Tracing mobilities regimes: The regulation of drug smuggling and labour migration at two airports in the Netherlands and Indonesia
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Methodological notes
Research at the airport

Doing research at airports is complex. In the public parts of the airport, doing observations and informal interviews with travellers is relatively easy. Yet, getting ‘behind the scenes’ is more difficult. Although I had expected that getting access would be a problem, I underestimated how many stages of access I would encounter. To an outsider, it may seem as if there is one entity called Schiphol or Soekarno-Hatta, but in practice it is a combination of a large number of public and private organisations. The name Schiphol alone for example already causes confusion. Schiphol Group runs Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, but also has other activities, such as management contracts overseas. Amsterdam Airport Schiphol is responsible for the physical infrastructure at Schiphol. Next to that, there are different ministries responsible for processes at Schiphol. The processes that the border police carries out are the responsibility of the ministry of Justice, whereas the border police themselves are governed by the ministry of Defence. The ministry of Finance is responsible for Customs. Common language doesn’t make things easier: crossing the border in Dutch is often referred to as ‘door de douane gaan’ (‘moving through customs’), while in fact people who cross the border are checked by the border police (Koninklijke Marechaussee). The border police checks the border crossing of persons, whereas customs checks the goods that cross the border (illegal goods hidden in bodies however are a different story...). Finding out that security checks are not done by the government (although the government is responsible in the end), but by a branch of Amsterdam Airport Schiphol (AAS Security), who at their turn hire private security companies to carry out part of the security check, was also a surprise.

For my research methods, this meant that I had to deal with more different parties than I expected. As travellers pass through the airport, they encounter different checkpoints for which different private and public actors are responsible. Had I focused on border crossing of persons in specific, for example, the border police would have been my focus. Therefore, I started my fieldwork by making overviews of the parties that played a role in the mobilities regimes I wanted to study. The fact that so many organisations together form Schiphol, also made arranging interviews difficult. I approached the organisations via Schiphol Group’s communications department. My official contact person had asked me to send interview requests through him, so he could check what I was going to ask. At that stage, it was still unclear to me how Schiphol Group related to an organisation such as Customs. It appeared that my interview requests for Customs via Schiphol Group were simply sent to Customs ‘frontdoor’, the communications department. I could have gotten their contact details
from the website myself, but now it took several weeks before my request arrived there. Next, my interview request was discussed by customs management and denied ‘because it was politically sensitive’. I had many other experiences of ‘frontdoors’ closing at my first attempt to get in. These experiences made me realise that doing it via the ‘official way’ was time consuming, had little result, and was maybe also unnecessary. I realised that by seeing Schiphol not as one ‘block’, but as a number of different organisations that have their own rules and standards it was not necessary to arrange each interview via Schiphol Group’s communications department. For topics that were not under Schiphol Group’s responsibility, I decided to contact people right away. Via a contact person, I was introduced to AAS floormanagement, where I spent two days joining their activities. During these two days, I tried as much as possible to ask people I met if I could also interview them, and this led me to AAS Security and KLM. It was a great help that I could now mention the names of people I had gotten to know when developing new contacts.

At Soekarno-Hatta Airport arranging interviews was easier. I contacted the airport operator PT Angkasa Pura II via a contact person of the joint venture between Schiphol and Soekarno-Hatta. I told Angkasa Pura II that I was impressed with the recent growth of (domestic) air travel and wanted to know how these developments have their impact on the movement of passengers through the terminals at Soekarno-Hatta Airport. The airport operator gave me the opportunity to do interviews and observations at the operational departments. I did interviews with operational managers and joined employees who worked at the flight planning department, and in the Airport Operation Control room to see how the operational departments planned for the next day, and how they constantly had to reschedule in real time. I also did one week of fieldwork joining employees of the registered traveller program Saphire, and sitting at the automated border passage gates with them to assist arriving Saphire members.

I arranged access to the migrant terminal via an NGO who had developed good contacts with the National Agency. I started with an interview with the head of the National Agency, who granted me permission to enter the terminal. I asked him for a small note with his signature and this note proved very helpful in negotiating access with the officials who guarded the entrance of the terminal. In total, I have spent one week, including a night, in the migrant building to do observations, and several days in the clean area of terminal 2 where migrant workers are separated from other passengers. During my time in the terminal I talked with many employees and with migrant workers who passed through the terminal.
Research outside the airport

In total I held in-depth interviews with 33 travellers about their journey. The interviews were tape-recorded and lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, but most interviews were around one hour. In the interviews, I asked travellers to recount their travel experiences from the moment of departure at the airport abroad until their arrival home. My strategy for finding travellers differed in the two countries. In the Netherlands, I focused on travel around the Christmas holidays, because that is a period in which many Surinamese-Dutch people visit family members in Suriname. I contacted people via Surinamese organisations in the neighbourhood where I lived and found a few respondents who would visit Suriname in the near future. Most travellers however, were contacted at the check-in desks for flights to Paramaribo at Schiphol. The advantage of contacting my respondents before they left was that they knew in advance that I would interview them about their return journey, and therefore they paid extra attention to all the steps of the anti-drug smuggling checks they went through. I interviewed these travellers within one week after their return journey to the Netherlands to make sure their memory of the journey was still fresh. In Indonesia, I have interviewed 18 migrant workers who had just returned from abroad. The strategy of contacting travelers before they leave was impossible because most migrant workers spend two years abroad. Instead, I visited migrant workers in their home villages in the regions Sukabumi and Indramayu in Java, two major migrant-sending regions. I spent one week in two villages and stayed with families. Through local contacts I found out where migrant workers who had returned in the last month lived. I visited their houses by foot, or if it was too far, by car. The advantage of interviewing travellers at their homes (instead of at the airport) was that they were in a trusted environment where they could talk freely about what had happened during the return journeys. In addition to interviews with travellers, I did 22 interviews with stakeholders outside the airport, including the National Agency, local government, NGOs, transportation companies, labour recruitment companies, and lawyers. These interviews mainly took place in Jakarta and in the Randstad metropolitan region in the Netherlands.