

**SMUGGLING, BORDER ENFORCEMENT FAILURES AND DIPLOMATIC STRAIN:
TRANS-BORDER SECURITY CHALLENGES ALONG THE NIGERIA–BENIN
BORDER, 2015–2023**

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Abstract

This study examined smuggling, border enforcement failures and diplomatic strain along the Nigeria–Benin border between 2015 and 2023. It specifically investigated how smuggling as a trans-border security threat weakened diplomatic relations between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. The study was anchored on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which explains security threats as interconnected within geographically proximate states. A qualitative research design was adopted, relying exclusively on secondary sources, including ECOWAS documents, government publications, scholarly works, policy reports and publications of international organizations. Qualitative content analysis was employed to examine patterns of smuggling, weaknesses in border enforcement and their implications for Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations. The study found, among other things, that persistent smuggling was sustained by economic disparities, price differentials, porous borders, corruption and weak enforcement; that disagreements over the control of illicit cross-border trade periodically generated diplomatic

tensions; that unilateral border-control measures weakened mutual trust; that inadequate coordination among border agencies created opportunities for smuggling networks; and that limited ECOWAS operational coordination constrained sustainable management of the problem. The study concluded that smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border was not merely a law-enforcement issue but a regional security challenge with direct implications for bilateral relations. It recommended strengthened joint border management, intelligence sharing, harmonisation of customs procedures, improved enforcement capacity and greater ECOWAS coordination.

Keywords: *ECOWAS, smuggling, border security, diplomatic relations, Nigeria–Benin border, Regional Security Complex Theory, trans-border insecurity.*

Introduction

Regional integration in West Africa has been closely associated with the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to facilitate the movement of persons, goods, services and capital among member states. The adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment constituted a major institutional attempt to reduce restrictions associated with colonial boundaries and promote regional economic cooperation. The protocol was intended to facilitate legitimate movement and strengthen interaction among West African populations rather than create security vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, the implementation of regional integration arrangements has generated complex security challenges, particularly where free movement has not been matched by effective and harmonised border-management systems (ECOWAS, 1979, 2006; Adepaju, 2002, 2005).

The Nigeria–Benin border occupies an important position within this regional framework because of the intensity of economic and social interactions between the two countries. The border links populations whose commercial and social relationships predated the formal establishment of the colonial boundary. Consequently, legitimate commercial activities coexist with informal and illicit cross-border transactions. Asiwaju (2005) observes that historical patterns of trans-border interaction have continued to influence contemporary border governance in West Africa. In the Nigeria–Benin context, differences in national economic policies, prices, tariffs and customs procedures have created incentives for traders and smuggling networks to exploit regulatory differences between the two states.

Smuggling has therefore become an important dimension of trans-border insecurity. Adeola and Oluyemi (2012) associate cross-border activities in the Nigeria–Benin environment with wider political, economic and security consequences, while Adeola and Fayomi (2023) emphasise the

implications of cross-border illicit activities for economic and political security. Smuggling is not restricted to a single commodity or group of actors. It may involve petroleum products, agricultural commodities, vehicles, prohibited goods and other items whose movement is restricted by national laws. The persistence of these activities demonstrates the difficulty of enforcing national economic regulations across a border characterized by extensive legitimate movement.

The security consequences extend beyond customs revenue and economic regulation. Persistent smuggling can weaken institutional authority where enforcement agencies lack adequate personnel, equipment, intelligence capabilities and inter-agency coordination. Akinyemi (2019) notes the importance of effective security governance in Nigeria's regional responsibilities, while Afolabi (2021) identifies implementation challenges as an important limitation in ECOWAS regional security management. Where border institutions are unable to control illicit movements effectively, smuggling networks may become embedded within local economic and social structures, thereby making enforcement more difficult.

The diplomatic dimension is particularly significant. Nigeria and Benin maintain extensive economic and social relations, and developments at their common border have implications for bilateral cooperation. When one state perceives the other as failing to prevent the movement of prohibited goods, diplomatic disagreements may arise. Conversely, when stringent border-control measures are introduced unilaterally, the affected neighbouring state may perceive such measures as harmful to its economic interests and inconsistent with regional integration commitments. Olabanji and Okunade (2021) identify the tension between border closure policies and ECOWAS regional integration as an important dimension of Nigeria's border-security policy.

