

**ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS) FREE
MOVEMENT REGIME AND TRANS-BORDER INSECURITY IN WEST AFRICA:
EXPLAINING THE PARADOX OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION ALONG THE
NIGERIA–BENIN BORDER**

Anochie Ogochukwu Augustine

Email: anochieug@gmail.com

Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam, Anambra State

&

Prof. BOG Nwanolue

Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, I
gbariam, Anambra State

&

Prof. C.C. Mbah

Email: mbahclem@gmail.com

Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam, Anambra State

Abstract

The study examined the paradoxical relationship between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement regime and trans-border insecurity along the Nigeria–Benin border between 2015 and 2023. Although the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment was designed to facilitate regional integration, economic interaction and social mobility, its implementation within a porous and weakly regulated border environment created opportunities that were exploited by smuggling networks. The study investigated how the free movement regime contributed to trans-border insecurity, how smuggling affected Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations, and how weak enforcement by border security agencies sustained the movement of persons and goods through unofficial routes. The study adopted Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its theoretical framework, while Liberal Institutionalism was considered but not adopted as the principal explanatory framework. A

qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary sources was employed, and documentary materials were subjected to qualitative content analysis. The study found that the problem arose less from the principle of free movement itself than from implementation gaps, porous borders, policy disparities, corruption and weak institutional coordination. It further found that persistent smuggling strained bilateral relations and that unilateral border measures produced only temporary effects. The study therefore recommended stronger ECOWAS coordination, harmonized border procedures, intelligence sharing, institutional reform and development-oriented border governance.

Keywords: *ECOWAS, free movement, trans-border insecurity, smuggling, Nigeria–Benin border, regional integration, Regional Security Complex Theory.*

1. Introduction

Regional integration has remained an important strategy for promoting economic development, political cooperation and collective security in West Africa. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, was originally conceived as an economic organization intended to promote cooperation, trade and regional development among West African states. Over time, however, its mandate expanded to include peace, security, conflict prevention and regional governance. One of the most significant instruments of this integration project was the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, adopted in 1979. The Protocol sought to reduce restrictions on the movement of citizens within the Community and to facilitate residence, employment, commercial activity and regional economic interaction (ECOWAS, 1979; Adepaju, 2002).

The free movement regime represented an important institutional attempt to reduce the restrictive consequences of colonial boundaries and reconnect populations that had historically maintained economic, cultural and social relationships across territorial boundaries. In West Africa, many border communities had continued to interact through trade, kinship and migration despite the formal boundaries inherited from colonial rule. Asiwaju (2005) therefore observed that African borders should not be understood solely as territorial barriers because they also constituted social and economic spaces within which communities maintained longstanding relationships.

The Nigeria–Benin border provided a particularly important illustration of this situation. The two countries shared extensive socio-economic interactions involving communities, traders, transporters and families whose relationships predated the contemporary international boundary. Major corridors such as Seme–Krake and Idiroko–Igolo facilitated substantial formal and informal

movement of people and commodities. Consequently, the border simultaneously functioned as an avenue for regional integration and as a space in which illicit activities could occur. The completed study identified the Nigeria–Benin border as one of the significant economic and security frontiers in West Africa, with legitimate trade occurring alongside informal and illicit movements.

The central paradox therefore concerned the relationship between openness and control. Regional integration required the reduction of barriers to legitimate movement and trade, whereas effective border security required states to monitor the movement of people and goods. Where border controls were weak, the opportunities created by regional mobility could also be exploited by actors engaged in smuggling, trafficking and other forms of trans-border crime. Andreas (2011) described modern borders as capable of becoming selectively permeable, allowing legitimate and illicit movements to coexist. In this context, the problem was not necessarily the principle of free movement, but the institutional conditions under which the principle was implemented.

The Nigeria–Benin border was particularly affected by differences in national trade policies, customs regulations, commodity prices and enforcement practices. The economic significance of Benin's re-export trade and Nigeria's large consumer market contributed to persistent informal commercial exchanges. Golub (2012) demonstrated the structural importance of the Nigeria–Benin trade relationship, particularly the role of Benin's port economy and re-export activities directed towards Nigeria. Such economic interdependence created legitimate commercial opportunities but also incentives for traders and organised networks to circumvent national regulations.

