchers, local businesses	Create networks of help, platforms for participation and community building, binational exchange, spreading information
Migrant populations	Unaccompanied minors, mixed status families, long settled binational residents	Navigate both legal systems (U.S.-Mexico), access support across both countries, often through informal means

2.2 Critical points of action

In the borderlands, the terrain of consular protection is constantly shifting. Participants described a climate of unpredictability, especially in the most recent Trump administration, where deportation routes change, and communication with U.S. authorities (not local ones) is

often inconsistent. "*One day they tell us they are going to deport everyone through Nogales, the next day through Yuma, then Texas. It is always changing, and it is difficult to coordinate, organise and adapt when it is so sudden"* (Interviewee 3). In this volatile context, consular staff must remain resourceful, and ready to act without warning.

Legal frameworks add to this instability, *"... (in the U.S.) they are using a law from the 1900s... a law from a time of war, they try to apply it now... of course there are difficulties, loopholes, the system needs to be integrated*" (Interviewee 3) one official noted. Such outdated frameworks leave officials navigating legal grey zones with little formal guidance. *"While some enforcement practices have evolved, such as the shift away from mass legal representation under Operation Streamline, eminency and fairness remain ongoing concerns"* (Interviewee 7).

Much of the work happens behind the scenes. Consular officials maintain regular contact with judges, police, and immigration officers to ensure that migrants receive the protections they are entitled to. *"We are constantly in conversation with the Police, the judges, immigration authorities, and others, reminding them and asking them to do the consular notifications, sometimes migrants don't do it themselves, they are afraid, they have been in a long journey, but it is important to offer consular services and let them know it's safe, we can help them*" (Interviewee 2). These interventions are essential yet often invisible.

Protection is not only reactive, but also preventive. Officials encourage migrants to build community ties, emphasizing that visibility and participation are forms of protection in themselves. *"...we ask them to get involved in the community, create ties, volunteer in schools, in church... participate, that's how you stay protected"* (Interviewee 12)

The scope of consular protection is wide ranging, extending from legal and labour matters to administrative and humanitarian support. As described by one consular official: *"We focus on five primary areas of protection which we call "scopes" or different fields, we have the immigration issue, criminal matters, civil matters, the labour area, the administrative department"* (Interviewee 1). Respondents emphasised that flexibility, constant monitoring, and informal diplomacy are essential parts of consular work in this shifting landscape. In sum, the actions described in this theme are shaped by the unpredictability of border enforcement and shifting political mandates.

2.3 Cases and examples

The complexities of borderland protection come into focus through the lived stories shared by consular staff. The interviews were filled with all types of cases ad examples, all of which reveal how diplomacy, community care, and humanitarian response often intersect in ways that defy institutional categories.

One official recalled partnering with a Mexican migrant who owned a funeral home in the U.S., whose business became a channel for mutual support: “There was this case of a Mexican man who owned a funeral home in the U.S., he helped to spread the word about the consulate, how we can help with paperwork... and from the consulate we referred families to this service, the relationship grew and it was a link between the institutional side and the community side, we helped him with his business, but the referrals were both ways, he made more people aware of consular services ...” (Interviewee 4)

In the last decade, the COVID-19 pandemic was an important example whcih exposed the flexible and improvised nature of border governance, as one participant mentioned: *“In terms of the border being a grey space, I can give you an example, during the pandemic, they brought people from Sonora to the border, let them cross without papers, vaccinated them, then sent them back... I am pretty sure that decision was not taken in Washington or Mexico's capital, it was a border issue in face of a global pandemic... this proves that the border is a unique space for governance and rules...”* (Interviewee 8). Local discretion may take over federal policy in cases like these, most participants agreed on the uniqueness of the border and binational lifestyle. As one participant explains: *“Tucson is Tucson, Sonora instead of Arizona, the Mexican presence is so strong... People have lived here for generations, it is like the Sonora desert is a region, some people even say we did not cross the border, the border crossed us... the Mexican presence in this region goes back...”* (Interviewee 11).

Circling back to the relationships, a former consular employee also provided a personal example on outside work relationships with important actors, *“When I worked in the consulate I would work professionally with CBP officers, border patrol we see them as this big U.S. authority... and then on the weekend there was. A house dinner I was being invited too, turns out it was in one of the border patrol officers' houses... the lines were blurred, but it helped to build string relationships far beyond work, human relationships”* (Interviewee 13). The social ties that sustain migrant protection remain a recurrent theme and important aspect aminghst consular employees, who consider the consulate are essential for the Mexican community to come together, and as one participant notes “at least recognize themselves within the context

of living in the U.S." (Interviewee 6). In the border, blurred lines are not a flaw, they are the foundation of how protection works.