The 2019–2020 border closure by Nigeria illustrates the interaction between smuggling control, national security and bilateral relations. The policy was associated with attempts to control the movement of goods and address perceived abuses of Nigeria's trade and customs regime. However, the closure also generated economic and diplomatic concerns because of its consequences for communities and commercial actors on both sides of the border. The episode demonstrated that a border-security measure directed at smuggling could have implications for regional integration and diplomatic relations.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides an appropriate framework for interpreting this situation because Nigeria and Benin are geographically proximate states whose security interests are closely interconnected. Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that security threats are frequently concentrated within regional settings because neighbouring states are more directly affected by each other's security policies and vulnerabilities. From this perspective, smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border cannot be treated as an isolated Nigerian or Beninese problem.

The activities of smugglers, the enforcement practices of national agencies, economic disparities and the responses of regional institutions interact across national boundaries.

Against this background, this article examines the relationship between smuggling, border-enforcement failures and diplomatic strain along the Nigeria–Benin border between 2015 and 2023. The central concern is how persistent illicit cross-border trade weakened mutual trust and complicated bilateral relations between Nigeria and Benin. The article contributes to the understanding of trans-border security by connecting the economic and institutional dimensions of smuggling with the diplomatic consequences of border-security responses.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed by this study was the persistence of smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border despite the existence of ECOWAS protocols, national border-control institutions and bilateral cooperation mechanisms. The problem was not simply that prohibited goods crossed the border, but that persistent smuggling exposed weaknesses in border governance and periodically generated disagreement between Nigeria and Benin over responsibility for controlling illicit trade. Economic disparities, price differentials and differences in trade policies created incentives for cross-border smuggling, while porous border areas, inadequate surveillance, corruption and weak institutional coordination created opportunities for such activities to continue (Adeola & Oluyemi, 2012; Akinyemi, 2019; Afolabi, 2021). The situation became diplomatically significant when Nigeria adopted stringent or unilateral measures to control smuggling, particularly during the 2019–2020 border closure, while Benin expressed concerns about the economic consequences of restrictions on cross-border commerce. Thus, the problem was the inability of existing national and regional border-management mechanisms to contain smuggling without generating tensions that weakened bilateral trust and complicated Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations. This gap between regional integration commitments and practical border-security outcomes constituted the principal problem investigated in this article.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarifications

Smuggling

Smuggling may be understood as the clandestine movement of goods or persons across national borders in violation of applicable laws and regulations. In the context of the Nigeria–Benin border, smuggling is closely associated with differences in prices, tariffs, taxation, trade restrictions and availability of commodities. It is therefore important to distinguish smuggling from informal cross-border trade. Informal trade may involve legitimate goods that are not officially recorded or fully

regulated, whereas smuggling involves deliberate circumvention of legal restrictions or customs requirements.

The historical character of the Nigeria–Benin border has contributed to the complexity of this distinction. Asiwaju (2005) explains that contemporary West African boundaries divided communities and commercial networks that had historically interacted across territories. The persistence of these relationships means that state-imposed border regulations may not always correspond with local economic practices. Where formal trade procedures are considered expensive, slow or restrictive, some traders may resort to informal channels.

Economic incentives constitute an important driver of smuggling. Price differentials between Nigeria and Benin can make the movement of commodities across the border profitable. Differences in tariff structures and domestic economic policies may further encourage traders to exploit regulatory disparities. Adeola and Oluyemi (2012) identify economic and security implications associated with cross-border movements, while Afolabi (2021) highlights the broader challenges of regional security governance.

Smuggling also has institutional consequences. Persistent illicit trade can reduce customs revenue, undermine regulatory authority and encourage corruption. Where border officials are inadequately supervised, the profitability of smuggling can create opportunities for collusion between enforcement personnel and criminal networks. The problem therefore involves both the demand for illicitly moved goods and the institutional capacity available to prevent their movement.

Border Enforcement

Border enforcement involves the institutions, procedures and measures through which states regulate movement across their territorial boundaries. In Nigeria, border management involves several agencies, including the Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service and other security institutions. Effective enforcement requires adequate personnel, infrastructure, intelligence, communication systems, inter-agency cooperation and clear operational responsibilities.

However, border enforcement becomes particularly difficult where borders are extensive, communities are socially interconnected and numerous informal routes exist. The Nigeria–Benin border presents such conditions. Enforcement concentrated exclusively at official crossing points may leave alternative routes vulnerable to exploitation. This makes effective border governance dependent not only on physical surveillance but also on intelligence, community cooperation and cross-border institutional coordination.