Between 2015 and 2023, the situation became especially significant because Nigeria intensified efforts to control smuggling while ECOWAS continued to promote regional integration. Nigeria's partial land-border closure during 2019–2020 represented one of the clearest manifestations of the tension between national economic and security interests and regional integration objectives. The measure was justified by the Nigerian government largely in relation to smuggling and economic protection, but it also generated economic and diplomatic concerns in Benin and raised questions about the compatibility of unilateral border restrictions with ECOWAS integration commitments. The completed study consequently identified the Nigeria–Benin border as an important setting for examining the contradiction between regional openness and national border-control imperatives.

The study was consequently guided by three interrelated questions. First, how did the ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons and goods engender trans-border insecurity along the Nigeria–Benin border? Second, how did smuggling as a trans-border security threat weaken diplomatic ties between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin? Third, how did weak enforcement by border security agencies of both countries increase the incidence of smuggling of persons and goods along the border?

The article therefore examined the relationship between the ECOWAS free movement regime and trans-border insecurity, with particular attention to smuggling, bilateral relations and border enforcement. It argued that the apparent paradox between integration and insecurity was substantially explained by the gap between regional policy objectives and their implementation within a complex border environment.

2. Statement of the Problem

The principal problem addressed by the study was the persistence of trans-border insecurity, particularly smuggling, despite the existence of ECOWAS regional integration mechanisms designed to facilitate lawful movement, trade and cooperation among member states. The free movement regime was intended to strengthen economic interaction and promote regional integration; however, its implementation along the Nigeria–Benin border occurred within an environment characterised by porous geographical boundaries, economic disparities, weak institutional capacity, corruption, informal trade networks and differences in national trade policies. Consequently, criminal and commercial actors were able to exploit gaps between formal ECOWAS rules and national enforcement practices.

The problem became more complex because the persistence of smuggling could not be explained exclusively by the existence of free movement. The literature reviewed in the completed study showed disagreement over the security consequences of the Protocol. Some scholars argued that liberalized movement created opportunities that could be exploited by criminal networks, while others maintained that the Protocol itself could not be held responsible for cross-border insecurity and that the principal problem was weak implementation and inadequate border governance (Adjei&Clottey, 2007; Opanike, Aduloju, &Adenipekun, 2015). The completed study similarly observed that porous borders, weak enforcement, corruption, economic incentives and policy disparities interacted to sustain smuggling.

The persistence of smuggling also generated bilateral tensions. Nigeria's attempts to control the movement of restricted commodities and protect domestic economic interests sometimes conflicted with the economic interests of Benin, whose economy was substantially connected with regional re-export and cross-border trade. Border closures and intensified enforcement therefore had implications beyond crime control, affecting trade, livelihoods, diplomatic relations and the practical implementation of ECOWAS integration commitments. At the operational level, inadequate manpower, poor surveillance infrastructure, corruption and weak inter-agency coordination further reduced the capacity of border institutions to manage legitimate movement while detecting illicit activities. The central problem was therefore the inability to reconcile regional mobility with effective and coordinated border security.

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Clarifications

Regional integration was understood as the process through which independent states coordinated their economic, political and security policies to pursue shared objectives. In the ECOWAS context, integration involved trade liberalization, free movement of persons and goods, regional economic cooperation and collective responses to common security challenges. Integration was expected to reduce barriers to trade and movement while expanding markets and creating opportunities for economic development. Schiff and Winters (2003) argued that developing countries had increasingly adopted regional integration as an instrument for economic cooperation and development. Kayizzi-Mugerwa, Anyanwu and Conceição (2014) similarly associated regional integration with the expansion of markets and opportunities for economic development.

However, integration could produce unintended consequences where institutions responsible for managing openness remained weak. The removal of barriers to movement could facilitate legitimate commerce while simultaneously creating opportunities for illicit activities. This tension was especially important in West Africa because many borders were historically embedded within social networks that predated the modern state. Asiwaju (2005) therefore treated African borders as spaces of trans-border interaction rather than simply lines of territorial separation.