2.4 Challenges

The complexity of the border brings not only innovation and collaboration, but also fragmentation, exhaustion, and strain. Participants described a climate of institutional uncertainty, emotional burnout, and reactive policymaking *"Recently, with all the changes, we pick up the phone and ask the U.S. agencies what is the scope of this... What is going to happen... And they do not know either... we are left to adapt and act with what we can"* (Interviewee 2).

Facing all types of challenges, leadership plays a critical role in navigating uncertainty. One longtime Tucson resident noted a shift in approach: *"I have lived in Tucson for many years, I have seen many consuls oversee the consulate and let me tell you before the consul was just a figure, he was there for the pretty pictures, not for the community. But that has changed... Consuls are very present, involved and participate in everything they can"* (Interviewee 9) However, engaged leadership cannot shield staff from emotional and moral burdens that come with working on such a complex region characterized by deaths and critical moments. In words of a formal consulate employee: *"A lot of people get emotionally drained, these topics are very heavy, children in the desert, families torn apart, it happens that people in Tucson are not as involved because it takes an emotional toll on them, they ignore the issue to protect their mental health, I think more mental health resources are needed in the community and for those who work daily in migrant protection"* (Interviewee 12)

The current situation, considering the Trump administration was a recurring topic as well, as one participant describes: *"... they are deporting in masses, without giving them the right to court or fight their cases, no due process is being respected... and we didn't expect this to happen with such intensity, nor with such dehumanization of migrants, they are being cruel, targeting local businesses, organizing violent raids... they use so many resources to persecute migrants"* (Interviewee 11)

Coordination remains one of the most present challenges. coordination between mexian and U.S. institutions is difficult due to the rapid changes and asymmetry in the system. *"The consulate here has legal advisors who are fully aware of what's happening in the U.S., but perhaps they don't have legal advisors with knowledge of what's happening in Mexico... maybe*

there is a miscommunication, with how fast things change it's hard to coordinate" (Interviewee 7). Gaps in legal and policy alignment complicate efforts to offer consistent protection.

Uncertainty is also compounded by limited resources, institutional authority, insufficient coordination, and shifts without warning. In regards of resources, time and staff were mentioned, as well as innovative alternatives *"We would like to be present at every event, every community gathering, presence is particularly important, but unfortunately it is humanly impossible to be at every single event. We put a lot of effort into other forms of presence, in social media, media outlets... digital tools have become immensely popular, so we adapt to that as well"* (Interviewee 5)

Even faced with so much emotional burden, challenges and difficulties, participants were all passionate about migrant protection, creating new ways to help, adapting and continue this path. Another challenge mentioned was educating others on what is happening, explaining the complex situation in a way that people can understand, one participant added: *"I would like to see more Latin American professionals advocating for the migrant community, I think this issue will continue to evolve and it is very important to continue educating the community, the power of education should be central in these moments"* (Interviewee 14).

These testimonies of challenges do not signal failure; they point to a system stretched to its limits. What keeps it functioning is not bureaucracy alone, but trust, adaptability, and a shared moral commitment amongst those who work every day and balancing legal constraints with the imperative to protect.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings presented in chapter 4, considering the theoretical frameworks, research context, and narrative expectations outlined in previous chapters. Drawing from theories of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010; Thomann, James & Deruelle, 2024), networked governance (O'Toole, 1997), co-production (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia., 2017), social embeddedness (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021), consular diplomacy (Okano-Heijmans, 2010), and migrant protection (Martinez-Schuldt, 2020, Cicero Fernandez,

2019; Martinez, Martinez-Schuldt & Cantor, 2018). This chapter unpacks how consular protection ins enacted, contested, and coproduced by consular officials and migrant communities in the Sonora-Arizona borderlands.

Set within the complex border landscape of Tucson, Arizona, this study situates consular protection in a governance regime shaped by both enforcement and humanitarian logics (Hiemstra, 2019). The region's desert geography, paired with militarized border infrastructure, and binational governance arrangements produce a high stakes environment in which consular officials must balance legal mandates with urgency. The Tucson consulate emerges as a key institutional actor navigating this terrain, embedded in local civil society, constrained by legal and diplomatic limits, and empowered by informal trust networks.

This chapter is organized into three core contributions and concludes with reflections on the study's limitations and directions for future research. It connects findings to the study's central research question and narrative themes: *Community resilience and trust* and *the border as a third country*.

First contribution: Reframing discretion as a form of affective governance

This study extends street-level bureaucracy theory by situating consular discretion within a transnational, humanitarian, and relational context. While Lipsky's (2010) foundational world conceptualized discretion primarily as a coping mechanism for frontline workers operating under conditions of resource scarcity and institutional constraint, this thesis argues that discretion in consular spaces (particularly at the Mexican consulate in Tucson) functions as a form of affective governance. Rather than acting solely out of necessity, consular officials exercise discretion through emotionally and ethically informed decisions, often guided by care in the face of complex and conflicting mandates.

