Journal of International Relations and Peace (JIRP)

ISSN: 3067-0098 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2026)

PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Journal of International Relations and Peace (JIRP)

Volume 3 Issue 1, Year 2026
ISSN: 3067-0098 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54536/jirp.v3i1.8325
https://journals.e-palli.com/home/index.php/jirp

Border Management, Regional Immigration Policies, and Nigeria's Trade Relations within the Framework of West African Regional Integration

Iveren Adoo Uganden[1], Okpe Ngbede Caleb[2*]

Article Information

Received: May 17, 2026

Accepted: August 08, 2026

Published: August 25, 2026

Keywords

Border management, ECOWAS, Formal-Informal Trade, Regional Integration, Transnational Theory

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's borders sit at the intersection of national security, economic regulation, and West African regional integration, yet the interaction between border management institutions, regional immigration policy, and cross-border trade in Nigeria has rarely been examined through a single, theoretically grounded lens. This study addresses that gap by asking how Nigeria's border management institutions, the ECOWAS regional immigration regime, and the persistence of informal cross-border trade interact to shape both the opportunities and the risks of regional integration. The study is qualitative, relying on a systematic documentary analysis of academic literature, ECOWAS legal instruments, Nigerian government and agency reports, and data published by the National Bureau of Statistics, the Nigeria Customs Service, and the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control. Transnationalism Theory, as articulated by Vertovec (2009), is applied as the interpretive framework, and its selection is justified against competing frameworks drawn from neo-institutionalist regional governance theory, political economy approaches to informal trade, border security theory, and functionalist integration theory. The findings show that Nigeria's borders play a vital role in trade facilitation, economic growth, and national security, but that poor inter-agency coordination among the Nigerian Customs Service, the Nigeria Immigration Service, and the Nigeria Border Communities Development Agency, combined with porous borders and the constant interaction between formal regulatory institutions and robust informal trade networks, undermines the effectiveness of border governance. The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol encourages labour mobility and intra-regional trade but simultaneously generates regulatory and security pressures, as illustrated by the Nigeria-Benin and Nigeria-Cameroon corridors. The study recommends strengthening institutional capacity and inter-agency coordination, investing in surveillance technology, and formalizing border communities into formal trade systems, while aligning national policy more closely with regional frameworks to secure the benefits of transnational flows while managing their risks.

INTRODUCTION

Border management has emerged as a critical policy concern for states across Africa, particularly for Nigeria, whose geographical location, demographic size, and economic significance make it a pivotal actor in regional trade and migration dynamics. Nigeria shares land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, spanning diverse ecological and socio-cultural zones. These borders, however, are largely colonial constructs, drawn with little regard for the ethnic, economic, or social realities of the region (Herbst, 2000). As a result, communities around these borders have maintained cross-border interactions that predate formal state delineations, creating enduring patterns of informal trade and migration that challenge contemporary regulatory frameworks. The legacy of arbitrary colonial boundaries has left Nigeria with porous borders, weak institutional control, and complex socio-economic interdependencies, making border management a central issue in both national governance and regional integration efforts (Nugent & Asiwaju, 1996).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has promoted frameworks such as the Free Movement Protocol, which encourages the unhindered movement of persons, goods, and services across member states to facilitate trade, investment, and regional cooperation (Omotola, 2010). While these policies aim to foster economic integration and reduce barriers to mobility, they have also exposed the limitations of Nigeria's border management systems. On one hand, cross-border trade has become a vital source of livelihood for many border communities, supporting both local economies and regional supply chains. On the other hand, the lack of robust enforcement mechanisms has created opportunities for smuggling, contraband trade, and other illicit economic activities that undermine state revenues, distort domestic markets, and exacerbate security challenges (Golub, 2012). These dynamics illustrate the inherent contradiction between regional integration objectives and national sovereignty, highlighting the need for effective and coordinated border governance.

Institutional challenges also contribute significantly to Nigeria's border management difficulties. Agencies such as the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS), and the Nigeria Border Communities Development Agency often face overlapping mandates, insufficient coordination, and

[1] Department of Political Science, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi, Nigeria
[2] Department of Political Science,Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria
[*] Corresponding author's e-mail: auganden@bsum.edu.ng

inadequate resources to monitor extensive border areas effectively (International Crisis Group, 2021). Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies further weaken enforcement, allowing informal networks to flourish and complicating the implementation of both national and regional regulations. The combination of porous borders, institutional fragility, and socio-economic dependence on cross-border trade creates a scenario in which formal trade regulations coexist with vibrant informal economies, generating both opportunities and vulnerabilities for the Nigerian state and for sub-regional trade initiatives that form part of West Africa's regional integration agenda.

