



WORKING
PAPER N° 1

CURBING CROSS-BORDER CRIMES IN THE SOKOTO-ZAMFARA-KATSINA AXIS OF THE NIGERIA-NIGER BORDERLANDS

THROUGH THE STRENGTHENING OF STAKEHOLDERS' PARTNERSHIP
AND COLLABORATION

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DISCLAIMER:

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ABBREVIATIONS

ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus group discussion
GIATOC	Inter-Ministerial Action Group against Transnational Organized Crime
ISWAP	Islamic State in West Africa Province
JSA	Jibiya Security Volunteer
KII	Key informant interview
NCS	Nigeria Customs Service
NIS	Nigeria Immigration Service
NAPTIP	National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons
NURTW	National Union of Road Transport Workers
RVSS	Remote Video Surveillance Systems
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VGN	Vigilante Group of Nigeria
WAPCC	West African Police Chiefs Committee
REcAP	Research and Action for Peace network
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
DRC	Danish Refugee Council

WITH ITS STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND DIVERSE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS, THE SOKOTO–ZAMFARA–KATSINA AXIS OF THE NIGERIA–NIGER BORDERLANDS REPRESENTS A CRITICAL REGION IN NORTHWESTERN NIGERIA.

The area, which shares an extensive border with the Republic of Niger and hosts an estimated population of over 20 million, encompasses a vast territorial network spanning the states of Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina¹. It contains several prominent cities and towns, including Sokoto, Gusau and Katsina, which serve as pivotal centres of commerce, culture and administration. The region's economy is multi-faceted, with both the formal and informal sectors playing significant roles. Agriculture, livestock farming and trade are the predominant activities, sustaining livelihoods and driving economic growth. At the same time, the porous nature of the border, coupled with socio-economic disparities, has rendered the region susceptible to cross-border crime². Illicit activities include goods and drugs smuggling, human and arms trafficking, and cross-border terrorism³. Against this backdrop, the working paper explores both the challenges of and opportunities for curbing cross-border crimes in the region.

Informed by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNCT)'s border security and management framework, the paper highlights the imperative of fostering collaboration among nations to effectively combat cross-border criminal activities. When it comes to the governance structure of the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis, a combination of national, regional and local governments hold sway on either side of the border. At a national level, the governments of Nigeria and Niger bear responsibility for border management, security and law enforcement within their respective jurisdictions. Additionally, regional entities such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union contribute to fostering relevant cooperation and integration among member states. Guided by bilateral agreements and protocols, cross-border cooperation between Nigeria and Niger aims at bolstering security, promoting trade and facilitating movement across the border. While such cooperation reflects a shared recognition of both common security threats and the benefits of economic integration, challenges persist, including capacity limitations in border management, and political and diplomatic complexities. Addressing these challenges necessitates sustained commitment, resource allocation and coordination between the two countries, supported by regional and international partners⁴.

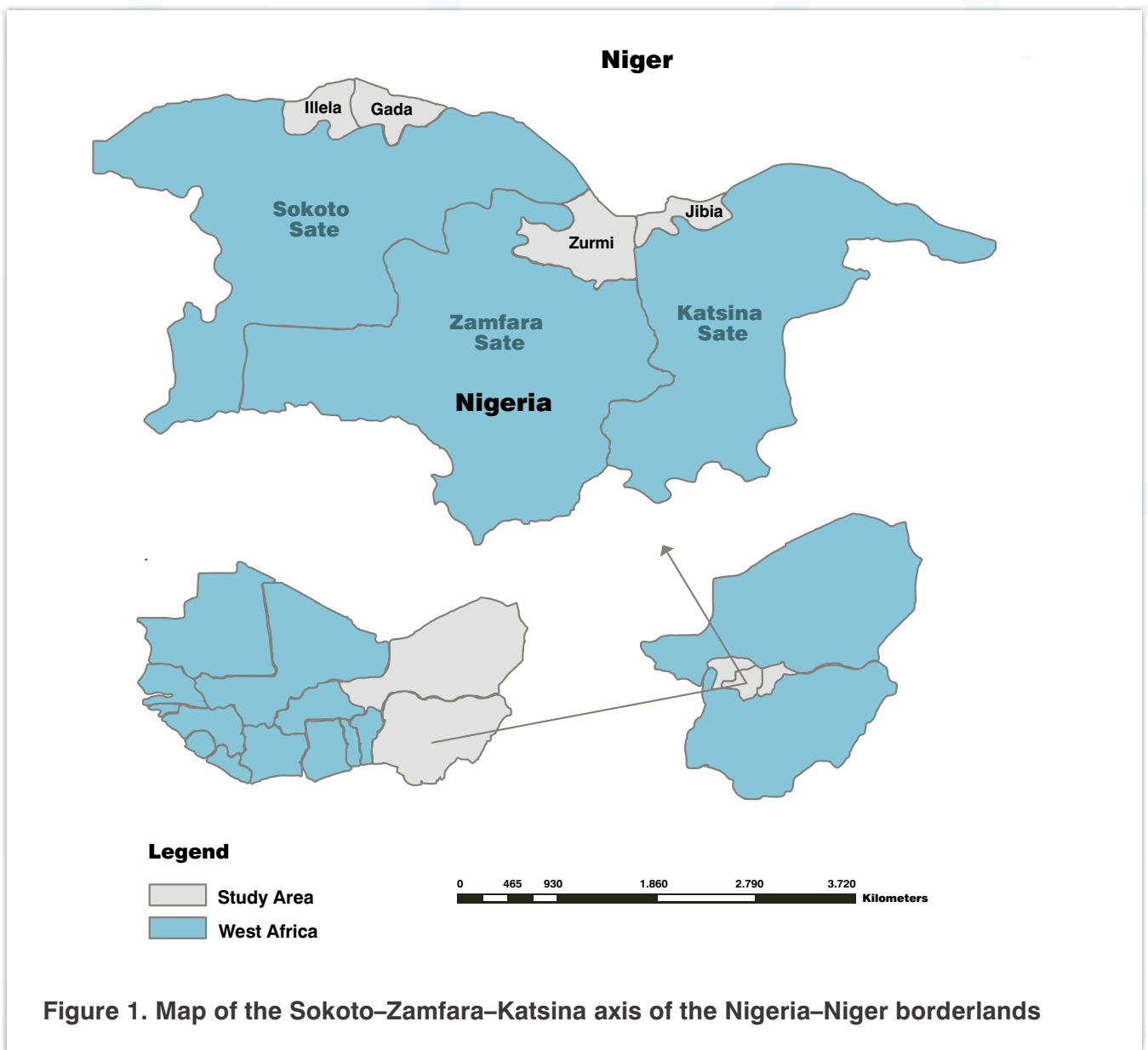
In emphasizing the necessity of sharing information and building capacities to enhance border security, the paper's approach also aligns with the transnational organized crime framework, which provides a strategic blueprint for addressing criminal activities that transcend national borders⁵. The framework recognizes that certain illicit enterprises, such as drug trafficking, human smuggling and cybercrime, are orchestrated by highly organized networks operating beyond the reach of any single jurisdiction⁶. International cooperation via mechanisms such as information sharing and joint investigations is therefore paramount when it comes to combatting these threats⁷.