In the high-pressure environment of the U.S.-Mexico border, discretion is not exercised in bureaucratic isolation. Instead, it is enacted in encounters with migrants facing urgent, often life-threatening, circumstances. A former consular employee, recounted an incident in which she took home an underage girl who had been left dehydrated in the desert and arrived in a hospital in the U.S. the girl was distrustful of authorities, and this employee made a hard decision:

"I didn't necessarily ask for permission, I couldn't leave her on the street" (Interviewee 9)

This moment illustrates how discretion is not only an administrative function, but it is also affectively charged practice, driven by compassion, urgency, and personal ethics. The consular official's decision to surpass protocol in response to a moral imperative underscore the inherently human dimensions of bureaucratic work. As Bada and Gleeson (2023) argue, discretion is central in labour protection contacts where decentralized structures, political tensions, and agency missions create space for significant variation in implementation. Street level bureaucrats, including consular staff, operate in complex institutional landscapes shaped by competing demands, limited resources, and ambiguity. Their discretionary actions do not simply adapt to policy, they enact it (Lipsky, 2010). These acts of discretion are not isolated choices but are embedded in organization cultures and shaped by border enforcement regimes (Bada & Gleeson, 2023). Moynihan and Soss (2014) emphasize that discretion is a site of both empowerment and constraint: while it allows frontline actors to respond flexibly to individual needs, it is also shaped by institutional goals, norms, and incentives. Street-level discretion becomes a critical arena where government policies are interpreted. Humanized, and sometime redefined through everyday interactions. In this study, discretionary acts by consular officials reflect their judgement and emotional labour, highlighting the transformative potential, and inherent tensions, of discretion as a form of affective governance.

Other consular staff echoed the surreal and improvisational nature of their daily work, from the department of protection, a consular official spoke about recent policy shifts:

... (in the U.S.) they are using a law from the 1900s... a law from a time of war, they try to apply it now... of course there are difficulties, loopholes, the system needs to be integrated" (Interviewee 3)

These testimonies reflect the volatile and ambiguous policy environments in which consular discretion must be exercised, often in the absence of clear procedural guidance. This aligns with recent contributions to street level bureaucracy theory that emphasize discretion not just as a functional necessity, but as a morally and emotionally charged practice shaped by the institutional and social contexts in which in unfolds (Thomann, James & Deruelle, 2024). Within consular settings, where officials navigate both sending and receiving state mandates, discretion becomes a critical tool for negotiation of legality, protection, and care. Rather than viewing discretion solely as a deviation from formal rules, this perspective acknowledges its constitutive role in shaping policy outcomes and state-citizen relationships (Lipsky, 2010; Moyinhan & Soss, 2014).

The discretionary work of consular officers, modulated by empathy, urgency, and normative reasoning, can generate more responsiveness and humane protection practices, especially when supported by institutional environments that recognize and cultivate these capacities. As Martinez-Schuldt (2020) demonstrates, the Mexican state's delivery of consular protection services varies across U.S. Jurisdictions, shaped by local demographic, legal, and political conditions. His analysis of sociolegal consultations provided through the Mexican consular network illustrates how origin states adapt their protective interventions based on contextual need, especially in areas with large undocumented populations or aggressive local enforcement regimes. This supports the argument that consular discretion is not uniform but highly context sensitive, and that its effectiveness depends on frontline capacity, institutional culture, and local conditions.

Moreover, this study contributes to a growing body of literature, challenging conventional views of street-level bureaucrats as passive implementers of top-down policy. Instead, it situates consular actors as active co-producers of migrant protection, operating in transnational governance spaces that require navigation of dual state logics. These findings underscore the need for more practice-oriented reforms that value the embedded knowledge and ethical reasoning of consular officials and provide institutional flexibility to support their adaptive, context sensitive work (Martinez-Schuldt, Hagan, &Weissman, 2021)

As Chapter 4 demonstrated, protection work at the consulate unfolds through unscripted and relational practices. These include not only legal referrals and documentation, but emotionally intimate acts such as hospital visits, end-of life support, and repatriation of remains. Discretion in this setting is shaped by staff members' moral commitments, sense of institutional responsibility, and emotional adaptation to migrants in vulnerable positions. These qualities are bot captured by traditional policy frameworks, yet they are essential to the provision of protection.

One interview reflected on the toll this work has on employees:

"During Trump, the consulate staff looked more tired... like they carried that pain with them" (Interviewee 10)

This study highlights the emotional burden and ethical stakes of discretion in the borderlands, contributing to a broader understanding of street level discretion as affective, ethical, and relational, particularly within transnational and humanitarian contexts. Discretion in consular settings often stems not from institutional mandates, but from shared vulnerability and moral commitment. Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020) argue that New Public

Management promotes high powered incentives to motivate public employees, yet such approaches may not suit consular environments, where staff are often driven by intrinsic motivation and a sense of duty. While targeted support such as emotional assistance, may be beneficial, the relational nature of consular work resists standard incentive models.