Nigeria's border management and trade relations are closely related for both regional and international policies for effective trade regimes. Effective governance requires balancing the imperatives of security, economic development, and regional cooperation, particularly within the framework of ECOWAS protocols. Misalignment between national regulatory frameworks and regional agreements may likely lead to economic distortions, security lapses, and the marginalization of border communities whose livelihoods depend on cross-border exchanges. Consequently, studying Nigeria's border management practices within the context of regional immigration policies provides critical insights into the complex interplay between national sovereignty, regional integration, and socio-economic development.

Statement of the Problem

A substantial body of scholarship addresses Nigeria's border security challenges, ECOWAS free movement provisions, and the scale of informal cross-border trade in West Africa as largely separate lines of inquiry. What remains comparatively underexplored is how these three dimensions institutional border management, regional immigration policy, and trade relations interact as a single, mutually reinforcing system, and how a transnational analytical lens can account for that interaction better than the state-centric or purely economic framings that dominate much of the existing literature. This gap matters because policy responses designed around only one dimension (for example, enforcement-focused border security measures, or trade liberalization measures) risk generating the very distortions documented in the Nigeria-Benin corridor, where restrictive national measures collide with liberalized regional mobility. This study addresses that gap.

Research Objectives

The study pursues four specific objectives

1. To examine the institutional and policy architecture of Nigeria's border management system and assess how inter-agency coordination shapes its effectiveness.
2. To analyse how the implementation of ECOWAS regional immigration policies, particularly the Free Movement Protocol, interacts with Nigeria's national border management practices to shape formal and informal trade.
3. To evaluate the socio-economic and security implications of informal cross-border trade along Nigeria's borders, with particular reference to the Nigeria-Benin and Nigeria-Cameroon corridors.
4. To propose policy measures for reconciling national border security imperatives with regional integration objectives under the ECOWAS framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic study of borders has moved substantially beyond the assumption, common in early-1990s globalization discourse, that intensifying flows of trade, capital, and communication would render political borders progressively insignificant. Newman (2006) argues against this "borderless world" thesis, contending that borders remain socially and politically consequential even as they become more permeable, and that border studies should treat bordering as an ongoing process rather than a fixed line on a map. Donnan and Wilson (1999) extend this argument from an anthropological standpoint, characterising borders as sites where national identity, state authority, and local community life are continuously negotiated, and where borderland populations often develop practices and loyalties that do not map neatly onto the territorial claims of the states that divide them. Rumford (2012) develops a multiperspectival approach, arguing that borders are experienced differently depending on the vantage point of the observer the state, the border trader, the migrant, or the local community and that border studies should account for this plurality of perspectives rather than privileging the state's own view of what a border is for. Andreas (2000), examining the U.S.-Mexico border, offers a comparative perspective on border governance that is directly relevant to Nigeria: he shows how intensified border enforcement can function as much as a symbolic performance of state authority as an effective deterrent to smuggling and irregular migration, a dynamic with clear parallels to Nigeria's periodic border closures.

Within African border studies specifically, Nugent and Asiwaju's (1996) edited volume remains foundational. Their central argument that colonial-era boundaries function simultaneously as barriers and as conduits and opportunities for the communities that straddle them directly informs this study's treatment of Nigeria's borders as sites where formal restriction and informal livelihood coexist rather than as simple failures of control. Bach (1999) contributes a complementary distinction between formal, state-led regional integration (of the kind ECOWAS institutions pursue) and informal regionalisation, the largely unplanned cross-border economic and social processes that proceed alongside, and sometimes in tension with, formal integration projects. This distinction is useful for interpreting why ECOWAS's Free Movement Protocol and Nigeria's national enforcement measures can pull in different directions even though both are, in principle, aimed at regional development.