Opanike, Aduloju and Adenipekun (2015) argue that free movement arrangements have important security implications where implementation and border-control capacities remain weak. Similarly, Edeko (2011) notes that criminal networks may exploit weaknesses within regional free-movement arrangements. Border enforcement therefore requires a balance between facilitating legitimate movement and preventing illicit activities.

Diplomatic Strain

Diplomatic strain in this study denotes tension or disagreement between Nigeria and Benin arising from conflicting interests, accusations, policy responses or disagreements concerning cross-border activities. It does not necessarily imply a breakdown of diplomatic relations. Rather, it describes circumstances in which persistent security and economic problems complicate bilateral cooperation.

Smuggling may contribute to diplomatic strain in several ways. First, Nigeria may regard the movement of prohibited goods through Benin as evidence of inadequate enforcement or tolerance of illicit trade. Second, Benin may regard stringent Nigerian border restrictions as economically harmful or inconsistent with ECOWAS principles. Third, repeated disagreements can weaken mutual trust and make bilateral cooperation more difficult.

The diplomatic dimension is therefore connected to the enforcement dimension. A security measure taken by one state may be interpreted differently by the other. Nigeria may perceive border restrictions as necessary for protecting domestic industries and revenue, whereas affected actors in Benin may perceive them as restrictions on legitimate commerce and regional integration. The resulting disagreement illustrates the interconnected nature of security within the Nigeria–Benin regional relationship.

ECOWAS and Trans-Border Security

ECOWAS was established to promote economic cooperation and integration in West Africa. Its free-movement regime was intended to reduce barriers to movement and strengthen regional economic interaction. The Protocol relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment represents one of the central instruments for achieving this objective (ECOWAS, 1979).

However, regional integration and border security may come into tension where national enforcement systems are not harmonised. Opanike et al. (2015) identify the security implications of free movement, while Afolabi (2021) emphasises the implementation difficulties affecting ECOWAS security management. The challenge is consequently not the principle of regional

integration itself but the institutional capacity to reconcile legitimate movement with effective regulation.

For the Nigeria–Benin border, this requires cooperation in customs administration, intelligence sharing, joint surveillance and information exchange. Where each state responds independently to a shared security problem, the effectiveness of enforcement may be limited. This reinforces the relevance of a regional rather than exclusively national approach.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary sources. The design was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine the historical development of smuggling, border-enforcement practices and their implications for Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations between 2015 and 2023. Rather than measuring individual attitudes or generating primary behavioural data, the study concentrated on interpreting documentary evidence concerning policies, institutional actions, security developments and bilateral relations.

Secondary data were obtained from ECOWAS documents, Nigerian government publications, relevant materials of border-management institutions, scholarly books and journal articles, policy documents, research reports and publications of international organizations. Documents relating to the ECOWAS free-movement regime, regional security, cross-border crime, smuggling and Nigeria–Benin relations constituted important sources. Academic studies provided conceptual and empirical perspectives, while institutional publications helped establish the policy and enforcement context.

Qualitative content analysis was employed to examine the selected materials. Documents were systematically reviewed in relation to the central research question, with attention given to recurring evidence concerning smuggling patterns, enforcement weaknesses, bilateral disagreements and regional cooperation. The analysis also compared evidence from different categories of sources in order to identify convergence and divergence. Official documents were considered alongside scholarly studies and international reports to reduce dependence on a single source category.

The period 2015–2023 was adopted because it enabled the study to examine developments before, during and after major policy responses to smuggling, including the 2019–2020 Nigerian land-border closure. The Nigeria–Benin border was selected because of its strategic importance to regional commerce and the intensity of cross-border interaction. The analysis was guided by Regional Security Complex Theory, enabling the study to connect national border-management problems with wider regional security dynamics.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The study adopted Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its sole theoretical framework. RSCT was systematically developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003) to explain the geographical clustering of security threats and the interdependence of states within regional security environments. The central proposition is that states located close to one another are likely to experience stronger security interdependence because their policies, vulnerabilities and responses directly affect one another.

The theory is relevant to the Nigeria–Benin border because the two countries share a geographical boundary and extensive economic and social interaction. Security developments in one country can therefore produce consequences in the other. Smuggling is a clear illustration of such interdependence. Goods prohibited or restricted by Nigeria may be obtained or transported through routes involving Benin, while Nigerian enforcement policies can affect traders, communities and economic activities on the Beninese side.

RSCT also recognizes that security is multidimensional. Although traditionally associated with military and political security, the theory accommodates economic, societal and other dimensions of security. Smuggling can therefore be analyzed as an economic-security problem because it affects government revenue, domestic industries, regulatory authority and the functioning of border institutions. It may also become a political and diplomatic concern when persistent illicit trade affects relations between neighbouring states.