Migrant networks also shape protection practices by providing emotional, informational, and material support, rooted in trust and reciprocity (Sha, 2021). These networks guide expectations and actions, embedding discretion in social as well as institutional relationships.

Finally, Thomann, James, and Deruelle (2024) emphasize that discretion can reduce or reinforce inequality depending on its use and context. Ensuring fair and flexible service delivery requires both preserving bureaucratic judgement and introducing safeguards to limit bias. In the consular realm, such structuring can help discretion remain. humane, equitable and responsive.

Second contribution: Social embeddedness as relational infrastructure of protection

This thesis contributes to the literature on migrant governance and consular practice by reframing social embeddedness as a foundational element of consular protection. Drawing on Portes &Sensenbrenner (1993) mechanisms of embeddedness and Sha's (2021) work on transnational migrant networks, this study conceptualizes embeddedness not merely as a setting in which protection occurs, but as a relational infrastructure that enables it.

In the Tucson consular district, protection is co-produced through interpersonal ties, shared norms, and localized knowledge that extend beyond consular walls. As one of the consular officials interviewed explained:

"We know which shelter has beds, which jail has more Mexicans, which officer you can talk too..."

These insights are not documented in any official manual. Rather, they are cultivated through daily interaction, institutional memory, and mutual trust with local actors. This form of embeddedness enables consular staff to respond to critical situations with speed, accuracy, and even emotional intelligence, in circumstances where resources are scarce and the environment is hostile.

Community members echoed this dynamic. One participant said: *"Sometimes people come to us (a migrant organization/shelter) rather than the consulate, sometimes they do not trust the government, or they are too afraid to go and ask for help. Once they trust us, we tell them there is help in the consulate, contact them...*"

Trust is not always automatic; it must be earned and sustained. As detailed in Chapter 4, the consulates legitimacy often depends on its ability to integrate into preexisting community networks rather than act as a distant state entity. This is reflected in the physical and institutional co-location of other organizations such as Clinca del Rio (medical services) and the YWCA (Women's association) within the consular premisses, this is a material expression of trust and cooperation that blur lines between state and civil society.

Portes & Sensenbrenner (1993) identify four mechanisms through which immigrant communities build embedded forms of support: the first one being value introjection, which is when individuals internalize shared norms that guide behaviour, for example community. The second one is bounded solidarity, defined by a shared sense of identity or struggle that binds individuals together, especially in contexts of marginalization, for example migration. The third one being enforceable trust, which is to be sustained by the ability of a community to sanction members who violate expectations. And lastly, reciprocity exchanges, which consider the ongoing mutual support based on the expectation of future return. These mechanisms help explain and understand more how consular protection can be extended through community norms and relationships, particularly when formal intervention is limited or delayed (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993).

Importantly, embeddedness also enables the consulate to act beyond its formal jurisdiction. In cases where legal frameworks restrict action, such as when a migrant must formally request protection before intervention, staff often rely on community information to pass on information, fill institutional gaps, or act informally on their behalf. Embedded relationships thus expand the reach of protective services, complementing each other's capacities (Martinez-Schuldt, Hagan, &Weissman, 2021).

As chapter 2 anticipated, embeddedness enhances not only access but also legitimacy. Migrants are more likely to engage in institutions that are relationally "in place." One interviewee descried the consulate as a "*neutral space... A community space... That feels like support from your government*." This aligns with Sha's (2021) analysis of relational embeddedness in

migration, where trust, reputation, and reciprocity shape the flow of resources, information, and institutional engagement across borders.

Yet, as interviewees emphasized, trust is fragile and stained by structural constraints such as misinformation, institutional fatigue, and funding limitations. One consular official said:

"There isn't enough money in the world to support it... immigration cases, even less so...The demands and expectations are too high, especially in the Trump administration, there is so much chaos, so many cases and urgent situations, we do all we can, but the demand is too high and there is not enough time or staff to cover all the cases..."

Despite these pressures, embeddedness proves to be resilient framework for migrant protection. It allows consular officials to navigate complex conditions by anchoring their work in credibility, personal networks, and shared vulnerability. As O'Toole (1997) notes, networked governance demands adaptive strategies that build cooperation and reconfigure relationships for program success, insights directly applicable to the consular field. By conceptualizing embeddedness as a relational infrastructure, this thesis offers a grounded understanding of how consular diplomacy and migrant protection operate, not through command-and-control hierarchies, but through dense social ties, emotional labour, and trust-based collaboration.

Third contribution: Migrant protection as co-produced and networked governance

This thesis advances the understanding of consular protection as a form of co-produced and networked governance, a collaborative and adaptive process shaped not only by state actors, but also by migrants themselves, and a diverse constellation of civil society organizations. Drawing on Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia (2017) typology of co-production, (compromising, co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment) this study reveals how consular protection in the Tucson district emerges through informal, trust-based partnerships that often arise from necessity and proximity, rather than formal agreements.