The empirical literature on informal trade in West Africa provides the evidentiary grounding for these theoretical claims. Meagher (2010), studying informal enterprise clusters in Nigeria, shows that social networks built on ethnicity, kinship, and religious affiliation are central to how informal economic activity is organised and regulated in the absence of effective formal institutions, but cautions against romanticising these networks: in her account, they have as often produced fragmentation, exclusion, and vulnerability to political capture as they have produced dynamic development. Golub (2012) and Benjamin, Golub and Mbaye (2015) provide quantitative evidence of the mechanism underlying much of the smuggling described in this study: because Nigeria maintains high tariffs and import bans on goods such as rice, used vehicles, and textiles while Benin and Togo maintain deliberately low barriers to serve as entrepôt states, large volumes of goods are transshipped informally across the Nigeria-Benin corridor, a pattern their customs-data analysis shows is too large to be explained by Beninese or Togolese domestic consumption alone.

Taken together, this literature establishes two things this study builds on. First, border theory has moved from treating borders as static lines of control toward treating them as dynamic, multiply-experienced social spaces a shift that supports the choice of a transnational analytical lens over a narrowly state-centric one (below). Second, the empirical literature on African and West African borders demonstrates that informal trade is not peripheral to regional integration but is a structural feature of it, produced by the interaction between national policy divergence and regional mobility commitments. What remains comparatively underdeveloped in this literature and what this study contributes is a sustained account of how these dynamics play out specifically within Nigeria's multi-agency border management architecture, connecting the institutional literature on the Nigeria Customs Service, the Nigeria Immigration Service, and the Nigeria Border Communities Development Agency (International Crisis Group, 2021) to the border-theory and informal-trade literatures reviewed above.

Border Management

Border management refers to the comprehensive set of policies, procedures, institutions, and infrastructure that states employ to regulate and monitor the movement of people, goods, and services across their national frontiers. It is a multidimensional concept that combines elements of national security, economic regulation, migration control, and regional cooperation. At its core, border management seeks to protect sovereignty, maintain law and order, and prevent illegal activities such as smuggling, human trafficking, drug proliferation, and the infiltration of armed groups (Adepoju, 2006).

Effective border management goes beyond mere physical surveillance or militarized control. It involves the creation and enforcement of legal frameworks that define permissible movement, customs duties, visa regulations, and trade standards. For instance, in Nigeria, border management policies are grounded in statutes such as the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) Act (2015) and the Customs and Excise Management Act (2023), which regulate the movement of people and goods while ensuring compliance with national security and revenue collection objectives (International Crisis Group, 2021). Similarly, regional instruments like the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons aim to harmonize border policies across West Africa, facilitating lawful travel and commerce while curbing illegal migration (Adepoju, 2006).

Infrastructure is a critical component of border management. Checkpoints, roads, fencing, biometric verification systems, and customs inspection facilities enable states to monitor cross-border activity efficiently. For example, Nigeria has invested in border posts such as Seme, Jibiya, and Idiroko, which are equipped with modern technology to track the movement of people and goods and enhance revenue collection (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013). However, despite these investments, infrastructure gaps, particularly in remote or porous border regions, often allow illicit activities to persist, underscoring the challenges of effective border governance (Olaniyan, 2017).

Institutionally, border management in Nigeria is implemented by agencies such as the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), the Nigeria Border Communities Development Agency (NBCDA), and other security agencies, including the Nigerian Police Force and the Armed Forces of Nigeria. These institutions collaborate to enforce immigration and customs laws, facilitate legitimate trade, strengthen border surveillance, and promote socio-economic development in border communities. Effective border management depends on inter-agency coordination, intelligence sharing, and bilateral and multilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries to address transnational threats such as terrorism, arms trafficking, human trafficking, smuggling, and irregular migration (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021).

The objectives of border management are multifaceted. First, it seeks to safeguard national security by preventing unauthorized entry of persons, illicit goods, and armed groups. Second, it supports economic development by facilitating legal trade, collecting customs revenue, and regulating cross-border commercial activities. Third, it promotes regional integration through the implementation of policies such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons while ensuring compliance with national laws. Finally, it contributes to social stability by reducing cross-border criminality and enhancing the resilience and development of border communities (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019).

In practice, however, effective border management in Africa faces significant challenges: porous borders, limited funding, inadequate technological adoption, corruption, and lack of coordination among institutions often undermine enforcement efforts. In Nigeria, for example, the partial border closures in 2019 aimed at curbing smuggling disrupted legitimate trade with neighbouring countries, highlighting the tension between security measures and economic facilitation (see the Trade Relations section below). Similar challenges are observed across West African countries, where border management must balance security imperatives with the promotion of lawful trade and regional integration.