The concept of a border was accordingly central to understanding trans-border insecurity. Newman (2006) argued that borders performed political, social and economic functions beyond geographical demarcation. Along the Nigeria–Benin frontier, communities on both sides shared cultural, linguistic and economic relationships. Such relationships complicated the rigid distinction between formal and informal movement. Informal economic practices could become deeply embedded in local livelihoods, while enforcement measures could be perceived as restrictions on established patterns of interaction.

Trans-border crime involved illegal activities whose organization, movement or consequences extended across national boundaries. Passas (2003) associated trans-border crime with activities that violated the laws of more than one state, while Ering (2011) emphasized the cross-national character of the perpetrators and consequences. Such activities included human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, smuggling, money laundering and other forms of organized crime. The security consequences arose because individual states could not effectively control criminal networks whose operations extended beyond their territorial jurisdictions.

Trans-border insecurity was therefore broader than conventional military insecurity. It encompassed economic crimes, human trafficking, arms movement, illicit trade and other activities that weakened state authority and affected neighboring states. The completed study located smuggling within this wider conception of non-traditional security. It showed that

smuggling affected government revenue, domestic industries, border governance and regional cooperation.

Smuggling constituted a particularly important concept in the study. It involved the clandestine movement of goods across national borders in violation of customs regulations, taxation requirements or restrictions. Smuggling along the Nigeria–Benin border included commodities such as petroleum products, rice, poultry products, vehicles and other consumer goods. Its persistence was associated with economic incentives, price differentials, tariff disparities, porous routes and corruption. Nte (2021) and related studies in the thesis associated persistent smuggling with revenue losses, distorted trade and the strengthening of illicit networks.

The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol represented an institutional attempt to facilitate lawful regional mobility. The Protocol provided for the right of Community citizens to enter, reside and establish themselves within member states, subject to the progressive implementation of the relevant provisions (ECOWAS, 1979). Adepoju (2002) noted the importance of the Protocol in facilitating intra-regional migration, while Adjei and Clottey (2007) examined the challenges associated with operationalising the free movement regime.

The literature consequently presented two broad interpretations. The first regarded free movement as an essential instrument of regional integration whose security consequences arose principally from inadequate implementation. The second emphasised that liberalized movement could provide opportunities for trans-border criminal activities when border management systems were weak. Opanike, Aduloju and Adenipekun (2015) specifically observed the limited attention previously given to the security implications of the Free Movement Protocol. Agbebaku and Osimen (2022) similarly found that inadequate implementation, porous borders, corruption and limited technological capacity weakened effective border management.

The concept of border security therefore involved more than physical control of territorial boundaries. It included surveillance, customs administration, immigration management, intelligence exchange, inter-agency cooperation and coordination between neighbouring states. Effective border management required a balance between facilitating legitimate movement and preventing illicit activities. The completed study observed that weaknesses in manpower, surveillance infrastructure, institutional coordination and enforcement had created opportunities for smuggling.

Diplomatic relations were also relevant because persistent smuggling generated disagreements over customs practices, border restrictions and responsibility for illicit flows. Nigeria's perception that its western neighbour served as a transit point for goods entering the Nigerian market contrasted with Benin's economic interest in maintaining commercial relations and cross-border

trade. Consequently, anti-smuggling policies sometimes became bilateral diplomatic issues rather than purely domestic law-enforcement matters.

The literature thus demonstrated that regional integration and trans-border security were not necessarily contradictory objectives. Rather, the paradox emerged when regional openness was not matched by effective institutions capable of managing the security consequences of increased mobility. This distinction was central to the interpretation of the findings.

4. Theoretical Framework

Two International Relations theories were considered in relation to the study: Liberal Institutionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Liberal Institutionalism emphasized the capacity of international and regional institutions to facilitate cooperation among states, reduce uncertainty and create mechanisms for managing common problems. From this perspective, ECOWAS could be understood as an institution capable of encouraging cooperation between Nigeria and Benin through common rules, shared procedures and collective responses to trans-border crime. The perspective was relevant because the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol represented an institutional arrangement intended to facilitate regional cooperation.

However, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) was adopted as the principal theoretical framework because it provided a more direct explanation of the security interdependence underlying the Nigeria–Benin border problem. Buzan and Wæver (2003) developed RSCT to explain how security dynamics clustered geographically among neighbouring states. The theory maintained that states within a region were linked by patterns of security interdependence and that security developments in one state could affect the security of neighbouring states.

RSCT was particularly suitable because Nigeria and Benin shared a long international boundary, extensive economic interaction and interconnected border communities. Smuggling did not occur exclusively within the territory of one country. Its organization and consequences involved both sides of the border. Nigerian trade restrictions, Beninese re-export practices, price differences, border-community livelihoods and enforcement practices interacted to produce a shared security environment.

One important concept in RSCT was security interdependence. The security condition of one state could be influenced by conditions in neighbouring states. Along the Nigeria–Benin border, weak control on one side could facilitate illicit movement into the other. Similarly, unilateral Nigerian restrictions could alter commercial patterns and generate new incentives for informal trade in Benin. The completed study therefore conceptualized smuggling as a regionalized security issue rather than an isolated Nigerian domestic problem.

Geographical proximity was another important element. Nigeria and Benin shared a border through which people, goods and economic activities moved continuously. Proximity created opportunities for legitimate commerce but also reduced the ability of either country to isolate itself from insecurity originating in the neighboring state.

The theory also drew attention to patterns of amity and enmity. Nigeria and Benin maintained broadly cooperative relations, but recurrent disagreements concerning smuggling, border restrictions and trade policies generated periods of tension. The 2019–2020 Nigerian border closure illustrated how a domestic response to an economic-security problem could have consequences for bilateral relations and regional integration.

Finally, RSCT provided a basis for examining the role of ECOWAS as a regional security institution. ECOWAS was expected to coordinate member states in responding to threats that crossed national boundaries. The theory therefore allowed the study to assess the extent to which ECOWAS mechanisms had assisted Nigeria and Benin in managing the shared security consequences of smuggling.

The choice of RSCT did not imply that regional institutions were unimportant. Rather, it situated ECOWAS within the wider regional security environment and enabled the study to explain why a regional problem required regional cooperation. The theory therefore provided the principal analytical framework through which the relationship between free movement, smuggling, border enforcement and diplomatic relations was interpreted.

5. Empirical Verification

Empirical scholarship on ECOWAS free movement and trans-border insecurity provided considerable evidence concerning the difficulties associated with reconciling regional openness with effective border governance.

Nebeife, Chinwuba and Onwanibe (2022) examined ECOWAS regional integration and trans-border security management in Nigeria. Using qualitative secondary data, they found that although regional integration was intended to promote the free movement of capital, goods and persons, unrestricted movement created challenges for trans-border security management. They recommended stronger border patrols and cooperative border management with neighboring countries. Their findings were particularly relevant because they connected regional integration directly with border security challenges.

Opanike, Aduloju and Adenipekun (2015) examined the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and trans-border security in West Africa. Their study observed that although considerable attention had been given to the economic benefits of the Protocol, relatively limited research had addressed

its security implications. Their work therefore established the need for closer examination of how free movement interacted with trans-border security.

Agbebaaku and Osimen (2022) similarly examined border security management and the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. Their findings associated inadequate implementation, porous borders, corruption and insufficient technological capacity with weaknesses in border management. They argued that effective border governance required improved funding, modern technology, appropriate training and stronger regional security cooperation.

Edeko (2011), in his examination of ECOWAS protocols and trans-border crime in Nigeria, linked the use of free movement provisions with trafficking in arms, drugs and persons. The study drew attention to weaknesses in enforcement mechanisms and border surveillance. Its relevance to the present study lay in its demonstration that legal provisions for mobility could be exploited when enforcement systems were inadequate.

Akinyemi (2003) examined Nigeria's border security architecture and the implications of ECOWAS protocols for cross-border policing. The study found that although the Free Movement Protocol promoted trade, it also complicated the control of illegal arms trafficking, smuggling and insurgency. The study therefore stressed the need to balance economic integration with effective monitoring.

Asiwaju (2005) provided a historical perspective by demonstrating that colonial boundary-making disrupted pre-existing economic and social networks. His work suggested that border communities often continued to interact across artificial territorial boundaries. This historical reality was important for understanding why strict enforcement of formal boundaries could conflict with local livelihood patterns.