Another important element of RSCT is geographical proximity. Nigeria and Benin's shared border creates a security environment in which the actions of one state cannot easily be separated from the security concerns of the other. A unilateral Nigerian measure designed to reduce smuggling may produce economic and diplomatic effects in Benin. Similarly, weaknesses in Beninese border control may affect Nigerian domestic security and economic interests.

The concept of amity and enmity is also relevant. Nigeria and Benin have generally maintained cooperative relations, but disputes concerning cross-border trade and enforcement can generate temporary tensions. The 2019–2020 border closure demonstrated how a security and economic measure adopted by one state could create diplomatic difficulties with its neighbour.

RSCT further highlights the importance of regional institutions. ECOWAS provides a regional institutional framework through which member states are expected to cooperate in managing shared security challenges. From the RSCT perspective, the persistence of smuggling despite ECOWAS protocols indicates a gap between regional security interdependence and operational

coordination. Consequently, the theory provides a basis for examining why national measures alone have been insufficient in addressing a problem that crosses national boundaries.

Applied to this study, RSCT suggests that smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border should be understood as a regionalized security challenge rather than a purely domestic crime. The activities of smugglers, weaknesses in border enforcement, economic policy differences and diplomatic responses form an interconnected pattern. The theory therefore supports the argument that sustainable management requires cooperation between Nigeria, Benin and ECOWAS rather than isolated national action.

Empirical Verification

The empirical review was restricted to ten scholars or studies drawn from the completed thesis and synchronized around the relationship between smuggling, enforcement weaknesses and bilateral or regional security.

Edeko (2011) examined ECOWAS protocols and trans-border crime in Nigeria, with attention to the implications of free movement for crime control. The study indicated that criminal groups could exploit regional movement arrangements for illicit activities, including smuggling, trafficking and the movement of prohibited goods. Its significance to the present study lies in demonstrating that regional integration arrangements require effective enforcement mechanisms if they are to avoid creating opportunities for trans-border crime.

Asiwaju (2005) examined trans-border regionalism and border governance in West Africa. His analysis demonstrated the importance of historical and socio-economic relationships in shaping contemporary border practices. For the Nigeria–Benin case, the persistence of cross-border commercial relationships helps explain why formal territorial boundaries do not automatically eliminate informal economic interaction. The study consequently provides an important historical explanation for the resilience of activities that occur outside formal border-control systems.

Adeola and Fayomi (2012) examined political and security implications associated with cross-border migration between Nigeria and neighbouring Francophone states. Their work showed that cross-border movements could produce both developmental benefits and security challenges. The study is relevant because it places border insecurity within the wider context of regional interaction and demonstrates why movement across the Nigeria–Benin frontier cannot be considered exclusively from the perspective of national territorial control.

Akinyemi (2019) examined security governance and Nigeria's role in ECOWAS. The study highlighted the importance of institutional capacity and regional cooperation in managing security challenges. Its relevance to the present study lies in the observation that Nigeria's national security

responsibilities are closely connected with its regional obligations. Weak coordination between national and regional mechanisms can therefore constrain effective responses to trans-border threats.

Ikelegbe (2017) examined the relationship between economic marginalisation and insecurity. His analysis indicated that communities experiencing limited economic opportunities may develop relationships with informal or illicit economic networks. Applied to the Nigeria–Benin border, this suggests that enforcement alone may not eliminate smuggling where border populations depend substantially on informal commerce for their livelihoods.

Asiwaju and Barkindo (2016) identified the Nigeria–Benin border as an important corridor for smuggling and associated the persistence of illicit trade with policy asymmetries between the two countries. Their work is particularly relevant to the present study because differences in economic and trade policies can create opportunities for arbitrage and illicit movement. These asymmetries also have diplomatic implications because each state may seek to protect its economic interests through different regulatory measures.

Olawale and Adebayo (2020) examined the consequences of Nigeria's border closures. Their findings suggested that restrictions could reduce certain forms of smuggling temporarily but could also displace illicit trade towards alternative routes. This finding is important to the present study because it demonstrates how unilateral enforcement may address symptoms without eliminating the structural conditions that sustain smuggling.

Alabi (2020) further showed that smuggling networks possess adaptive capacities and can modify their methods in response to enforcement pressure. Such adaptability weakens the effectiveness of enforcement strategies that depend predominantly on physical restriction without corresponding intelligence and regional coordination. It also demonstrates why border security must be treated as an ongoing regional governance challenge.