THE POROUS NATURE OF THE BORDER, COUPLED WITH SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES, HAS RENDERED THE REGION SUSCEPTIBLE TO CROSS-BORDER CRIME

¹ National Population Commission of Nigeria. (2023). *2023 Census*. National Population Commission of Nigeria. - ² The term 'cross-border crime' is used in this working paper to refer to criminal activities that transcend national boundaries, involving illegal actions in more than one country. - ³ Boás, M. and Strazzari, F., 'Governance, fragility and insurgency in the Sahel: A hybrid political order in the making', *International Spectator, Italian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2020), pp. 1–17; Campbell, J., 'Northwest Nigeria: Potential jihadi linchpin in West Africa', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 30 Oct. 2020. ; Tanwa, A., 'Understanding the Zamfara State Security Threat', *Bulwark Intelligence*, 15 Apr. 2019. - ⁴ UNOCT. (2017). *Border security and management*. United Nations. - ⁵ UNODC. (2000). *Organized crime international framework: The Organized Crime Convention and its Protocols*. UNODC. Asiwaju, A. I., *Bridging African Boundaries: Cross-border Areas and Regional Integration in Comparative History and Policy Advocacy* (Pan African University Press: 2022) - ⁶ Castle, A., 'Transnational organized crimes and international security', *Institute of International Relations, The University of British Columbia, Working Paper No. 19* (1997). - ⁷ Telephone interview with an ECOWAS official in Abuja, 20 February, 2024.

Legislation and legal mechanisms are critical to the framework, with nations required to enact and reinforce laws aimed at targeting perpetrators, confiscating illicit proceeds and bolstering border security⁸. Moreover, in emphasizing preventive measures, the framework centres on tackling root causes, such as poverty, unemployment and ignorance. This involves promoting social and economic development initiatives, alongside capacity building in the form of training programmes and infrastructure enhancements⁹. Collaboration across sectors is also advocated through public–private partnerships and adaptive strategies, recognizing the evolving nature of criminal organizations and the need for dynamic responses¹⁰. In sum, the framework offers a comprehensive approach to combatting transnational organized crime by promoting cooperation, strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing preventive measures, building capacity, fostering partnerships and adapting strategies.

Drawing on the two theoretical frameworks outlined above, the working paper delves into the complex landscape of curbing cross-border crime in the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis. Given the axis intersects with multiple, intricate networks of illicit activities, ranging from smuggling to organized criminal enterprises, a concerted, strategic response is paramount. Through analysis of the current challenges faced and proposing strategies to fortify collaboration among stakeholders, the paper seeks to pave the way for effective, sustainable solutions.



⁸ United Nations. (2000). *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*. United Nations. - ⁹ United Nations (Note 8). - ¹⁰ Shaw, M. (2015, April). *Public-private partnerships & crime prevention*. Workshop 4, 13th UN Congress on Crime Prevention & Criminal Justice, Doha, Qatar.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach, drawing on a range of secondary and primary data involving desk reviews, key informant interviews (KIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). This multi-source approach facilitated data triangulation and enabled the research team to gain a holistic understanding of cross-border crime in the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina corridor of the Nigeria–Niger borderlands.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase involved a comprehensive desk review of relevant literature—including peer-reviewed journal publications, situation analyses, publicly available reports and media coverage—thereby helping identify knowledge gaps related to cross-border crime in the study area.

In phase two, KIs and FGDs were conducted. Data was collected in six purposively selected communities across Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina (see Table 1). The research team considered both geographic and cultural variations, along with population size, to ensure the voices of residents from various backgrounds were represented. Fieldwork was carried out in December 2023, yielding insights from a total of 84 (62 male, 22 female) participants. The data collection tools used can be seen in Annexes I and II.

Table 1. Data collection sites:

Country	State/region	Community
Nigeria	Sokoto Zamfara Katsina	Kalmalo Gurbin Bore Jibiya
Niger	Tahoua Maradi	Birnin Konni Malbaza Faru
Total: 6 communities		



Legend

- Border Settlements
- Study Area
- West Africa

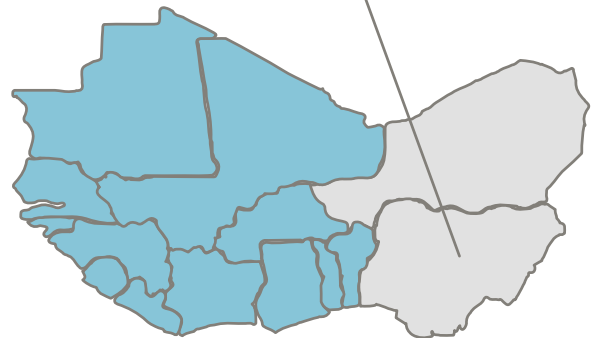


Figure 2. Map of the data collection sites

Thirty-six (25 males, 11 females) participants were purposively selected for the KIIs (see Table 2) based on their in-depth knowledge, experience and expertise on cross-border crimes in the study area. KIIs were conducted one-on-one, using a semi-structured interview guide.

Table 2. Data collection matrix

S/N	Stakeholder	Data collection methods	No. conducted
1.	Government officials (e.g. local government authorities, anti-human trafficking agency officials)	KII	2
2.	Security agents (immigration, customs, police)	KII	4
4.	Vigilante groups	KII	6
5.	Local civil society organizations	KII	4
7.	Community leaders (e.g. border community heads, ethnic/tribal leaders, trade unions leaders)	KII	4
8.	Cross-border businesspeople	KII	4
9.	Cross-border businesspeople	FGD	2
10.	Motorcycle crossers (Yan Kabu-Kabu)	KII	4
11.	Members of National Union of Road Transport Workers	KII	4
12.	Border crossing agents (Yan-Fito)	KII	4
13.	Male and female victims of cross-border crimes	FGD	6
Total: 36 KIIs and 8 FGDs			

Eight FGDs involving 48 (30 male; 18 female) selected participants from Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina were also conducted. The FGDs, each of which consisted of six participants, were facilitated by trained moderators who followed a pre-determined set of open-ended questions. Efforts were made to ensure homogeneity within groups in order to encourage open discussions.

DATA ANALYSIS

The research team employed thematic analysis, manually coding and identifying recurrent themes within the qualitative data¹¹. Data obtained from the desk review served to complement and triangulate the primary source findings. This combined approach ensured a robust, multi-faceted understanding of the research topic.

DATA LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges the following limitations:

- Due to time and resource limitations, the research team could not extensively investigate the data collection methodologies used in the secondary sources consulted. To address this potential limitation, we employed a triangulation strategy whereby secondary data was complemented by and cross-checked with findings from the KIIs and FGDs.
- Some KII and FGD participants initially exhibited difficulty in fully understanding the scope of the interview questions. To mitigate this challenge, the research team flexibly adapted and refined its data collection tools throughout the primary data collection period, ensuring the KII and FGD guides were tailored to the level of understanding and vocabulary of respondents.
- Despite repeated assurances of confidentiality, some respondents were apprehensive about disclosing information to the research team due to security concerns related to the study.
- Responses from some KII participants relied heavily on personal observations and anecdotal evidence, a potential limitation addressed through data triangulation.
- Due to time constraints, the number of KII participants was restricted to six per community. These challenges did not, however, significantly affect the study.

DESPITE REPEATED ASSURANCES OF CONFIDENTIALITY, SOME RESPONDENTS WERE APPREHENSIVE ABOUT DISCLOSING INFORMATION TO THE RESEARCH TEAM DUE TO SECURITY CONCERNS RELATED TO THE STUDY

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2, having provided some historical context, examines the types and patterns of cross-border criminal activity in the study areas, shedding light on the modus operandi of the criminal networks present along the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis. Section 3 sets out the various strategies that have been adopted to tackle cross-border crime in the region, before Section 4 proceeds to explore the obstacles—from institutional barriers to socio-economic factors—hindering effective collaboration among stakeholders. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the paper's key points, proposing a comprehensive array of recommendations aimed at not only mitigating the immediate threats posed by cross-border crime, but contributing to the overall development and stability of the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis and its surrounding regions.

¹¹ Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2006), pp. 77–101.