Golub (2012) provided a significant economic explanation of the Nigeria–Benin trade relationship. His analysis showed the structural importance of Benin's re-export economy and its links to Nigeria. This finding helped explain why economic incentives for informal and illicit trade remained strong despite repeated enforcement measures.

Adeola and Fayomi (2012) associated cross-border migration and informal economic activity with political and security implications. Their work demonstrated that movement between Nigeria and its Francophone neighbors could produce both integration benefits and security concerns. Their findings supported the argument that regional mobility required effective institutional management.

Akinyemi (2014) linked border porosity to institutional weaknesses and inadequate inter-agency coordination in southwestern Nigeria. This finding was particularly important for the third research

question because it demonstrated that geographical porosity alone did not explain the persistence of smuggling. Institutional capacity also shaped the effectiveness of border controls.

Onuoha (2015) linked economic crime and weaknesses in border governance to declining state legitimacy. The study suggested that persistent illicit activities could reduce public confidence in state institutions and thereby weaken the legitimacy of border governance.

Ikelegbe (2017) emphasized the importance of socio-economic marginalization in sustaining informal and illicit activities. From this perspective, border communities could become connected to smuggling networks because of limited livelihood opportunities. The finding suggested that enforcement measures without complementary economic policies could have limited effects.

Gambari (2019) assessed ECOWAS security governance and observed that although ECOWAS possessed significant policy frameworks, implementation capacity remained problematic. This finding was relevant to the present study because the existence of regional instruments did not necessarily guarantee effective operational outcomes.

Olawale and Adebayo (2020) examined Nigeria's border closure measures and concluded that such policies could produce short-term reductions in smuggling while displacing illicit activities to alternative routes. Their findings were consistent with the broader argument that unilateral restrictions were less capable of eliminating trans-border criminal networks than coordinated regional measures.

Alabi (2020) examined the Nigeria–Benin border and observed that smuggling networks were adaptive and capable of changing routes in response to enforcement pressure. The finding demonstrated the resilience of illicit trade networks and the limitations of enforcement strategies that focused primarily on particular crossing points.

The World Bank (2019) also provided evidence concerning informal cross-border trade in West Africa. Its analysis associated excessive tariffs, bureaucratic procedures and trade restrictions with incentives for informal economic activities. Such findings suggested that simplifying legitimate customs procedures could form part of an effective response to illicit trade.

UNODC (2022) provided a broader regional perspective by highlighting the relationship between porous borders, transnational organized crime and weaknesses in intelligence and law-enforcement cooperation. The evidence supported the need for improved regional information sharing and coordinated responses.

Aning and Pokoo (2014) examined ECOWAS conflict prevention mechanisms and demonstrated the broader institutional role of ECOWAS in regional security. Their analysis was relevant to the

study because the organization's security role extended beyond economic integration to conflict prevention and collective security cooperation.

Taken together, the empirical literature revealed several interconnected patterns. First, free movement had generated important integration benefits but had also created implementation challenges in environments characterized by weak border management. Second, smuggling was sustained by economic incentives, policy disparities, corruption, border porosity and local dependence on informal trade. Third, unilateral enforcement measures could displace rather than eliminate illicit activities. Fourth, the effectiveness of ECOWAS depended significantly on the willingness and capacity of member states to implement regional commitments. Finally, there remained a need for integrated analysis connecting free movement, smuggling, diplomatic relations and border enforcement along a specific ECOWAS border.

6. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design with the Nigeria–Benin border as the case under investigation. The study covered the period 2015–2023, which represented a period of significant concern over smuggling, border governance and the relationship between national border-control policies and ECOWAS integration.

The study relied exclusively on secondary sources of data. Documentary materials included ECOWAS protocols, policy documents, official government publications, Nigeria Customs Service materials, Nigeria Immigration Service materials, diplomatic documents, academic journal articles, books, theses, conference papers and reports of international organizations. Relevant materials from the World Bank, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and other credible institutions were also considered.