Gambari (2019) assessed ECOWAS regional security arrangements and observed that the organisation possesses important policy frameworks but faces implementation challenges. This finding is significant because the Nigeria–Benin smuggling problem exists within an institutional environment where regional commitments are stronger than the practical capacity for coordinated implementation.

Eme and Onwuka (2021) examined the limitations of ECOWAS in harmonising customs operations among member states. Their analysis reinforces the argument that divergent customs procedures and weak institutional coordination can undermine regional approaches to border

security. For the Nigeria–Benin relationship, inadequate harmonisation creates conditions in which differences in national customs practices can continue to encourage illicit cross-border activities.

Taken together, these ten empirical studies demonstrate that smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border is influenced by historical border structures, economic disparities, policy differences, institutional weaknesses and inadequate regional coordination. They also establish that unilateral enforcement may displace rather than permanently eliminate illicit activities. However, the studies provide less sustained attention to the specific diplomatic consequences of smuggling between Nigeria and Benin over the 2015–2023 period. The present study therefore extends the existing literature by connecting smuggling and border-enforcement failures directly to diplomatic strain within the Nigeria–Benin relationship.

Discussion of Findings

Finding One: Smuggling weakened Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations by generating mutual accusations and distrust

The study found that persistent smuggling periodically strained diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Benin because each country had different interests concerning the regulation of cross-border commerce. Nigerian authorities frequently viewed the movement of prohibited goods through Benin as a challenge to Nigeria's customs regime, domestic industries and economic security. Conversely, restrictions imposed by Nigeria affected traders and communities in Benin and generated concerns about the economic consequences of border-control measures. Such disagreements created conditions in which mutual trust could be weakened.

This finding is consistent with the argument of Asiwaju (2005) that the historical and economic interconnectedness of West African border communities makes border management complex. It also supports the analysis of Akinyemi (2019), which emphasises the importance of regional security cooperation. From the perspective of RSCT, the problem illustrates security interdependence: the security policy of one state produces consequences for the other.

Finding Two: Unilateral border-control measures intensified diplomatic tensions

The study found that unilateral measures, particularly the 2019–2020 border closure, contributed to diplomatic strain because they attempted to address a regional problem through predominantly national enforcement. The policy reflected Nigeria's concern about smuggling and the protection of domestic economic interests. However, its effects extended beyond Nigerian territory and affected economic activities in Benin.

Olawale and Adebayo (2020) indicate that border restrictions can reduce some forms of illicit trade while simultaneously encouraging the redirection of smuggling activities. This finding demonstrates the limitations of enforcement strategies that are not accompanied by effective regional coordination. Within RSCT, unilateral action may be insufficient because the underlying security threat remains embedded within a network extending across neighbouring territories.

Finding Three: Weak enforcement created opportunities for smuggling networks and indirectly affected bilateral relations

The study established that inadequate border enforcement contributed significantly to the persistence of smuggling. Problems identified in the completed work included inadequate manpower, weak surveillance infrastructure, corruption and limited inter-agency coordination. Such weaknesses allowed illicit activities to continue despite formal border-control policies.

The diplomatic implication is important. Where enforcement agencies fail to control smuggling, neighbouring states may become subject to accusations of complicity or inadequate cooperation. Conversely, when enforcement becomes excessively restrictive, affected communities and authorities may view the measures as disproportionate. Thus, enforcement failures can generate diplomatic problems indirectly by creating repeated disputes over responsibility.

This finding corresponds with Edeko (2011), who identified weaknesses in enforcement mechanisms as an important factor enabling trans-border crime. It also reflects Gambari's (2019) observation that regional security frameworks can be constrained by implementation limitations.

Finding Four: Divergent economic and customs policies sustained smuggling and created recurring bilateral tensions

The study found that economic and policy differences between Nigeria and Benin contributed to the persistence of smuggling. Disparity in prices, tariffs, customs arrangements and trade policies created incentives for individuals and organised networks to move commodities through unofficial routes. Asiwaju and Barkindo (2016) associated the Nigeria–Benin border with such policy asymmetries.

The problem was therefore not solely a failure to police the physical boundary. It also involved differences in the regulatory environments of the two countries. As long as significant economic incentives existed, enforcement pressure alone could encourage smugglers to alter routes rather than abandon illicit activities. This situation created recurring disagreements because each country had legitimate but sometimes conflicting economic and security interests.