DYNAMICS OF CROSS-BORDER CRIMES IN THE NIGERIA-NIGER BORDERLANDS

THE SOKOTO-ZAMFARA-KATSINA AXIS OF THE NIGERIA-NIGER BORDERLANDS HAS BECOME A FOCAL POINT FOR CROSS-BORDER CRIME. WITH THIS IN MIND, THIS SECTION EXAMINES THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT UNDERLYING THE PRESENT SITUATION, THE TYPES AND PATTERNS OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY, AND THE MODUS OPERANDI OF THE NETWORKS INVOLVED.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CROSS-BORDER CRIMES IN THE REGION

The roots of cross-border crime in the Nigeria-Niger borderlands can be traced back to the historical dynamics shaping the region. The post-colonial era witnessed an increase in cross-border crime, with shifting political dynamics, conflict and economic downturns playing pivotal roles. As the geopolitical landscape evolved, so the Nigeria-Niger borderlands became a hotspot for various forms of smuggling and trafficking. More recently, the late 20th century saw the rise of organized criminal networks capitalizing on regional instabilities¹². The Boko Haram crisis and other conflicts have further fuelled the dynamics of cross-border crime, adding additional layers of complexity to the challenges faced.

Various reports indicate that Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have sought to exploit the porous nature of the Nigeria-Niger borderlands in order to infiltrate the region, engaging in arms smuggling, recruitment and attacks on border communities. Criminal networks operating in the area facilitate the trafficking of weapons, funds and contraband, providing financial resources and logistical support to terrorist organizations¹³. Cross-border crime, including extortion and smuggling, also serves as a significant revenue source for terrorist groups¹⁴. Marginalized border communities, grappling with poverty and lack of access to basic services, are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups, further exacerbating security risks in the region.

The alienation of border communities, a consequence of Nigerian government border closures and other policies, has inadvertently driven some residents to support—if not actively participate in—the criminal activities taking place along the border. Inadequate security arrangements at the border have also enabled the proliferation of alien infiltration and unrestricted smuggling, even at security posts, a situation made worse by the lack of coordination or cooperation among border security outfits. Alongside this, numerous other factors—including corruption, political instability, political and civil unrest, economic marginalization, intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts, and the exploitation of religious identity for personal gain—have contributed to the persistence of trans-border crime in the region.

While it is tempting to blame 'cross-border socio-cultural and economic contacts' as the primary source of security issues, the reality is more nuanced. The collapse of local authority, often spurred by the informal nature of trade in peripheral areas, has led to the emergence of a shadowy informal security industry. This enables armed and criminal gangs to operate with impunity in border villages, sometimes even with the cooperation of local residents. The lives of those living near the border are undoubtedly impacted by trans-border crimes such as livestock rustling and armed banditry, which not only pose direct threats to safety and security, but restrict the vital role the borderlands could potentially play as hubs for interstate contact and conflict resolution.

AS THE GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE EVOLVED, SO THE NIGERIA-NIGER BORDERLANDS BECAME A HOTSPOT FOR VARIOUS FORMS OF SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING

¹² Barkindo, B. M. and Lipede, A. A. (eds), *Human Trafficking and Economic Crimes Across Nigeria's International Borders* (Spectrum Books: 2007). - ¹³ [Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit. \(2023\). Typologies report on terrorism financing in Nigeria. NFIU.](#) - ¹⁴ Interview with a Nigerian Security official at Illela town on the Nigeria-Niger western boarder, 17 December 2023.

TYPES AND PATTERNS OF CROSS-BORDER CRIMES

The Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis features a unique convergence of factors fuelling cross-border crime. The vast, ungoverned spaces along the border provide safe havens for criminal gangs, whose operations across the divide are facilitated by linguistic and cultural similarities. The economic disparity between the two countries, with Niger facing greater poverty, acts as a push factor for criminal recruitment, made worse by the availability of weapons and proliferation of small arms. Armed banditry, often intertwined with cattle rustling, has become a major concern, displacing communities, disrupting agricultural activities, and leading to loss of lives and livelihoods. Moreover, human trafficking, particularly of women and children, has seen the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups exploited in the pursuit of forced labour, sexual exploitation and even organ harvesting. The smuggling of goods such as fuel and drugs adds to the complex web of illicit activities, undermining legitimate economies and fuelling corruption.

The patterns of cross-border crimes often interconnect: for instance, arms smuggling may intersect with drug trafficking routes, facilitated by human trafficking networks. The Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis serves as a migratory route, accommodating both seasonal and permanent migration among communities on either side of the border. Migrants, including pastoralists, traders and labourers, use the axis for various purposes, such as accessing grazing lands, trade, seeking employment and maintaining social connections. Irregular migration and human trafficking also occur, however, underscoring the region's complex dynamics. Law enforcement authorities must understand these trends if they are to implement focused and efficient tactics.

SMUGGLING: A BOOMING BLACK MARKET

Smuggling activities along the porous Nigeria–Niger borderlands encompass a diverse range of goods, including illegal drugs, counterfeit goods, banned substances, firearms, ammunition and livestock. Moreover, price disparities between the two countries have driven a lucrative illicit trade in fuel and petroleum products. Smuggling networks, often controlled by powerful syndicates, continue to exploit the weak border security and economic disparities, fuelling price distortions and undermining legitimate businesses¹⁵.

Transnational criminal organizations and terrorist operating within the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina border enclave, such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, along with faceless arms trafficking and human trafficking networks, facilitate the illegal transportation of goods, drugs and weapons. Meanwhile, local smuggling rings operate within specific border communities, engaging in smaller-scale smuggling of contraband, fuel or livestock, often exploiting informal border crossings¹⁶. Allegations of collusion between smugglers and corrupt law enforcement and border control officials further complicate the situation. In addition, human trafficking poses severe humanitarian concerns, with men, women and children smuggled across borders for forced labour and exploitation. These smuggling circuits traverse various cities, originating in Nigerian urban centres such as Kano, Sokoto and Katsina.

The economic repercussions are significant: governments face lost tax revenue and customs duties; local markets experience distortions; and legitimate businesses struggle to compete amid an influx of illicit goods. Moreover, the fuel subsidy fraud perpetuated by smuggling operations not only drains government coffers but undermines efforts to provide essential services and infrastructure. Smuggling also exacerbates regional security challenges by contributing to the proliferation of firearms and ammunition, thereby fuelling conflict and organized crime activities.

The clandestine nature of such activities and the challenges associated with data collection in border regions means precise figures on the impact of smuggling in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands are impossible to obtain. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that smuggling has significant economic implications for both countries, affecting government revenue, market dynamics and overall regional stability.

Understanding factors driving smuggling is crucial for formulating successful countermeasures. The allure of heightened profits, combined with constrained economic prospects, entices individuals to partake in illicit trade, while corruption within border enforcement agencies and inadequate monitoring exacerbate the problem. All this creates a conducive environment within which smugglers can operate with impunity.

SMUGGLING NETWORKS, OFTEN CONTROLLED BY POWERFUL SYNDICATES, CONTINUE TO EXPLOIT THE WEAK BORDER SECURITY AND ECONOMIC DISPARITIES, FUELLING PRICE DISTORTIONS AND UNDERMINING LEGITIMATE BUSINESSES

¹⁵ Golub, S., 'Government policies, smuggling, and the informal sector', eds N. Benjamin and A. A. Mbaye, *The Informal Sector in Francophone Africa: Firm Size, Productivity, and Institutions* (World Bank: Washington, DC, DC: The World Bank; Hoffman, L. K., & Melly, P. (2018). Incentives and constraints of informal trade between Nigeria and its neighbors (West African papers, No. 16). OECD Publishing. (2012); Hoffman, L. K. and Melly, P., 'Incentives and constraints of informal trade between Nigeria and its neighbors', West African Papers No. 16, OECD Publishing, 2018. - ¹⁶ Hoffman, L. K., and Melly, P. (Note 15).