The consulate's protective role is not executed unilaterally; rather, it materializes through horizonal collaborations with clinics, shelters, schools, media outlets, legal aid groups, and local authorities, including for example, the county coroner's office. As one of the consulate officers explained:

"We work closely with the coroner's office to fully identify the bodies, recover belongings, and work with funeral homes to send the body to Mexico, a lot of people are involved" (Interviewee 3)

These interactions, while outside of rigid bureaucratic frameworks, demonstrate highly responsive, relational governance. A local journalist, and former consulate employee echoed this sentiment:

"We never signed agreements, but we worked together. We messaged on WhatsApp, sent each other cases, we had each other's back"

Migrants are also essential contributors in this ecosystem, not just passive beneficiaries. As shown in Chapter 4, they often act as legal navigators, translators, educators, and first responders. Their lived experience and embedded social knowledge position them as vital actors in co-delivery of protection. One interviewee noted:

"Young migrants become guides for others" (interviewee 11)

This highlights that migrant agency is foundational to protection efforts, reinforcing the theme of **community resilience and trust**, and challenging top-down models of public service delivery.

Beyond the local scale, the consulate also participates in transnational coordination, illustrating what this thesis conceptualizes as **the border as a third country**. Consular officials described working with the Mexican and Central American consulates, Sonoran shelters, and U.S. agencies to coordinate cross-border repatriations and humanitarian support. These forms of cooperation blur jurisdictional boundaries and operate though improvisation, diplomatic negotiation, and moral commitment.

These practices align with O'Toole's (1997) theory of networked governance, which emphasizes decentralized coordination, mutual adaptation, and shared responsibility among actors, responsibility being one of the biggest notions interviewees mentioned. Rather than being sustained by centralized command from each country's governments, the continuity if migrant protection relies on relational capital, emotional intelligence, and flexible inter-organizational problem solving, especially in environments of policy fragmentation and legal complexity. O'Toole's (1997) further argues that networked governance challenges traditional public management logics by requiring actors to share authority, identify coordination points, and foster cooperation without relying solely on formal hierarchies or bureaucratic control.

The work of Sha (2021) supports this perspective by showing how migrant networks provide not only material and informational support but also form the normative and emotional infrastructure through which migrants navigate risk and uncertainty. These networks, rooted in

trust, reciprocity, and relational embeddedness, enhance both the efficacy and resilience of protection mechanisms. Mexico's consular system, and Mexican migrants at the border have been working on building these networks for decades, therefore now facing an administration that challenges them, they are established, and they continue progressing. They are key to understanding how protection is co-produced across formal institutions and transnational social fields.

Altogether, this study demonstrates that consular protection is best understood as a networked practice, messy, adaptive, and relational. It offers an empirical contribution to both co-production and networked governance theories by showing how consular institutions function as embedded actors that negotiate their role at the intersection of state obligations, migrant agency, and civil society partnerships.

Limitations and future research

This study offers an in depth, situated analysis of consular protection practices at the Mexican consulate in Tucson Arizona, specifically during the recent administrations. While the case provides rich insights into how protection is co-produced, discretionary, and embedded in local networks, the findings are inherently context specific. The institutional dynamics, community relationships, and enforcement environments of the Sonora-Arizona borderlands may differ significantly from those in other consular districts with distinct geopolitical, legal, or demographic conditions. As such, the transferability of these findings should be approached with caution.

This research is based on 15 semi structured interviews that reached thematic saturation; however, the sample does not fully capture all the actors involved in the migrant protection ecosystem. Future studies could incorporate the perspectives of U.S. immigration and Enforcment authorities, Central American consular officials, detained or recently deported migrants, and additional community organizations. Including these voices would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how protection is enacted across institutional and national boundaries.

Methodologically, future research could build on this work by employing complementary approaches such as ethnographic observation, policy and document analysis,

or survey research. These tools could help triangulate findings, uncover informal practices that could not easily be captured through interviews, and explore broader trends in service delivery. Across time studies would be particularly valuable in tracking how consular protection practices adapt to shifting political administrations, resource reallocations, and technological changes, including the increasing use of digital platforms.

Finally, emerging debates in public administration around digitalization, specialization, and disaggregation merit closer attention in the context of transnational service delivery. And as Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020) argue, fragmentation can create more agile and responsive public services but may also dilute accountability and coherence. In highly discretionary and trust dependent settings like consular protection, future research should critically assess how such institutional transformations affect frontline practices, inter-organizational collaboration, and the relational dimension of governance.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that consular protection in the Sonoran borderlands is not a top-down solely legal service. Rather, it has become a socially embedded, emotionally charged, and co-produced practice shaped by discretionary judgement, relational trust, and networked collaboration. Within the Tucson consular district, protection emerges not from the rules alone, but from people working together across institutional, national, and affective boundaries. By extending public administration and governance theories into a transnational and humanitarian context, this thesis repositions consular officials as moral agents and relational actors. Framing them as street-level bureaucrats provides a new perspective on how their discretion, their abilities and characteristics have an impact on service delivery and migrant protection. Far from only implementing policy, they are responsible for interpreting and adapting it in real time, guided by ethical commitments, professional experience, and an intimate understanding of migrant vulnerability. Their work involved building and sustaining alliances across sectors, formal and informal, governmental, and grassroots, and often requires improvisational problem solving that exceeds their formal mandates. These discretionary actions are not just administrative, they are affective, emotionally taxing, and ethically consequential (Thomann, James, & Deruelle, 2024.