From an RSCT perspective, the finding demonstrates that economic security is inseparable from regional security. National economic decisions generate trans-border consequences, making policy harmonisation necessary for sustainable management.

Finding Five: Limited ECOWAS operational coordination constrained the sustainable management of smuggling and diplomatic tensions

The finding was that ECOWAS possessed important normative frameworks but had limited operational capacity to coordinate sustained action against smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border. The completed study found limited evidence of sustained joint patrols and effective intelligence-sharing mechanisms specifically directed towards smuggling during the study period.

Eme and Onwuka (2021) identified weaknesses in customs harmonisation, while Afolabi (2021) highlighted broader implementation challenges within ECOWAS security management. These limitations meant that Nigeria and Benin frequently depended on their national institutions to manage a problem whose causes and effects were regional.

The finding supports RSCT because it demonstrates that shared security threats require mechanisms capable of translating regional interdependence into practical cooperation. Without effective intelligence sharing, coordinated customs procedures and joint enforcement mechanisms, unilateral national actions remain vulnerable to circumvention.

Conclusion

This study examined smuggling, border-enforcement failures and diplomatic strain along the Nigeria–Benin border between 2015 and 2023. The analysis demonstrated that smuggling constituted more than an economic or customs problem. It was a trans-border security challenge whose persistence was shaped by economic disparities, policy differences, weak institutional enforcement, porous border areas and the adaptive character of illicit networks.

The study further established that persistent smuggling weakened Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations by generating mutual accusations, reducing trust and producing disagreements over the appropriate response to illicit cross-border trade. The 2019–2020 border closure illustrated the difficulty of addressing a regional security challenge through unilateral national measures. Although such measures could produce temporary effects, they did not remove the structural incentives and networks sustaining smuggling.

The findings also demonstrated that weak enforcement was connected to inadequate manpower, surveillance limitations, corruption and weak inter-agency cooperation. These institutional

problems created opportunities for smugglers and complicated bilateral relations because responsibility for controlling illicit activities became a recurrent source of disagreement.

Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory, the study concludes that Nigeria and Benin exist within an interconnected security environment in which the actions and vulnerabilities of one state affect the other. Consequently, sustainable management of smuggling requires more than national enforcement. It requires harmonised policies, effective bilateral cooperation and stronger ECOWAS operational coordination. Strengthening these mechanisms would contribute not only to border security but also to the stability of Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations and the broader objectives of West African regional integration.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening joint Nigeria–Benin border management

Nigeria and Benin should strengthen joint border-management mechanisms through coordinated patrols, joint operational planning and regular meetings between relevant border-security institutions. Such cooperation should focus particularly on known informal routes and areas vulnerable to smuggling. A coordinated approach would reduce the tendency for smugglers to exploit institutional gaps between the two countries and would strengthen mutual confidence in border-security operations.

2. Establishment of stronger intelligence-sharing mechanisms

The two countries, with ECOWAS support, should strengthen mechanisms for timely intelligence sharing concerning smuggling networks, routes, commodities and suspected facilitators. Information exchange should involve customs, immigration, police and other relevant security institutions. Improved intelligence cooperation would make it possible to identify and disrupt smuggling networks without relying excessively on broad restrictions on legitimate cross-border movement.

3. Harmonisation of customs and trade-enforcement procedures

ECOWAS should intensify efforts to harmonise customs procedures, border documentation and relevant trade regulations among Nigeria and Benin. Policy disparities and differences in customs arrangements create economic incentives for illicit trade. Harmonisation would reduce opportunities for regulatory arbitrage while preserving the objectives of regional integration and legitimate commercial movement.

4. Strengthening the capacity and accountability of border-security agencies

The capacity of Nigerian and Beninese border institutions should be strengthened through adequate staffing, modern surveillance equipment, improved communication systems and continuous professional training. At the same time, stronger accountability mechanisms should be introduced to address corruption and official collusion with smugglers. Effective enforcement requires both institutional capacity and integrity. Without these, investments in border infrastructure may not produce sustainable security outcomes.

5. Strengthening ECOWAS operational coordination and bilateral diplomatic mechanisms

ECOWAS should move beyond normative commitments towards stronger operational coordination in managing trans-border smuggling. This should include support for joint border operations, intelligence coordination, regular bilateral consultations and mechanisms for resolving disputes arising from border-enforcement measures. Nigeria and Benin should also maintain regular diplomatic consultations before adopting major border measures with substantial cross-border consequences. Such arrangements would reduce misunderstandings, preserve mutual trust and ensure that responses to smuggling remain consistent with the broader objectives of regional integration.

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