BANDITRY AND KIDNAPPING: A REIGN OF TERROR

The prevalence of banditry and kidnapping along the Nigeria–Niger borderlands is rooted in a combination of social, economic and political factors. The porous border allows criminal elements to move easily between the two nations, while economic disparities, political instability and weak law enforcement create an environment conducive to illicit activities.

Banditry, encompassing armed robbery, cattle rustling and attacks on communities, has developed into a sophisticated network, with criminal groups exploiting the vast, sparsely populated areas along the Nigeria–Niger border—particularly the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis—to establish safe havens. In 2021, the area experienced over 1000 reported cases of kidnapping for ransom, a trend that persisted into 2022, with a staggering 12 391 incidents of banditry documented across the entire northwest region¹⁷. Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina states endured the brunt of this violence, respectively reporting 512, 3763 and 1822 cases¹⁸. Additionally, between July 2022 and June 2023, SBM Intelligence, a Nigerian security risk analysis firm, reported at least 1921 abductions in the northwestern region, with a significant portion of these incidents—likely exceeding 1000 cases—occurring within the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis¹⁹.

The challenges posed by banditry and kidnapping are multi-faceted, impacting not only the immediate victims but the region's broader socio-economic and political fabric. Loss of lives and property, displacement of entire communities, and erosion of public trust in governance together paint a grim picture of dire consequences.

The lack of robust border security measures exacerbates the situation, with corruption within law enforcement agencies, porous border control and limited resources allowing criminal elements to operate with relative ease. On top of this, the complex interplay of ethnic, religious and cultural factors further complicates efforts to address the issue.

BANDITRY, ENCOMPASSING ARMED ROBBERY, CATTLE RUSTLING AND ATTACKS ON COMMUNITIES, HAS DEVELOPED INTO A SOPHISTICATED NETWORK

CATTLE RUSTLING: A PASTORAL NIGHTMARE

The porous nature of the Nigeria–Niger border, coupled with inadequate surveillance and enforcement resources in remote locales, enables stolen livestock to be illicitly transported across international borders²⁰. This clandestine trade not only adversely affects local communities and economies, but raises concerns regarding regional security and stability. Although up-to-date data on cattle rustling in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands is difficult to find, a 2018 International Crisis Group report indicates that between June 2017 and January 2018 approximately 2 million cattle were stolen across Nigeria, with the northwestern states of Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina a major hotspot²¹.

Cattle rustling has deep historical roots among the pastoral societies of the Nigeria–Niger borderlands. As socio-economic conditions have evolved, however, so too have the motivations driving cattle rustling²². In its contemporary form, cattle rustling is no longer merely a cultural practice driven by resource competition, but a thriving criminal industry, with the stolen livestock serving as a valuable commodity for criminal networks operating in the borderlands. The economic implications of this—both for pastoral communities who lose their herds and the broader regional economy—are profound.

¹⁷ Punch Editorial Board, 'Save Nigeria from renewed banditry,' *Punch Newspapers*, (Feb 2024). - ¹⁸ Punch Newspapers (Note 17) - ¹⁹ SBM Intelligence, 'The Economics of Nigeria's Kidnap Industry: Follow the Money', Aug. 2023 - ²⁰ UNODC, (2019), *Transnational organized crime in West Africa: A threat assessment*, United Nations, - ²¹ International Crisis Group, 'Stopping Nigeria's spiraling Farmer-Herders Violence', *Africa Report No. 262*, 26 July 2018 - ²² Rufa'i, M. A., 'Cattle rustling and armed banditry along Nigeria–Niger borderlands', *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Apr. 2018), pp. 66–73; Shuaibu, S. A. and Sama'ila, A., 'Pastoralist transhumance and conflicts in the Sahelian zone of the Nigeria–Niger Borderlands', *South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2023), pp. 1–10

HERE, CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES CONTRIBUTE TO THE CHALLENGES OF CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION

For the affected pastoralists, who rely heavily on their herds for sustenance, trade and as a store of wealth, cattle rustling represents a direct assault on their primary source of livelihood. Moreover, the economic ripple effect extends to businesses dependent on the pastoral economy, exacerbating poverty and contributing to social unrest²³.

Limited law enforcement resources, lax border controls and the sheer expanse of the Nigeria–Niger borderlands makes apprehending and prosecuting cattle rustlers extremely difficult²⁴. The involvement of well-organized criminal networks, often spanning multiple jurisdictions, further complicates law enforcement efforts, as does the lack of effective communication and coordination between Nigerian and Nigerien authorities. Here, cultural and linguistic differences contribute to the challenges of cross-border collaboration.

MODUS OPERANDI OF CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Criminal networks operating in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands exhibit sophisticated modus operandi that encompass the utilization of clandestine routes, remote border crossings and corrupt practices within law enforcement and border control agencies. Moreover, they often leverage familial or ethnic ties among the close-knit communities that straddle the border to facilitate their activities. The use of technology has also become a prevalent feature, with criminal networks employing encrypted communication channels and advanced transportation methods. Understanding these operational tactics is crucial if authorities are to stay ahead of evolving criminal strategies.

The shared ethnographic traits of those inhabiting the borderlands goes a long way to negating the obstacles to economic endeavours posed by official boundaries. Consequently, trade and cross-border movement have become routine facets of daily life. The border area spanning Illela in Sokoto State to Jibiya in Katsina State is particularly permeable, facilitating substantial volumes of trade between Nigeria and Niger. While legitimate cross-border trade undoubtedly offers cooperative benefits and economic integration, widespread smuggling and trans-border crime brings with it a multitude of negative consequences.

As a consequence of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons orchestrated by organized syndicates, armed gangs operating from the unregulated forest areas that connect the borderlands have proliferated. These criminal entities are involved in various nefarious activities, including cattle rustling, ransom kidnappings and armed robbery.

Informal border crossings used by gangs sometimes create animosity and mistrust among various vigilante groups aiming to combat bandits in the region. «The mistrust among the different vigilante groups operating in the area exacerbates tension and encourages reprisal attacks» explained a male community leader in Maradi, Niger, during a KII. The study revealed that allegations of extra-judicial killings of innocent civilians by some overly zealous vigilantes have led to reprisal attacks across towns, intensifying animosity between different vigilante groups, as well as between the local community and other vigilantes. Additionally, the community leader interviewed in Maradi, Niger, emphasized the challenge of identifying perpetrators due to the presence of twin border villages along most of the border area. He reported that:

In the Niger Republic, there are twin border towns such as Hirji, which is less than a kilometre from the border, Mai Dabāro, located just 40 feet from the border, and Hwaru, visible from this location. Around two or three market places may be found along the border. In Nigeria, there are market places named Magama and Jibiya, while in the Niger region, there are markets called Hirji and Hwaru. In these places, distinguishing between law-abiding citizens and criminals is nearly impossible.

It has also been discovered that some criminal youth in border villages engage in trading intelligence reports with bandits in exchange for cash. Bandits pay for these intelligence reports because criminals typically cross the border at night on motorcycles to launch attacks on locals before retreating to forested areas that span the border towns. As a result, vigilante communities in vulnerable areas have initiated partnerships with groups on the opposite side of the border to establish inter-border vigilante groups, aiming to bolster security.

The illicit trade in small and light weapons along the Nigeria–Niger borderlands is a recognized concern, indicative of broader security challenges in the region. The porous border, coupled with weak law enforcement and governance structures in certain areas, offers a conducive environment for trafficking weapons across international boundaries²⁵. Although precise quantitative data on the extent of the trade is elusive, reports from security agencies, anecdotal evidence and occasional seizures of arms in border regions all point to the existence of significant illicit arms trade networks operating in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands²⁶.

The spread of small arms and light weapons within the region has been linked to various conflicts, criminal activities and acts of violence, highlighting the urgent need for concerted efforts and comprehensive strategies aimed at addressing the issue. Again, while comprehensive statistics may be lacking, the prevalence of armed groups, communal clashes and violent incidents in border communities, points to the significance of the illicit arms trade in exacerbating regional security challenges²⁷.