Equally central to this study is the recognition of migrant communities as active co-producers of protection. Migrants do not passively receive assistance, they organise, interpret,

advise, mediate, and mobilize. Through trust networks, cultural fluency, and peer support, they build the very systems that aim to protect them, and that sometimes fail to do so. Migrant agency is not secondary; it plays a vital role in how protection happens. These dynamics, in turn, have a significant impact on the social fabric of both the U.S. and Mexico. Migration flows are deeply interconnected with both countries' economic, political, and social spheres, and they are constantly evolving. Ongoing research is essential to understand how recent changes have shaped the borderlands, and it is especially important to pay close attention to civil society and migrant led resistance movements.

By reframing consular protection as a hybrid and negotiated form of governance, this research contributes new insights into the fields of consular diplomacy, Street level bureaucracy, co-production, networked governance, and migrant protection. It challenges rigid distinctions between state and society, between diplomacy and service delivery, and between rule-following and ethical discretion. In high stakes and enforcement heavy spaces, like the U.S.-Mexico border, the delivery of public services to mobile and marginalized populations depends not only on institutional frameworks, but on relationships, trust, creativity and mutual recognition (Hiemstra, 2019) Ultimately, this study affirms that protection is not simply delivered, it is built, shared and continuously reimagined. It is enacted through the daily, often disguised labour of consular officials, community partners and migrants themselves, each navigating a volatile political landscape while responding to human need. In doing so, they forge adaptive and humane forms of transnational governance rooted in solidarity, care, and collective resilience.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Major U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement policies and Programs

Table A Summary of key border enforcement policies

This table outlines policies that have shaped the migratory and protection landscape at the U.S.-Mexico border. It includes each program's date of implementation, issuing country, and a brief description of its operational impact on migrants and consular protection practices.

(References in Chapter 1, Context Section, content referenced throughout the thesis).

Policy, Program	Date of implementation	Issuing country	Description, Impact
Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD)	1994	U.S.	Redirected migrant crossings into remote and dangerous terrains (deserts), increasing migrant fatalities and shaping humanitarian response at the border. Challenged traditional consular roles due to increased deaths and disappearances.
Operation Streamline	2005	U.S.	Introduced mass criminal prosecution of unauthorised border crossers. Increased detention rates and legal complexity, prompting more legal and humanitarian

			interventions by consular staff.
Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) "Remian in Mexico"	2019	U.S.	Required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico during their U.S. immigration proceedings exposing them to danger and limiting consular ability to monitor and assist them while outside U.S. jurisdiction.
Title 42 Expulsions	2020	U.S.	Expelled migrants without processing asylum claims under public health grounds (COVID-19) Complicated legal access and disrupted traditional consular protection pathways.
Institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME)	2003	Mexico	Aimed to integrate Mexican migrants in the U.S. by providing health, education, financial literacy, and civil programs through consular networks. Reframed

			consular protection as binational and proactive, expanding services beyond legal aid to social inclusion.
Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)	1986	U.S.	Granted legal status to many undocumented migrants, making the last major U.S. immigration reform. Also triggered expanded border enforcement, reducing seasonal migration and increasing the settled unauthorized population. Later policies broadened local enforcement roles, raising concerns over civil rights, racial profiling, and challenges for consular protection

Appendix B - Interview Guides

Note: The following interview guides were originally developed and administered in Spanish to ensure linguistic and cultural relevance. Due to space limitations, only the Spanish versions are included in this appendix. English translations are available upon request for reference and transparency.

These instruments were used during semi-structured interviews with consular officials and community actors as part of this thesis research topics. Both guides were designed to be adaptable depending on each participants role, experience, and context. In practice, some questions were omitted or explored in greater depth based on the flow of the conversation.

Section B.1: Guía de entrevista a funcionarios consulares mexicanos en EE. UU.

Introducción: rapport, recordatorio de participación voluntaria y confidencial.

Rol y Contexto Profesional

- ¿Qué cambios ha observado en el trabajo consular recientemente?
- ¿Qué tipos de casos atienden con más frecuencia?
- ¿Cuál suele ser el momento más crítico para los migrantes?
- ¿Cuándo y cómo interviene el consulado?
- ¿Cómo entiende usted la función de "proteger" a un migrante?