The selection of secondary sources was consistent with the historical and institutional character of the research. Since the study sought to examine policy implementation, regional institutional arrangements, smuggling patterns and bilateral relations over an extended period, documentary evidence provided an appropriate basis for analysis. The completed study specifically relied on official documents, academic literature, policy reports, archival materials and regional security records.

The method of analysis was qualitative content analysis. Documentary materials were examined systematically in relation to the three research questions. Relevant evidence was identified, compared and interpreted according to the issues of free movement, trans-border insecurity, smuggling, diplomatic relations and border enforcement. Official and scholarly sources were

compared in order to identify areas of convergence and disagreement. The analysis was also guided by the assumptions of RSCT.

The use of qualitative content analysis was particularly appropriate because the study concerned policies, institutional practices, diplomatic relations and security processes that could not be adequately understood through numerical measurement alone. It also permitted the interpretation of policy documents and scholarly evidence within their historical and regional contexts.

The study recognized limitations associated with secondary data, including incomplete official statistics, differences in reporting practices and the covert nature of smuggling. These limitations were addressed through comparison and triangulation of available documentary sources. The findings were therefore interpreted cautiously, particularly where estimates of illicit trade were concerned.

7. Discussion of Findings

The first finding was that the ECOWAS free movement regime had inadvertently created opportunities that were exploited by trans-border criminal networks along the Nigeria–Benin border. The finding did not establish that free movement was inherently responsible for insecurity. Rather, it showed that the implementation of free movement within a context of weak border governance and inadequate harmonization of customs procedures created opportunities for illicit actors.

The completed study found that smugglers exploited the liberal movement environment to transport restricted goods while attempting to present their activities as legitimate cross-border commerce. Rice, poultry products, petroleum products, vehicles and other commodities were among the goods associated with illicit movements. The absence of harmonized enforcement procedures between Nigeria and Benin contributed to the problem.

This finding was consistent with RSCT because the security problem was produced by interconnected conditions on both sides of the border. Nigeria's trade restrictions influenced commercial activities in Benin, while Benin's re-export economy affected the Nigerian market. Neither country could therefore effectively address the problem through isolated domestic measures.

The second finding was that smuggling had become a persistent trans-border security threat. The persistence of smuggling was associated with economic disparities, price differentials, weak enforcement, corruption, demand in the Nigerian market and the existence of numerous informal routes. The study found that anti-smuggling operations, including Nigeria's 2019–2020 border

closure, had produced only temporary effects because networks adapted by changing routes and methods.

The implication was that smuggling should not be treated merely as an issue of customs evasion. Its effects extended to state revenue, domestic industries, institutional integrity, local livelihoods and regional security. The ability of smuggling networks to adapt demonstrated the limitations of strategies based solely on physical restriction. The findings therefore supported a broader conception of border security that combined enforcement, regional cooperation and economic measures.

The third finding concerned the relationship between smuggling and Nigeria–Benin diplomatic relations. The study found that persistent illicit trade periodically strained bilateral relations, particularly when Nigeria adopted unilateral restrictions. Nigeria's concerns about the movement of prohibited goods contrasted with Benin's economic interests in maintaining cross-border commercial activity. The 2019 border closure represented an important example of how a domestic anti-smuggling policy could generate bilateral diplomatic tensions.

From an RSCT perspective, this finding illustrated the interconnected nature of national security and regional relations. A policy adopted by one state in response to a domestic security concern could affect economic interests, diplomatic interactions and security conditions in neighbouring states. Smuggling consequently constituted not only a law-enforcement issue but also a matter of regional diplomacy.

The fourth finding was that weak enforcement by border security agencies sustained smuggling. The study identified inadequate manpower, poor surveillance infrastructure, corruption and weak inter-agency coordination as major institutional weaknesses. Such weaknesses enabled illicit networks to operate through unofficial routes and reduced the effectiveness of formal border controls.

This finding was important because it qualified the argument that border porosity alone explained insecurity. Physical geography provided opportunities, but institutional weaknesses determined the extent to which those opportunities could be exploited. Effective border management therefore required not only infrastructure but also professional personnel, inter-agency coordination, intelligence sharing and accountability mechanisms.