Regional Immigration Policies

Regional immigration policies are the frameworks, agreements, and regulations established by multiple countries within a defined geographic or political region to manage the movement of people across international borders. These policies are designed to harmonize migration rules, facilitate lawful mobility, promote economic integration, and enhance regional security, addressing both the rights of migrants and the responsibilities of states in balancing human mobility with national and regional security imperatives (Adepoju, 2006).

These policies often standardize entry requirements, residence permits, work authorizations, and documentation procedures across member states, thereby facilitating smoother cross-border movement for trade, employment, education, and social interaction. A notable example is the ECOWAS Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, which grants citizens of member states the right to enter, reside, and establish economic activities within the region, subject to compliance with national laws and public security considerations. While promoting regional integration and economic cooperation, the Protocol also requires member states to strengthen border management, cooperate on migration governance, and implement measures to combat irregular migration, human trafficking, and other forms of transnational crime (ECOWAS, 1979; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021). Also, another example is that in order to address most of the pastoral-related issues, such as banditry, terrorism, cross-border crimes, and cattle rustling, in the West African sub-region, the ECOWAS policies were adopted and implemented. By adopting the ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance (1998) and supporting Regulation (2003), ECOWAS Member States recognized cross-border pastoralist transhumance as a valuable economic activity. It defined a regional regulatory framework for cross-border transhumance based on the ECOWAS principle of free movement of persons, services and goods (Ugar et al, 2023).

Regional immigration policies also serve as instruments for addressing security challenges. By creating shared standards and cooperative enforcement mechanisms, member states can jointly monitor borders, prevent human trafficking, combat smuggling networks, and respond to transnational threats. These policies are a combination of legal, institutional, and operational measures that guide how people move across borders within a region, seeking to ensure that migration is orderly, secure, and beneficial to both sending and receiving states, which is especially critical in regions with porous borders and high levels of intra-regional migration, such as the West African sub-region (Adepoju, 2010).

Theoretical Framework: Transnationalism Theory

Transnationalism Theory, most prominently articulated by Steven Vertovec (2009), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multidimensional movement of people, goods, capital, information, and social relationships across national borders. While rooted in earlier migration and globalization scholarship, the theory has evolved to explain how individuals, communities, and institutions sustain enduring economic, political, cultural, and social ties that simultaneously connect multiple countries. Contemporary scholars argue that transnationalism extends beyond physical migration to encompass digital communication, financial exchanges, and institutional linkages that reshape interactions between states and societies (Nowicka, 2020; Tedeschi *et al.*, 2022).

A fundamental proposition of Transnationalism Theory is that national borders are not impermeable barriers but dynamic spaces through which people and resources circulate continuously. Rather than viewing migration or trade as one-way processes, the theory emphasizes recurring and multidirectional exchanges that create interconnected social fields spanning different countries. Advances in transportation, communication technologies, and regional integration have further strengthened these cross-border networks, enabling migrants, traders, businesses, and communities to maintain regular contact and economic activities across jurisdictions (Collins, 2023; Tedeschi *et al.*, 2022). Another key assumption of the theory is that governments exercise only partial control over cross-border interactions. Informal trade, diaspora investments, remittance flows, and migrant social networks frequently operate alongside or outside formal regulatory mechanisms, thereby influencing economic and political outcomes in ways that cannot be fully managed by state institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative documentary (desk-based) research design, relying exclusively on secondary data obtained from academic literature, regional legal instruments, government documents, and reports from international organisations to examine Nigeria's border management system and its interaction with ECOWAS regional immigration policy and informal cross-border trade. The documentary approach was considered appropriate because it enables the triangulation of evidence from multiple credible sources, thereby enhancing the reliability and comprehensiveness of the analysis in an area where no single source provides complete information. Data for the study were drawn from three broad categories: peer-reviewed scholarly publications on border governance, regional integration, and informal cross-border trade in West Africa; regional and national policy documents, including the ECOWAS Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (1979), its supplementary protocols, the Nigeria Immigration Service Act, and the National Border Management Strategy; and official statistical and administrative reports produced by agencies such as the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Bank, and the International Crisis Group. Sources were selected based on their relevance to Nigeria's border governance, ECOWAS free movement and trade policies, and informal cross-border trade.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Nigeria's Border Management

Nigeria's border management system is a complex and multifaceted framework comprising policies, infrastructure, and institutions aimed at regulating and controlling the movement of people, goods, and services across its international frontiers (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021). As the most populous nation in Africa and one of the continent's largest economies, Nigeria shares extensive borders with four neighbouring countries Benin to the west, Niger to the north, Chad to the northeast, and Cameroon to the east covering over 4,000 kilometres of land boundary (Herbst, 2000; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). These borders play a strategic role not only in safeguarding national security but also in facilitating economic regulation, migration control, and regional integration under the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, 1979; Omotola, 2010).