²³ [Famine Early Warning System Network \(FEWS NET\), 'Nigeria Food Security Outlook June 2019 to January 2020: Continued Boko Haram conflict in northeast increasing displacement and food assistance needs', 2019](#) - ²⁴ [International Crisis Group, 'Violence in Nigeria's North-West: Rolling Back the Mayhem', Africa Report No. 288, 18 May 2020](#) - ²⁵ UNODC (note 16) - ²⁶ UNODC (note 16) - ²⁷ [Small Arms Survey, Small Arms Survey 2015: Weapons and the World \(Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2015\)](#)

3

EXISTING APPROACHES TO TACKLING CROSS-BORDER CRIME

A NUMBER OF STATE ACTORS PLAY CRUCIAL ROLES WHEN IT COMES TO ADDRESSING CROSS-BORDER CRIME IN THE NIGERIA–NIGER BORDERLANDS. BORDER CONTROL AGENCIES, FROM IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS TO CUSTOMS OFFICERS, SERVE AS GATEKEEPERS, MONITORING THE FLOW OF PEOPLE AND GOODS.



The Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) and Niger Customs Service are integral to enforcing customs regulations, preventing illegal trade and combatting cross-border smuggling²⁸. Meanwhile, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) and Niger Immigration Service control the movement of people across the border, issue visas, permits and passports, and conduct border patrols to prevent illegal immigration and human trafficking²⁹. In addition, the Nigeria Police Force and Nigerian Security Forces bear responsibility for maintaining public order, combatting smuggling, trafficking and terrorism, while ensuring overall security along the border³⁰. Finally, local customs and immigration officials stationed at border crossings facilitate legal movement, conduct inspections and monitor activities to ensure compliance with regulations³¹.

The impact of cross-border criminal activities along the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis is profound, affecting security, livelihoods and regional stability in both nations³². Consequently, a range of strategies have been adopted to tackle cross-border crime in the region:

CIVIL INITIATIVES

Many traditional and religious leaders on both sides of the border utilize their influence within communities to promote social cohesion, mediate disputes and—through moral guidance and cultural teachings—discourage engagement in illicit activities. According to a community leader in Birnin Konni, Niger Republic, ‘We value our collaboration with our counterparts in Nigeria. We exchange intelligence among ourselves [traditional authorities] to prevent attacks by bandits.’ A traditional leader in Illela, Sokoto State, similarly explained that:

We exchange intelligence information with our counterparts in Konni, Niger Republic, which helps reduce incidences of armed banditry on both sides of the border. We are one people; the borderlines did not divide us. Nigerians come here [Illela, Nigeria] to farm on our lands and we always allow them to farm.

Moreover, a male FGD participant in Faru, Maradi, Niger Republic, reported:

Although there is no visible formal cooperation among the border institutions, there is an informal cooperation among various traditional institutions: Sarakuna [local chiefs], Hakimai [village heads], cultural organizations such as festivities and sports platforms, and kungiyoyin sada zumunta [social organizations] in Maradi, Katsina, Dan Issa and Faru. Faru, specifically, serves as a social hub. It is a village established on the border line to attract social gatherings that bring people from both Nigeria and Niger without discrimination.

Communities in the mentioned villages have built collaboration through exchanging information via mobile phones, with social media said to have played a major role in improving security in recent times. More generally, socio-cultural ties play a crucial role in fostering collaboration among border communities in the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina region.

“ WE ARE ONE PEOPLE;
THE BORDERLINES DID
NOT DIVIDE US ”

²⁸ Nigeria Customs Service Act, 1964. - ²⁹ Nigeria Immigration Act, 2015. - ³⁰ Nigeria Police Act, 2020. - ³¹ [International Organization for Migration/Displacement Tracking Matrix \(IOM/DTM\), ‘Rapid assessment: Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara’, 11 June 2019](#) - ³² UNODC (note 15).

Informal associations often engage with their counterparts in Niger to establish vigilante groups tasked with patrolling their respective areas. Such arrangements remain informal, however, lacking recognition from authorities. According to a key informant in Jibiya, Katsina State:

we have the 'Jibiya People's Forum', which oversees security cooperation through the activities of Yan Sakai and Yan Banga [vigilante groups]. Their responsibilities extend beyond the border, and we typically organize our people with the guidance of our traditional leaders.

These collaborative civil initiatives complement government-led efforts, representing a multi-stakeholder approach to combatting cross-border crime. By leveraging local knowledge and community networks, such initiatives can help promote security and stability across the region.

JOINT BORDER PATROLS

Joint border patrols between Nigeria and Niger were established through a 2015 Memorandum of Understanding on Security Cooperation aimed at enhancing border security, intelligence sharing, and coordinated operations against criminal gangs operating in the borderlands³³. Thus, the NCS and NIS periodically patrol vulnerable areas of the borderlands with their counterparts in Niger in an effort to strengthen cooperation and respond to such criminal activities such as smuggling, human trafficking and terrorism. Special patrols and the Nigeria–Niger Joint Border Patrol typically oversee such operations, with key informants reporting that the initiative had led to the disruption of criminal operations and arrest of perpetrators engaged in various illicit activities. It was also emphasized that without the assistance of the Nigerien authorities it would not have been possible to apprehend the majority of trafficking syndicates in the area. As a border patrol officer in Illela, Sokoto State, observed, 'By sharing intelligence and coordinating operations, these patrols have contributed to enhancing the overall security situation in the borderlands.' An FGD participant in Magama, Katsina State, likewise claimed:

In the past, attempts were made through the joint patrol initiative involving two well-known security personnel: Na'Allah in Niger and Mai Kaho in Nigeria, which led to the apprehension of border criminals and a reduction in border crimes along the Magama-Dan Issa-Maradi axis of the border.

Improved communication networks have also facilitated the effectiveness of these patrols, enabling real-time information sharing and coordination among security forces from both countries. According to a Nigerian law enforcement officer in Magama, Katsina State, 'The use of mobile phones to exchange information has greatly improve our collaboration. Social media also help greatly in enhancing security recently [in this border community]'.³⁴

Despite these successes, the joint border patrols face several challenges. Sustained political commitment is crucial, as changes in government or shifts in priorities could impinge on the effectiveness of the patrols. Resource constraints, including limited funding and equipment, pose significant operational challenges, as do manpower shortages, particularly in remote, hard-to-access areas along the border. On top of this, there are logistical obstacles such as poor infrastructure and rugged terrain. As a Nigerian security agent working at a Nigeria–Niger border post lamented, 'We lack the necessary resources and tools to enhance border patrols.' Tackling these challenges requires active efforts to sustain political will, increased investment in resources and equipment, and enhanced coordination between Nigerian and Nigerien authorities. More recently, however, the border closure following the July 2023 coup in Niger has made such collaboration impossible.

“ IN THE PAST, ATTEMPTS WERE MADE THROUGH THE JOINT PATROL INITIATIVE INVOLVING TWO WELL-KNOWN SECURITY PERSONNEL: NA'ALLAH IN NIGER AND MAI KAHU IN NIGERIA, WHICH LED TO THE APPREHENSION OF BORDER CRIMINALS AND A REDUCTION IN BORDER CRIMES ALONG THE MAGAMA-DAN ISSA-MARADI AXIS OF THE BORDER ”

³³ Telephone interview with an ECOWAS official, 20 February, 2024 - ³⁴ Telephone interview with an ECOWAS official, 20 February, 2024

THROUGH WAPCC, NIGERIA, NIGER AND OTHER MEMBER STATES CAN SHARE INFORMATION AND BEST PRACTICES, FACILITATING THE LEVERAGING OF COLLECTIVE RESOURCES AND EXPERTISE

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Both Nigeria and Niger actively participate in ECOWAS to address various regional security challenges, including cross-border crime. In this respect, a key platform for cooperation is ECOWAS's West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCC). According to an ECOWAS Secretariat official, 'This committee brings together the heads of police forces from member states, including Nigeria and Niger, to collaborate on matters related to law enforcement and security'³⁴. Through WAPCC, Nigeria, Niger and other member states can share information and best practices, facilitating the leveraging of collective resources and expertise.