The fifth finding was that ECOWAS had established significant normative frameworks but had experienced difficulties in translating them into sustained operational outcomes. The study found that implementation remained heavily dependent on member states and that regional mechanisms

had not sufficiently overcome differences in national interests, institutional capacities and enforcement practices.

This finding reinforced the central paradox identified by the study. ECOWAS promoted regional integration through free movement, but the effectiveness of this integration depended upon security institutions capable of managing the consequences of increased mobility. Where such institutions remained weak, openness could be exploited by criminal networks. Consequently, the problem was not resolved simply by either closing or opening borders; it required institutional coordination capable of combining mobility with effective security management.

The sixth and broader finding was that trans-border insecurity along the Nigeria–Benin border constituted a regional rather than exclusively national problem. The study's findings supported RSCT's central proposition that neighbouring states were security interdependent. Smuggling networks operated across borders, economic incentives originated from differences between national policies, and unilateral interventions generated consequences beyond the state in which they were introduced.

The findings therefore indicated that national border closures could provide temporary restrictions but could not address the structural causes of smuggling. Sustainable management required coordination between Nigeria and Benin and stronger ECOWAS involvement in intelligence sharing, customs harmonisation, joint border management and regional policy implementation.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that the paradox of ECOWAS integration and trans-border insecurity was substantially an implementation paradox. Regional integration increased interaction and mobility, but the security benefits of integration could not be fully realized where border governance remained weak. The study therefore situated the problem at the intersection of regional policy, national interests, institutional capacity and border-community economic realities.

8. Conclusion

The study examined the relationship between the ECOWAS free movement regime and trans-border insecurity along the Nigeria–Benin border between 2015 and 2023. It focused particularly on the paradox whereby a regional policy designed to promote integration, economic interaction and mobility could simultaneously create opportunities that were exploited for smuggling and other illicit activities.

The study concluded that the Free Movement Protocol itself should not be understood as the sole cause of insecurity. Rather, the evidence demonstrated that insecurity was associated with the interaction between free movement and weak implementation, porous borders, economic disparities, divergent national trade policies, corruption and inadequate enforcement. The

existence of regional rules without corresponding operational capacity created gaps that illicit networks exploited.

The study further concluded that smuggling had implications extending beyond economic losses. It affected state revenue, border governance, institutional credibility, bilateral relations and regional security. The persistence of smuggling also demonstrated that unilateral border restrictions had limited capacity to resolve a problem whose causes and consequences extended across national boundaries.

The application of RSCT demonstrated that the Nigeria–Benin border constituted part of a wider West African security complex in which the security of neighbouring states was interconnected. The findings therefore supported the proposition that sustainable management of trans-border insecurity required collective regional action rather than isolated national responses.

The study ultimately concluded that ECOWAS needed to strengthen the implementation of its existing instruments rather than rely principally on the creation of additional policies. Greater harmonization of customs procedures, improved intelligence exchange, stronger bilateral cooperation, modern border technology and development-oriented interventions in border communities were necessary for reconciling regional integration with trans-border security.

9. Recommendations

1. ECOWAS should strengthen the implementation and enforcement of its existing free movement and border-security instruments. The problem identified by the study was substantially associated with the gap between regional policy commitments and operational implementation. ECOWAS should therefore strengthen monitoring mechanisms, establish clearer implementation benchmarks and support member states in translating regional protocols into coordinated national and border-level practices.

2. Nigeria and Benin should strengthen bilateral border-security cooperation through joint intelligence sharing, coordinated patrols and harmonized customs procedures. Since smuggling networks operated across both sides of the border, unilateral enforcement was unlikely to provide a sustainable solution. Joint operational mechanisms should therefore be strengthened in major corridors such as Seme–Krake and Idiroko–Igolo, with appropriate safeguards for legitimate movement and trade.

3. ECOWAS and member states should strengthen institutional capacity and accountability among border-security agencies. The findings identified inadequate manpower, weak surveillance, corruption and poor inter-agency coordination as important factors sustaining smuggling. Border agencies should therefore receive improved training, modern surveillance equipment and

institutional mechanisms for monitoring personnel and reducing opportunities for collusion with illicit networks

4. ECOWAS should promote greater harmonization of trade, customs and commodity policies between neighbouring member states. Significant differences in tariffs, prices and import restrictions created economic incentives for smuggling. Greater policy coordination would reduce the commercial advantages associated with bypassing formal customs procedures while improving the predictability of legitimate regional trade.