Effective border management in Nigeria involves a combination of regulatory policies, physical infrastructure, and institutional mechanisms designed to ensure border security while facilitating legitimate trade and human mobility (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019; IOM, 2021). Key institutions include the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), which oversees customs administration and revenue collection; the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), responsible for regulating migration and border control; the Border Communities Development Agency, which promotes socio-economic development in border communities; and other security agencies mandated to combat transnational crimes and irregular migration (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019; World Customs Organization, 2018). Over the years, Nigeria has introduced several policy initiatives and legal frameworks, including the National Border Management Strategy, to strengthen border governance and harmonise national border management practices with regional and international standards (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019; IOM, 2021).

Despite these efforts, Nigeria's borders remain highly porous, creating vulnerabilities to a wide range of challenges. Smuggling of commodities such as petroleum products, foodstuffs, and pharmaceuticals continues to undermine economic policies and revenue generation (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, the borders serve as conduits for human trafficking, arms proliferation, insurgent movements, and other forms of transnational crime, complicating both national security and regional stability. Geographic factors, inadequate technological infrastructure, and limited manpower further exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult to implement comprehensive surveillance and enforcement across all entry points.

The significance of Nigeria's border management extends beyond national considerations, as the country plays a central role in West African migration and trade networks. Informal cross-border trade is a critical economic activity for border communities, contributing to livelihoods but often operating outside official regulatory frameworks the barrier-and-conduit duality identified by Nugent and Asiwaju (1996) is directly visible here. This intersection of formal and informal cross-border interactions necessitates a border management approach that balances security, economic, and humanitarian imperatives. Nigeria's border management is therefore not merely a matter of enforcement; it requires coordinated policy frameworks, community engagement, technological investment, and regional cooperation to address the multidimensional nature of border challenges effectively.

Nigeria's Trade Relations and Regional Integration

Nigeria occupies a central and influential position in West African trade due to its large population, substantial economic size, and strategic geographic location. With an estimated population of over 227 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and represents the largest consumer market in the region, creating significant demand for both domestically produced and imported goods (U.S. International Trade Administration, 2025). Its economy, driven primarily by oil, agriculture, and manufacturing, positions it as a major exporter of commodities such as petroleum products, cocoa, and processed foods, while simultaneously importing essential goods including rice, textiles, and machinery (Olaniyan, 2017).

Nigeria's trade relations are shaped by a combination of domestic policies and regional frameworks aimed at fostering economic integration. Domestically, Nigeria implements tariffs, trade protection measures, and industrial incentives to protect local industries and stimulate production. Regionally, ECOWAS provides the primary institutional framework for promoting intra-regional trade, economic cooperation, and the free movement of goods and people. Through instruments such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme

(ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET), member states including Nigeria seek to reduce trade barriers, harmonize tariffs, and ensure lawful commerce within the region (Adepoju, 2006).

Participation in ECOWAS allows Nigeria to expand markets for its goods and services while simultaneously accessing labour, capital, and raw materials from neighbouring countries. For instance, Nigerian manufacturers export processed goods and petroleum products to Benin, Niger, and Cameroon, while importing agricultural and consumer goods to meet domestic demand. Furthermore, regional integration enables coordinated trade facilitation, infrastructure development, and border management initiatives that are essential for reducing smuggling, enhancing security, and promoting economic efficiency.

By leveraging both domestic policy instruments and regional trade agreements, Nigeria strengthens its economic influence and contributes to West African integration. However, challenges such as informal trade networks, porous borders, and periodic policy misalignments with ECOWAS protocols continue to affect the efficiency of regional trade. Despite these hurdles, Nigeria's central position ensures that its economic performance, trade policies, and regional cooperation efforts remain critical determinants of both national prosperity and broader West African development.