The ECOWAS Secretariat official also highlighted the role of the Inter-Ministerial Action Group against Transnational Organized Crime (GIATOC), which serves as a collaborative forum for the government ministries and agencies responsible for addressing transnational organized crime in West Africa: 'through GIATOC, member states develop strategies, policies and action plans to combat various forms of organized crime, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling and money laundering'. Thus, engagement in GIATOC enables Nigeria and Niger to align their national efforts with regional initiatives aimed at tackling cross-border crime.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Several cross-border cooperation programmes between Nigeria and Niger exist, with financial backing provided by a diverse array of international organizations, including ECOWAS, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), as well as other bilateral and multilateral donors. A key informant in Jibiya, Katsina State, cited ECOWAS's Cross-Border Cooperation Programme—funded by ECOWAS and other international partners—which supports initiatives in West Africa aimed at promoting cooperation and socio-economic development among border communities, and enhancing border management and security.

Additionally, the EU has funded several cross-border cooperation programmes designed to increase collaboration between Nigeria and Niger. An ECOWAS Secretariat official referred to the Niger–Nigeria Support Project, which 'focuses on enhancing security, stability, and development in the border areas between the two countries.' The EU also supports the ECOWAS Strategy for Border Management and Security, which focuses on improving border infrastructure, enhancing border control measures and promoting information sharing among border agencies in the West African region³⁵.

In addition, the EU funds the Trans-Border Security Programme, tasked with improving trans-border security collaboration between Nigeria and Niger. This includes supporting projects aimed at strengthening border surveillance, combatting cross-border crime and promoting regional cooperation among law enforcement agencies³⁶. Moreover, the EU supports the Regional Development and Protection Programme, designed to enhance livelihoods, promote social cohesion and improve access to basic services (e.g. healthcare, education) among vulnerable populations resident in the two countries' border regions³⁷.

³⁵ EU. (2019). *Support to ECOWAS Regional Peace, Security and Stability Mandate (EU-ECOWAS PSS)*. European Union External Action. - ³⁶ EU support (Note 37). - ³⁷ EU support (Note 37)

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS TO STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION

ADDRESSING CROSS-BORDER CRIME ALONG THE SOKOTO–ZAMFARA–KATSINA AXIS OF THE NIGERIA–NIGER BORDERLANDS DEMANDS A SYMPHONY OF STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION. ANALYSIS OF BOTH THE SECONDARY AND PRIMARY DATA, HOWEVER, REVEAL AN ARRAY OF DISCORDANT NOTES IN THE FORM OF INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS, RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS, SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS, WHICH TOGETHER IMPEDE PROGRESS.

“ WE LACK THE NECESSARY RESOURCES AND TOOLS TO ENHANCE BORDER PATROLS. OUR GOVERNMENT DOES NOT SEEM TO BE SERIOUS ABOUT ADDRESSING ARMED BANDITRY IN THE BORDER COMMUNITIES ”

making it challenging for law enforcement agencies to pursue and prosecute offenders seamlessly across borders. Improving diplomatic cooperation and harmonizing legal frameworks are essential first steps in resolving these jurisdictional issues. vered in part by regional budgets.

Security agents also reported that limited resources—including funding, personnel and equipment—impedes the capacity of state actors to effectively address cross-border crimes. According to a Nigerian security agent working at border post:

We lack the necessary resources and tools to enhance border patrols. Our government does not seem to be serious about addressing armed banditry in the border communities. Even payment of our allowances is an issue. We don't always get our allowances.

Application of the rule of law in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands is also regarded as seriously flawed. Many respondents voiced discontent over the frequent release of criminals by the courts, attributed to bottlenecks in the judicial system. This issue poses a significant obstacle to promoting collaborative efforts among local communities when it comes to addressing insecurity.

Analysis of the field data points to siloed operations among the numerous stakeholders involved in tackling trans-border criminality within the study area, with the majority of community stakeholders seemingly unaware of any successful strategies for security agency partnership³⁸. Our interviews with village chiefs, cross-border businesspeople, motorcycle riders (‘Yan Kabu-Kabu’) and Yan Sakai vigilantes³⁹, as well as the National Union of Road Transport Workers, reveal very little cooperation between their respective organizations and security authorities⁴⁰. While the majority of respondents expressed worry about the porousness of the border, emphasizing the potentially devastating local consequences of transnational criminal activities, there was generally very little discussion of collaboration or cooperation between security agencies and civil society organizations. Instead, the focus was on increasing manpower and equipment, as well as (re)training security personnel⁴¹.

One observation made by participants was that jurisdictional conflicts often arise due to traditional and religious authorities operating within their own domains, which may not always align with official administrative boundaries. A traditional ruler in Illela, Sokoto State, reported that ‘This misalignment leads to challenges in coordinating efforts to address cross-border crimes, as jurisdictional conflicts sometimes impede seamless cooperation’. Some key informants complained that traditional and religious authorities often face issues regarding a lack of formal recognition or legal authority from the state. This undermines their legitimacy and influence, thereby hampering, according to a community leader in Jibiya, Katsina State, ‘their ability to effectively collaborate with state representatives and local authorities in tackling cross-border crimes’.

³⁸ Field notes on various border communities along Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina states, Dec. 2023. - ³⁹ Refers to vigilante groups not recognized by the government. - ⁴⁰ Fieldwork data, Dec. 2023. - ⁴¹ Field notes, Dec. 2023.

Many villagers expressed regret concerning the apparent lack of meaningful cooperation among communities along the Nigeria-Niger border to improve local security. For instance, in the past there has been meaningful cooperation that reduce border crimes in the Magama-Dan Issa-Maradi axis of the border due to the individual initiatives of two security officials: Na'Allah in Niger Republic and Mai Kaho in Nigeria, which no loner happens⁴².

Overall, in referring to the erosion of institutional capacity, Fukuyama regards northern Nigeria's security architecture as having very weak foundations, leading to a breakdown in state governance and impeding enforcement of the formal rules ingrained in the social order⁴³. Igbuzor shares this perspective, viewing Nigeria's current state of insecurity as an outcome of failed government efforts⁴⁴.

COMMUNITY DISTRUST

There is a widespread perception among local communities that Nigerian law enforcement agents are not committed to fighting cross-border crime such as banditry and kidnapping⁴⁵. A community leader in Katsina State, for example, complained that, 'The government is not serious about fighting banditry at all'. Another informant berated the police and army for not responding to calls for help:

when bandits attack particular community and you quickly reach out to the security agents, they will not respond promptly. They will wait until bandits left the community before you will see them. They are not reliable at all. In some instances, they will also run away.

The shortcomings of law enforcement agents in responding promptly to distress calls has impacted the willingness of people to co-operate with the government in tackling cross-border crime. In some instances, the perceived lack of commitment has created an enabling environment for non-state armed actors to operate as vigilante groups. However, a lack of formal security training means some vigilante group members end up engaging in acts of violence and human rights abuses that further aggravate the security situation.

All this is made worse by what appears to be an increasing disconnect between the people—especially rural communities—and the government, with the former frequently convinced that the latter cares little for their well-being and security. This has bred misunderstanding, distrust and even hatred, which manifests as a reluctance to partner with the government or its locally deployed security agents. A male FGD participant in Gurbin Bore, Zamfara State, observed, 'It is difficult to partner with a government that does not seem to care whether we live or die'.