Redes de Apoyo y Coordinación

- ¿Con qué actores externos colabora el consulado (ONG, abogados, autoridades, etc.)?
- ¿Cómo es esa relación (institucional, informal, tensa, etc.)?
- ¿Influyen las redes sociales o familiares del migrante en la intervención?
- ¿Suelen acudir primero al consulado o a otras redes? ¿Por qué?

Discrecionalidad y Toma de Decisiones

- ¿Qué margen de discrecionalidad tiene ante casos urgentes?
- ¿Puede compartir un ejemplo concreto?
- ¿Qué factores favorecen o limitan la intervención consular?
- ¿Enfrenta obstáculos legales, políticos o institucionales?
- ¿El consulado puede generar barreras administrativas sin intención?
- ¿Se vio afectada su labor por políticas como "tolerancia cero" o MPP?

Barreras Administrativas y Experiencia del Migrante

- ¿Qué barreras enfrentan los migrantes al solicitar apoyo (documentación, idioma, tiempos)?
- ¿Qué expectativas tienen hacia el consulado o el CIAM?
- ¿Ha habido esfuerzos exitosos para reducir estas cargas?

Cierre y Reflexión

- ¿Cuáles son los mayores obstáculos estructurales para brindar protección efectiva?
- ¿Qué cambiaría del sistema consular?
- ¿Desea agregar algo más sobre su experiencia o el trabajo bajo presión?

Section B.2: Guía de Entrevista – Personal No Consular / Organizaciones Comunitarias

Introducción: rapport, recordatorio de participación voluntaria y confidencial.

Rol de la Organización y Relación con el Consulado

- ¿Cuál es el enfoque de su organización respecto a la protección de migrantes?
- ¿Qué tipo de actividades realizan y cómo se relacionan con el consulado?
- ¿Cómo comenzó la colaboración con el consulado? ¿Ha sido constante o intermitente?
- ¿Qué servicios consulares han utilizado en su labor (apoyo legal, documentos, emergencias)?

El Consulado como Puente entre Redes Formales e Informales

- ¿Puede el consulado actuar como puente entre organizaciones comunitarias y estructuras formales?
- ¿Qué tipo de apoyo podría ofrecer a redes informales?
- ¿Cómo se podría fortalecer la coordinación entre actores civiles y gubernamentales?
- ¿Cómo ha sido la colaboración en situaciones críticas (detenciones, deportaciones, violencia, etc.)?

Barreras y Limitaciones en la Colaboración

- ¿Qué limitaciones institucionales enfrenta el consulado para colaborar eficazmente?
- ¿Existen barreras burocráticas, culturales o de comunicación?
- ¿El consulado tiene suficientes recursos (personal, presupuesto, tecnología)?
- ¿Cómo afectan esas limitaciones a la respuesta ante las necesidades migrantes?

Comunidad y Redes de Apoyo

- ¿Qué tan importante es para los migrantes contar con una red de apoyo comunitario?
- ¿Cómo podría el consulado fortalecer esa red?
- ¿Cómo mejorar la confianza de los migrantes en el consulado y sus aliados?
- ¿Qué iniciativas podrían fortalecer las redes ya existentes?

VI. Reflexión Final

- ¿Cuál debería ser el rol principal del consulado en la protección y acompañamiento comunitario?
- ¿Qué cambios propondría para mejorar su colaboración con organizaciones civiles?
- ¿Desea agregar algo más sobre la protección de migrantes o el trabajo conjunto con el consulado?

Appendix C - Codebook

Referenced in Chapter 3. This codebook was developed based on interview extracts and reflects the operationalization of the study's theoretical frameworks, street-level bureaucracy, coproduction, social embeddedness, networked governance, and consular diplomacy. It demonstrates how abstract concepts were translated into more concrete analytical; categories and identifies the keywords and patterns used to quote qualitative data.

Code	Definition	Theoretical link	Example indicators
Discretion	Actions where consular staff make independent decisions beyond formal protocol	Street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010)	"No one told me to do it," "I decided," "not part of my duties," "we made an exception"
Embeddedness	Evidence of deep, trust based social ties and long-term relationships	Social embeddedness (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021)	"We know them personally," "strong community ties," "everyone knows each other," "binational identity"