Despite the opportunities presented by regional integration, Nigeria's trade remains characterized by significant dependencies, reflecting structural asymmetries in both production and consumption. The country continues to import essential goods such as food products, pharmaceuticals, machinery, chemicals, textiles, and manufactured items while relying heavily on crude oil and agricultural commodities for export earnings. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024), Nigeria's total merchandise trade reached ₦35.16 trillion in the third quarter of 2024, with imports amounting to ₦14.67 trillion (41.73%) and exports totaling ₦20.49 trillion (58.27%). Crude oil exports accounted for ₦13.41 trillion, representing 65.44% of total exports, underscoring the economy's continued dependence on petroleum despite ongoing diversification efforts. Within the ECOWAS region, Nigeria exported goods worth approximately ₦1.54 trillion but imported only about ₦82.05 billion in the same quarter, illustrating both its dominant regional trading position and its interconnectedness with neighbouring economies (NBS, 2024).

Nigeria faces considerable challenges in realizing the full potential of regional trade integration, many of which stem from the persistence of informal trade networks and contraband flows. Smuggling remains a pervasive problem, undermining domestic industries and reducing government revenue. This pattern matches the entrepôt-trade mechanism documented empirically by Golub (2012) and Benjamin, Golub and Mbaye (2015): because Nigeria maintains comparatively high tariffs while Benin and Togo maintain deliberately low import barriers, large volumes of goods are transshipped into Nigeria outside formal channels. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) notes that informal cross-border trade is not fully captured in official trade records, while the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) reported seizures of smuggled goods with a duty-paid value exceeding ₦28.5 billion in the first quarter of 2024, including large quantities of rice, petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, used clothing, and other prohibited items. Goods such as rice, sugar, and fuel frequently enter the country through unofficial routes facilitated by porous borders and weak enforcement capacity, reflecting deeply entrenched informal trading networks (Okunade, 2017). Such activities distort market competition, deprive the government of substantial customs revenue, discourage local production, and heighten national security risks by enabling the unregulated movement of contraband and potentially hazardous goods.

Discrepancies between national trade policies and regional agreements further complicate integration efforts. Nigeria's partial border closures in 2019, aimed at curbing smuggling and protecting local industries, conflicted with the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment and undermined aspects of regional trade integration (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], 1979; Omotola, 2010; Omotuyi, 2022). This episode illustrates the symbolic-politics dynamic that Andreas (2000) identifies in border enforcement more broadly: intensified enforcement can function as a demonstration of state authority even where its practical effect on trade flows is limited or counterproductive (Andreas, 2000). While such protective measures may offer short-term benefits, including increased domestic revenue and temporary relief for local producers, they simultaneously generate diplomatic tensions with neighbouring states and weaken the broader objectives of regional cooperation (Omotuyi, 2022; United States International Trade Administration, 2025). Infrastructure limitations further compound these challenges, as inadequate customs facilities, poor transport networks, and under-equipped border posts reduce trade efficiency, increase transaction costs, and encourage informal trading practices, thereby limiting Nigeria's ability to maximize its economic and strategic position within West Africa (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019; World Customs Organization, 2018; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021).

Case Evidence: The Nigeria-Benin and Nigeria-Cameroon Corridors

Along the Nigeria-Benin border, the smuggling of essential commodities particularly rice, petroleum products, and other subsidized goods is widespread, largely driven by price differentials between the two countries, exchange rate fluctuations, and sustained domestic demand for lower-cost imported goods (Golub, 2012; Benjamin *et al.*, 2015). Subsidized Nigerian petroleum products are frequently diverted into Benin for resale at higher prices, while imported rice entering through Benin provides more affordable alternatives for consumers in many Nigerian border communities (Golub, 2012; Benjamin *et al*., 2015). Traders often bypass official customs checkpoints by relying on informal cross-border networks and taking advantage of the relatively liberal movement of persons encouraged under the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol (ECOWAS, 1979; Meagher, 2010). Border communities benefit from these exchanges through employment opportunities, increased commercial activities, and improved access to affordable consumer goods, with small-scale traders, transport operators, and informal service providers forming an interconnected regional economic network that depends heavily on cross-border trade.

However, these informal practices impose significant costs on the Nigerian state. Revenue losses from bypassed customs duties and taxes are substantial: the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) estimated that the country loses billions of naira annually to smuggling and customs evasion, with anti-smuggling operations leading to seizures valued at over ₦28.5 billion in the first quarter of 2024 alone. The Rice Millers Association of Nigeria (RIMAN) has similarly reported that persistent rice smuggling deprives the government of significant customs revenue while undermining domestic producers. Beyond fiscal losses, unregulated trade weakens the enforcement of quality and safety standards: the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC, 2024) has repeatedly intercepted counterfeit and unregistered pharmaceuticals smuggled through Nigeria's borders, while the NCS has confiscated prohibited items such as expired food products, illicit drugs, and improperly imported petroleum products.