5. Border-security strategies should incorporate the socio-economic needs of border communities. The study demonstrated that informal trade was linked partly to livelihood dependence and economic marginalization. ECOWAS, Nigeria and Benin should therefore support infrastructure, employment, legitimate market opportunities and community participation in border governance. Such measures would reduce dependence on illicit networks while strengthening community cooperation with legitimate security institutions.

References

- Achumba, I. C., Ighomereho, O. S., & Akpor-Robaro, M. O. M. (2013). Security challenges in Nigeria and the implications for business activities and sustainable development. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 4(2).
- Adebajo, A. (2008). *Building peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. International Peace Academy.
- Adeola, G. L., & Fayomi, O. I. (2012). The political and security implications of cross-border migration between Nigeria and her Francophone neighbours. *International Journal of Social Science Tomorrow*, 1(3), 1–9.
- Adepoju, A. (2002). Fostering free movement of persons in West Africa: Achievements, constraints and prospects for intra-regional migration. *International Migration*, 40(2), 4–28.
- Adetula, V. (2015). Nigeria's response to transnational organized crime and jihadist activities in West Africa. ECOWAS Secretariat.
- Adjei, J., & Clottey, E. (2007). Operationalising ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of People among the Member States: Issues of convergence, divergence and prospects of sub-regional integration. *European Journal of International Law*, 14, 96–107.

- Agbebaku, E. P., & Osimen, E. (2022). Border security management and ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement in West Africa. *Canadian Social Science*, 18(1).
- Afolabi, G. (2018). Free movement of citizens, goods and border security: The consequence of ECOWAS member state integration. A case study of Nigeria and Benin border.
- Akinyemi, A. (2003). Nigeria's border security architecture and the role of ECOWAS protocols in cross-border policing.
- Akinyemi, A. (2014). Border security, institutional capacity and trans-border crime in Nigeria.
- Aning, K., & Pokoo, J. (2014). Understanding the ECOWAS mechanism for conflict prevention and resolution. Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre.
- Andreas, P. (2011). *Illicit international political economy: The clandestine side of globalization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Asiwaju, A. I. (2005). Trans-border regionalism and border governance in West Africa. *International Journal of African Studies*, 6(1), 22–41.
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chambas, I. (2013). Free movement of persons, goods biggest challenge to West Africa integration.
- ECOWAS. (1979). Protocol relating to free movement of persons, residence and establishment. Dakar: ECOWAS.
- ECOWAS Commission. (2008). *ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration*. Abuja: ECOWAS Commission.
- Edeko, S. E. (2011). ECOWAS protocols and trans-border crime in Nigeria: A legal review.
- Eze, C. (2018). Nigeria's border management and the challenges of transnational crime. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 33(4), 567–582.
- Gambari, I. (2019). ECOWAS and regional security governance in West Africa.
- Golub, S. S. (2012). Entrepôt trade and smuggling in West Africa: The case of Benin and Nigeria.
- Ikelegbe, A. (2017). Border communities, informal economies and transnational crime in Nigeria.

- Nebeife, C. J., Chinwuba, M. E., & Onwanibe, J. O. (2022). ECOWAS regional integration and trans-border security management in Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary International Relations and Diplomacy*, 3(1), 379–399.
- Newman, D. (2006). The lines that continue to separate us: Borders in our borderless world. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30(2), 171–191.
- Olawale, T., & Adebayo, A. (2020). Trans-border crimes and the challenge of border security in Nigeria. *African Security Review*, 29(1), 33–50.
- Onuoha, F. C. (2015). Porous borders and trans-border security challenges in Nigeria.
- Opanike, A., Aduloju, A., & Adenipekun, L. (2015). ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and trans-border security in West Africa. *Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs*, 3(1).
- Passas, N. (2003). Cross-border crime and the internationalization of criminal activities.
- UNODC. (2022). Transnational organized crime and border security in West Africa. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- World Bank. (2019). Informal cross-border trade and regional integration in West Africa. World Bank.