Co-production	Collaboration between consulate, migrants, and civil society in delivering services	Co-production (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia 2017)	"We organized it together," "they helped us reach others," "they brought people to us"
Preventive protection	Outreach or education aimed at avoiding future harm	Street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), New Public Management (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020)	"Preventive work," "education campaigns," "talk to people before it happens"
Actor networks	Mentions of diverse institutional or community actors involved in protection	Networked governance (O'Toole, 1997)	"We work with…," "clinics, shelters, police, NGOs," "relationships with U.S. authorities"
Cross-border coordination	Evidence of cooperation across Mexican and U.S. institutions	Consular diplomacy (Okano-Heijmans, 2010), Networked governance (O'Toole, 1997)	"We coordinate with consuls in Mexico," "American consulate in Nogales," "cross-border institutions"
Urgent humanitarian response	Cases where consular actors intervene during life-threatening or traumatic situations	Street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), Emotional labour	"Hospitalized minors," "repatriating bodies," "rescue in the desert," "death notifications"
Legal and institutional asymmetry	Challenges arising from inconsistent or unclear binational policies	Networked governance (O'Toole, 1997), Transnational governance	"Scope is always changing," "no due process," "legal grey zones,"

		(Martinez-Schuldt, Hagan, & Weissman, 2021)	"miscommunication with Mexico"
Information access/ education	Education and information sharing by consular staff or migrants	Co-production (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia 2017) Social embeddedness (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021)	"We explain their rights," "they should inform themselves," "CIAM," "legal literacy"
Community leadership	Migrants serving as mediators, cultural brokers, or informal leaders	Co-production (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia 2017) Social embeddedness (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021)	"Hometown clubs," "organizing events," "helped us spread the word," "self-advocacy"
Resource constraints	Lack of funds, time, or staff to meet demands	New Public Management (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020), Emotional labour	"We can't be everywhere," "we are not enough," "burnout," "limited human capital"
Relational diplomacy	Consular relationships extending beyond formal protocols into personal trust	Consular diplomacy (Okano-Heijmans, 2010), Social embeddedness (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021)	"Personal contact," "we know each other," "they invite us," "trust is essential"
Narratives of criminalization	Discriminatory or criminalizing	Transnational governance	"Criminalized," "they treat migrants

	discourse against migrants	(Martinez-Schuldt, Hagan, & Weissman, 2021), Border studies (Longo, 2017)	differently," "negative attitude from nurses"
Migrant agency	Migrants advocating, educating, or organizing for their own and others' benefit	Co-production (Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia 2017) Social embeddedness (Portes &Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sha, 2021)	"They mobilize," "they advocate," "they share knowledge," "they look out for each other"

Appendix D - Invitation to Interview / Consent Form

This appendix includes the informed consent form provided to all research participants. The form was originally written in Spanish to ensure full comprehension. An English translation is included for reference.

Consent Form

Purpose of the Study:

You are being invited to participate in an interview for a master's thesis in Public Administration. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age and currently hold a position at the Mexican Consulate in Tucson, Arizona.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked some broad questions about processes, mechanisms, decision-making in the public sector, and your experience as part of the consulate. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be conducted online.

Potential Risks and Benefits:

No risks or discomforts are anticipated with participating in this study. Although there are no direct personal benefits, your feedback may contribute to a better understanding of how environmental issues are prioritized in local government.

Compensation:

No financial compensation will be offered for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

All data collected in this study will remain anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be shared. The results will be used exclusively for academic purposes in the context of a master's thesis at Leiden University, the Netherlands. Anonymous data will not be shared with third parties.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time, without any consequences.

Questions or Concerns:

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact student Nina Diaz Rodriguez (n.diaz@umail.leidenuniv.nl).

Appendix E – Anonymized list of participants

Note: This table provides an anonymized list of interview participants. Names have been removed, and roles have been generalized to protect confidentiality. All interviews were conducted in Spanish between February and April 2025. Affiliations reflect participants' roles at the time of the interview or based on their most relevant experience. Some participants were no longer employed by the Mexican Consulate at the time of the interview, but shared reflections based on prior consular service. Where applicable, roles are described in general terms to avoid indirect identification. Several participants also held overlapping positions (e.g., consular and community work, media, and advocacy). Additionally, since all participants are documented Mexican migrants, most were users of consular services at some point—whether for documentation, legal aid, or community engagement.

(See anonymized participant table following this note.)

Interviewee	Affiliation	Role / Description
1	Mexican Consulate	Consular Employee #1
2	Mexican Consulate	Consular Employee #2
3	Mexican Consulate – Protection	Consular Employee #3 (Protection Department)
4	Mexican Consulate (former)	Consular Employee #4
5	Mexican Consulate	Consular Employee #5
6	Local Environmental NGO	Organization Employee (Education & Advocacy)
7	Local Newspaper / Media Org	Organization Employee (Media Outreach, former consular employee)
8	Binational Academic Institution	University Employee (UNAM–UA Collaboration)
9	Local Media / Tourism Org	Organization Employee (Community Engagement, former consular employee)
10	YWCA	Organization Employee (Women's Services, former consular employee)

11	Migration Social Alliance	Organization Employee (Legal & Advocacy)
12	Migrant Community Member	Community Member #1 (former consular employee)
13	Migrant Community Member	Community Member #2 (former consular employee)
14	Migrant Community Member	Community Member #3 (former consular employee)
15	Health Services	Medical Professional (Non-Consulate Affiliation)