Similarly, along the Nigeria-Cameroon border, informal trade in agricultural products such as yams, maize, cassava, and vegetables plays a vital role in sustaining the livelihoods of local communities, who often depend on these exchanges as a primary source of income and as a means of accessing essential goods that are either scarce or expensive within domestic markets. Small-scale traders, transporters, and intermediaries form a complex network that facilitates the movement of goods across porous border points, often bypassing formal customs checkpoints due to inadequate infrastructure, high tariffs, or bureaucratic delays. While economically beneficial to local populations, the largely unregulated nature of this trade weakens the enforcement of quality and safety standards, increases the risk of pest and disease transmission through agricultural products, and limits the collection of duties and tariffs critical for government revenue (Benjamin, Golub & Mbaye, 2015). These case studies, the persistent smuggling of subsidized petrol and rice through the Nigeria-Benin border and the cross-border movement of agricultural goods and contraband along the Nigeria-Cameroon border illustrate the practical challenges governments face in balancing the objectives of regional integration with the imperatives of security, regulation, and revenue generation.

Regional Immigration Policies and Their Implications for Nigeria

The implementation of ECOWAS immigration policy in Nigeria interacts in complex ways with national visa and labour regulations, which may either facilitate or constrain cross-border economic activities. Although the regional framework supports liberalized movement, individual member states retain the authority to apply specific administrative procedures, including registration requirements, residence documentation, and work authorization measures, particularly on grounds of national security, public order, and economic regulation (ECOWAS, 1979; IOM, 2019). These national-level measures can significantly influence trade flows and labour mobility by either streamlining the movement of people and goods or creating bureaucratic bottlenecks that encourage informal cross-border practices, consistent with Bach's (1999) distinction between formal integration and informal regionalisation processes. In many border communities, informal trade networks continue to serve as important livelihood strategies, especially where official border procedures are perceived as costly, restrictive, or inefficient. While such activities may temporarily sustain local economies and ensure the circulation of essential goods, they can also weaken regulatory oversight, reduce government revenue, and expose traders and migrants to legal and security risks (Olaniyan, 2017).

The interplay between regional protocols and national policies highlights the tension between promoting economic integration and maintaining state sovereignty. Countries may prioritize domestic security, revenue collection, or industrial protection, sometimes at the expense of ECOWAS principles, leading to inconsistencies in policy enforcement and gaps in regional cooperation. Irregular migration, often facilitated by porous borders and entrenched informal networks, is widely perceived as a security threat, creating avenues for smuggling, human trafficking, and the circulation of contraband that undermine national security, destabilize border communities, and compromise regulatory enforcement (Olaniyan, 2017). At the same time, the liberalization of movement under ECOWAS has facilitated trade in both formal and informal sectors, allowing goods, services, and labour to move across borders more efficiently — the dual effect that underscores the trade-offs inherent in regional immigration policy: it enhances economic integration and sustains local livelihoods, while simultaneously presenting challenges for monitoring, taxation, and customs enforcement.

Challenges to Effective Border Management in Nigeria

Beyond the corridor-specific dynamics described in the Trade Relations section above, four cross-cutting and structural challenges undermine border management nationally. First, institutional weakness is reflected in poor coordination among the key agencies responsible for border oversight. The NCS, NBCDA, NIS, and various local security outfits often operate independently, with overlapping mandates and limited communication (Adejoh & Ukpere, 2016). This fragmentation results in enforcement gaps, inefficient monitoring of border crossings, and delayed responses to emerging threats, allowing illicit actors to exploit regulatory loopholes and weakening the state's capacity to control cross-border movement effectively.

Second, corruption and entrenched smuggling networks exacerbate these institutional challenges. Informal collusion between border officials, transporters, and traders facilitates the illegal movement of commodities and people, often with minimal risk of prosecution (Okunade, 2017). The profitability of illicit trade, combined with patronage networks and weak accountability mechanisms, makes dismantling these networks particularly difficult (Omoniyi, 2023).