Distrust of police and military personnel among affected communities also deters locals from sharing intelligence reports with law enforcement agents. For instance, a respondent from Zamfara State asserted:

We [local people] don't want to share any intelligence report with the police or army because they sometimes leak out the report to the bandits and even tell them the identity of the reporter. Unless God saves you, bandits will use the information [they got from the security agents] to trace and kill you. Many people got killed because they were suspected to have provide intelligence report to the police and army.

This lack of trust in security agents, which was also shared by many other respondents, has hindered the police and army from acquiring the intelligence they need to effectively combat the bandits and other criminals plaguing local communities. In the absence of such vital information, security experts like retired major general Babagana Monguno—National Security Adviser to Nigeria's President Buhari—believe that, 'No matter how much you spend on defense forces- land, air, maritime or police, you will just be like three blind men operating in a dark environment'⁴⁶.



⁴² The names given are pseudonyms. Fieldwork data, Magama border, Dec. 2023. - ⁴³ Fukuyama, F., *State-building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Cornell University Press: 2004). - ⁴⁴ Igbuzor, O., 'Peace and security education: A critical factor for sustainable peace and national development', *International Journal of Peace and Development Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–7. - ⁴⁵ Field notes, Jibiya-Magama border, Dec. 2023. - ⁴⁶ Vanguard, 'Intelligence remains effective instrument in fighting insurgency, banditry – NSA', 11 Sep. 2021.

INEFFECTIVE BORDER MANAGEMENT

Ineffective border management in the Sahel area not only impacts populations residing in borderlands, but—given the emergence of terrorist organizations, violent non-state actors and organized criminal groups—poses a threat to global security and peace. A new strategy is therefore required to improve border management and human security in Sahelian border regions. Improved communication with local populations is necessary in order to establish their concerns regarding law and order efforts, while protecting the unofficial cross-border trade that has proven essential to their livelihoods and food security. At the same time, strengthening the government's social capital in border communities and enhancing conflict resolution systems is a prerequisite for enhancing cross-border security coordination mechanisms. Such efforts should be pursued alongside the development of border agencies' capacities and ensuring an increased government presence in borderlands.

As highlighted previously, there appears to be an absence of strong relationships between government agencies and inter-community organizations/associations. Additionally, conflicting ethnic sentiments are being used to construct identities within these associations, with governments seemingly reluctant to confront this reality. The failure to address this issue has made it increasingly difficult to forge effective, long-lasting partnerships in the administration of borderland communities and so implement successful collaboration strategies. Ethnification of conflicts provoked in part by the activities of Yan Sakai, Kato da Gora and other vigilante organizations has sparked widespread violence throughout the Nigeria–Niger borderlands, with local communities bearing its brunt.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Poverty is a pervasive issue in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands, providing fertile breeding grounds for criminal activities⁴⁷. Insufficient resources and the absence of legitimate employment opportunities push individuals towards illicit activities, with criminal enterprises seemingly presenting the only viable option for financial sustenance. High unemployment rates thus contribute to the growth of criminal networks, making it difficult for stakeholders to break cycles of criminality and collaborate effectively.

Widespread ignorance regarding the consequences of engaging in cross-border crime also hampers collaborative efforts, with many individuals inadvertently becoming involved in illegal activities through lack of awareness. Such ignorance also impedes the development of effective educational campaigns aimed at preventing individuals from falling prey to criminal networks. More generally, limited access to education presents another significant challenge, perpetuating cycles of poverty and ignorance. Lack of an adequate education means individuals are less likely to find legitimate employment, while also hampering development of the critical thinking skills necessary for individuals to make informed choices and avoid being drawn into cross-border crime.

Aggravating the challenge of addressing cross-border crimes such as banditry and smuggling is the erosion of communal value systems. An informant from Zamfara State observed that, 'the collapse of moral values [in society] is one critical factor to the security challenges that we are faced with'⁴⁸. According to him, a loss of moral values and lack of fear of God have resulted in people working as informants for bandits. Most of the attacks and kidnapping carried out by bandits are reliant on the activities of informants living among affected communities. As such, weakened communal value systems pose a serious threat to national security. In this respect, Ehrlich emphasizes the imperative of civic education in addressing security challenges, claiming a civically engaged individual will be 'willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues'⁴⁹. Here, we concur with Checkoway and Aldana, who maintain that equipping people with basic civic knowledge can enable them 'to take collective action to address issues of public concern'⁵⁰. Members of the Nigerian government also bear a moral obligation to lead by example in standing against social injustice and corruption.

INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES AND THE ABSENCE OF LEGITIMATE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES PUSH INDIVIDUALS TOWARDS ILLICIT ACTIVITIES, WITH CRIMINAL ENTERPRISES SEEMINGLY PRESENTING THE ONLY VIABLE OPTION FOR FINANCIAL SUSTENANCE

⁴⁷ Archibong, M., 'Porous borders: Nigeria's security compromised by loose frontiers', mauricearchibongtravels, 11 June 2012 - ⁴⁸ Field notes, Dec. 2023. - ⁴⁹ Ehrlich, T. (ed.), *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* (Oryx Press: Wesport, Ct, 2000). - ⁵⁰ Checkoway, B. and Aldana, A., 'Four forms of youth civic engagement for diverse democracy', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 35, no. 11 (2013), pp. 1894–1899.

INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL ACTORS AND CORRUPTION ISSUES

The influence of political actors in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands poses a significant challenge to effective cross-border crime prevention. In some instances, political figures may be directly or indirectly linked to criminal enterprises, hindering law enforcement agencies from taking decisive action against illicit activities. The nexus between politics and crime creates an environment where stakeholder collaboration becomes difficult, with vested interests superseding commitment to combatting transnational crime. Several key informants observed that security issues have been politicized for political gain or to undermine opponents, especially in Nigeria. Political interference in investigations, prosecutions and resource allocation compromises the integrity of collaborative initiatives and erodes public trust in the justice system. Moreover, such politicization tends to result in selective enforcement of laws, with certain groups targeted and others overlooked.

At the decentralized level, local governance structures such as traditional authorities and community leaders play pivotal roles in managing local affairs and facilitating interactions with state institutions. Corruption within these decentralized services, however, undermines their effectiveness. According to a respondent in Gurbin Bore, Zamfara State, ‘this corruption manifests through local administrative structures, where traditional rulers engage in practices such as bribery and favouritism’. Such actions undermine the rule of law, weakening the ability of decentralized services to effectively address cross-border crime. Additionally, the limited resources allocated to decentralized services may be misappropriated or diverted for personal gain, hindering collaboration efforts and impeding the provision of essential services like border security and law enforcement.

Within state agencies, bribery and collusion with criminal networks can also compromise the integrity of law enforcement operations and hinder interagency cooperation. According to a businesswoman in Jibiya, Katsina State, ‘The problem is that many security agents are corrupt; they often turn a blind eye to smuggling and other illicit activities.’ A community leader in Magama, Katsina State, similarly lamented:

Our police checkpoints are nothing but extortion spots; officers allow passage with illegal or contraband goods if you pay them. With a bribe of fifty or one hundred Naira, a policeman will let you pass without any security check.

At the centralized level, corruption and governance challenges within government institutions—particularly in Nigeria—impede collaboration in tackling cross-border crimes.

“ OUR POLICE CHECKPOINTS ARE NOTHING BUT EXTORTION SPOTS; OFFICERS ALLOW PASSAGE WITH ILLEGAL OR CONTRABAND GOODS IF YOU PAY THEM. WITH A BRIBE OF FIFTY OR ONE HUNDRED NAIRA, A POLICEMAN WILL LET YOU PASS WITHOUT ANY SECURITY CHECK ”

LACK OF NIGERIA–NIGER BORDER SECURITY COOPERATION

Diplomatic challenges between Nigeria and Niger significantly hinder cross-border crime prevention efforts, which necessitate a coordinated and cooperative approach between the two nations if they are to be effective.