Third, technological gaps constitute a major limitation. Many Nigerian border posts lack modern surveillance systems, biometric tracking tools, and automated customs management technologies required for real-time monitoring and enforcement. The reliance on manual procedures and outdated record-keeping reduces the efficiency of inspections, hinders intelligence sharing between agencies, and allows illegal activities to go undetected, constraining the state's ability to track irregular migration, monitor contraband goods, and respond rapidly to security threats.

Fourth, socio-economic pressures shape how enforcement is experienced and resisted. Many border communities rely on cross-border trade, both formal and informal, as a primary source of livelihood. Restrictive enforcement measures, such as the 2019 partial border closure, disrupted local markets and disproportionately affected small-scale traders and transport operators who depend on the movement of goods from neighbouring countries (Adepoju, 2006). These disruptions can intensify poverty, fuel social tensions, and provoke resistance to state interventions. Consequently, border management in Nigeria requires careful balancing of security priorities with the economic needs of local populations to avoid exacerbating social inequalities and undermining public compliance with regulations.

Policy Recommendations

Effective border management in Nigeria, particularly in the context of regional immigration policies, requires a multifaceted approach that balances trade facilitation, national security, and regional integration.

First, strengthening institutional coordination and capacity across border management agencies remains essential. Agencies such as the NCS, the NIS, and other security institutions must work collaboratively through effective information sharing, joint border patrols, and harmonized operational procedures to manage increasingly complex cross-border movements. International best practices emphasize that integrated border management depends on cooperation among customs, immigration, police, and other relevant authorities to facilitate legitimate trade while combating transnational crimes such as smuggling, trafficking in persons, and terrorism (International Organization for Migration, 2015; World Customs Organization, 2018, Yager & Okpe, 2026).

Second, the adoption and integration of advanced technology can significantly enhance border monitoring and trade tracking. Tools such as electronic customs clearance systems, biometric migration controls, and digital cargo tracking can reduce human error, increase transparency, and facilitate legitimate trade. Adopting electronic single-window systems could streamline import and export procedures, ensuring that regional trade agreements under ECOWAS are operationalized without compromising national security (IOM, 2018).

Third, national policies should be harmonized with ECOWAS protocols while safeguarding Nigeria's economic and security interests. Policy alignment ensures that cross-border trade and migration flows are consistent with regional agreements, promoting legal mobility and economic integration, while Nigeria simultaneously implements risk-based security measures to prevent illegal activities, particularly in high-risk border areas prone to insurgency or criminal networks (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Fourth, promoting the formalization of informal trade networks can generate revenue and reduce smuggling. Many border communities rely on informal cross-border trade for livelihoods, yet this trade often escapes taxation and regulatory oversight. By providing incentives such as simplified registration processes, microcredit access, and market infrastructure, the government can integrate these networks into the formal economy, improving both compliance and economic benefits (Adepoju, 2010).

Finally, public awareness and community engagement along border regions are essential. Educating local populations on the economic, legal, and security implications of smuggling and irregular migration encourages voluntary compliance and fosters collaboration with enforcement agencies. Community-based initiatives, such as border monitoring committees or local trade associations, can bridge the gap between authorities and residents, ensuring that border management strategies are socially informed and sustainable (Omotuyi, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Nigeria's border management institutions, ECOWAS regional immigration policy, and informal cross-border trade interact, using Transnationalism Theory to connect institutional, economic, and social dimensions that are more commonly studied separately. The evidence assembled in the preceding sections shows that Nigeria's borders play a critical role in trade, security, and regional integration in West Africa, serving as gateways for goods, services, and people that require a careful balance between facilitating legitimate trade and ensuring national security. Regional policies, particularly the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, offer opportunities for labour mobility and intra-regional commerce but also present challenges, including informal trade, smuggling, and weakened regulatory oversight. Effective border management in Nigeria depends on strengthening institutional coordination among agencies such as the NCS, NIS, and NBCDA, investing in technological tools for surveillance and data management, and integrating border communities into formal trade systems. Harmonizing national policies with regional frameworks, improving infrastructure, and providing economic alternatives for local populations can mitigate smuggling and illicit trade while promoting inclusive growth.

The study's documentary design means these conclusions rest on secondary and official sources rather than original fieldwork; future research incorporating interviews or survey data with border officials, traders, and border-community residents along the Nigeria-Niger and Nigeria-Chad corridors, which received less attention here than the Benin and Cameroon corridors, would extend and test the account offered in this study. Strengthening border governance along the lines proposed above will nonetheless enhance Nigeria's security, economic prosperity, and contribution to regional integration.

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