Inter-municipal cooperation across borders—including partnerships between local authorities—emerges as a crucial factor in fostering collaboration in the Nigeria–Niger borderlands, particularly when it comes tackling security concerns. Despite the importance of inter-municipal cooperation, numerous barriers stand in the way of collaborative efforts. These include political and ideological differences, as well as legal and regulatory inconsistencies between Nigeria and Niger. Weak governance structures, corruption and limited institutional capacity within municipalities further exacerbate these challenges, hindering implementation of joint projects and fostering distrust among stakeholders.

The July 2023 coup d'état in Niger has cast long shadows of uncertainty across the border. Participants pointed out that the coup had disrupted established security channels, leading to a temporary paralysis of collaboration efforts. According to a Nigerien law enforcement agent, 'with the coup and severity of diplomatic ties with Nigeria, information sharing stagnates, joint operations grind to a halt, and mistrust hangs heavy in the air'⁵¹.

Criminal networks have been able to exploit the instabilities sown by the coup and other diplomatic discord between the two countries. Human traffickers weave through gaps in information sharing, drug smugglers take advantage of weakened border controls, and resource theft rings operate with impunity in the absence of coordinated action. Thus, coups and diplomatic spats represent a boon to these illicit actors, allowing them to tighten their grip on the borderlands.

Findings also indicate that the land border being shut down in the wake of the coup, Boko Haram, bandits and other criminal groups have become more active throughout the nation. This calls into doubt the security benefits of the closure, pointing to the need for a more comprehensive discussion about border control measures that takes into account the various unofficial entrance points where smuggling continues to proliferate. Official justifications for the closure have referred to sovereign national (economic) interests and the ECOWAS protocol. Some critics contend that the border closure breaches the ECOWAS treaty's free trade provisions, as well as tarnishing a landmark free trade deal that was signed by 54 African nations just five weeks prior to the closure. For Nigeria's neighbours, particularly Benin and Niger, the strategy has had considerable negative economic impacts⁵². In this light, the Nigerian government's border closure policy does not appear to be either a long-term or even a medium-term solution to the security concerns raised, nor does it represent a sustainable strategy for economic growth.

The majority of weapons used by bandits on the Nigeria–Niger borderlands seem by to be entering the region via Nigeria's borders, with the country's arms-smuggling business ranked significantly higher than the average for the West African region in the Organized Crime Index 2021⁵³. There is ample evidence that the money made from bandit kidnappings and livestock rustling goes toward buying more weapons from members of Boko Haram and other extremist organizations. Overall, the border closures in Nigeria in 2023 have had very little effect on the growth of the armaments market, particularly along the border between Nigeria and Niger.

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⁵¹ Field notes, Dan Issa, Maradi, Dec. 2023. - ⁵² Field notes, Illela, Sokoto, Dec. 2023. - ⁵³ [Ogbonna, C.N., Lenshie, N.E. & Nwangwu, C. Border Governance, Migration, Securitisation, and Security Challenges in Nigeria. Soc 60, 297–309 \(2023\)](#)

AUTHORITIES CLAIM THAT THE NUMEROUS CHECKPOINTS ARE NECESSARY BECAUSE THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH SECURITY PERSONNEL OR TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES TO COVER THE REGION'S VAST AND POROUS BORDERS

FLAWED CHECKPOINT MANAGEMENT AND INTELLIGENCE GATHERING AND SHARING BY SECURITY AGENCIES

Various security agencies—including the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps, the Army, Customs, Immigration and the Police—were identified as operating checkpoints in research locations in Nigeria. Furthermore, different law enforcement units, including the Bomb Squad, the Nigeria–Niger Joint Patrol, the Criminal Investigation Department and Mobile Police, manage distinct checkpoints. This proliferation of checkpoints and lack of clear synergy between them makes collaboration challenging.

Authorities claim that the numerous checkpoints are necessary because there are not enough security personnel or technological resources to cover the region's vast and porous borders. As a result, checkpoints are erected at strategic locations, such as where illicit routes connect to a major road leading to a significant town or city centre. Security personnel conduct stop-and-search operations at the checkpoints, impeding the movement of traffickers and smugglers attempting to evade security personnel and deliver their goods to commercial hubs. They are also meant to facilitate the sharing and acquisition of intelligence.

Agencies have been able to deter some crimes through vehicle searches. In addition, to provoke a constant sense of dread among trans-border criminals, border security personnel often rotate their patrol routes from one location to another. Generally, however, a variety of factors work against the efficiency of the checkpoints. Smugglers and human traffickers use informants to circumvent the checkpoints, often operating during the night when the security structure is weak and temporary posts are removed. Moreover, there is no comprehensive checkpoint system that enables the various border security services to communicate and exchange ideas during investigations.

Security agencies employ both formal and informal tactics when it comes to gathering and sharing intelligence for curbing cross-border crimes along the Nigeria–Niger border. These channels include field personnel, border communities and collaborations with sister security organizations. Such methods have, however, often proved insufficient due to the lack of robust implementation of such modern technologies as satellite surveillance.

Secret information exchanges between agencies, particularly the NCS and NIS, occur when deemed crucial for addressing shared economic or societal threats. This system is, however, undermined by a lack of trust between both agencies in particular and a seemingly general lack of depth as it relates to inter-agency collaboration, coordination and cooperation and insufficient dedication to safeguarding the interests of individual border communities. Consequently, progress in curbing cross-border crimes through information sharing in these regions has been limited over time.

ADDRESSING CROSS-BORDER CRIMES IN THE SOKOTO–ZAMFARA–KATSINA AXIS OF THE NIGERIA–NIGER BORDERLANDS DEMANDS A COMPREHENSIVE, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH. HERE, FOSTERING COOPERATION AMONG VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS—INCLUDING LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, LOCAL COMMUNITIES, GOVERNMENT BODIES AND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS—OFFERS THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING A ROBUST FRAMEWORK FOR INTELLIGENCE SHARING, RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND COORDINATED ACTION. MOREOVER, THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING THE REGION’S SOCIO-ECONOMIC DYNAMICS CANNOT BE OVERSTATED WHEN IT COMES TO GAINING INSIGHTS INTO THE ROOT CAUSES OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES AND INFORMING TARGETED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES.

The paper has also highlighted the need for capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing the capabilities of institutions and personnel involved in border security. Training programmes, technology upgrades and the establishment of joint task forces can significantly contribute to the effectiveness of counter-crime efforts.

It is essential to recognize the transnational nature of cross-border crimes and the imperative of fostering diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries. In this respect, collaboration at the regional and international levels is indispensable for creating a united front against criminal networks that operate across borders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With all of the above in mind, the following recommendations—addressed to a variety of stakeholders—are proposed with a view to not only mitigating the immediate threats posed by cross-border crime, but contributing to the overall development and stability of the Sokoto–Zamfara–Katsina axis and its surrounding regions.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS (NIGERIA AND NIGER)

Short-term (0–6 months):

- Implement hotlines or online platforms for real-time communication and information exchange between community members and security agencies/law enforcement agents.
- Establish a confidential reporting mechanism for community members to encourage reporting of suspicious activities.
- Deter involvement in crime by sensitizing community members to the effects of criminal involvement, while also investing in the provision of alternative livelihood activities.
- Encourage private sector engagement in initiatives that create legitimate livelihoods and sustainable economic opportunities for those in border communities.

Medium-term (6–12 months):

- Ensure representatives from relevant ministries, law enforcement and security forces hold regular meetings, share information and collaborate in curbing cross-border crimes.
- Focus on crime detection, border management and collaborative investigation methods by law enforcement and security forces.

Long-term (12 months and beyond):

- Build modern border posts, deploy surveillance technology such as drones, remote video surveillance systems (RVSS), ground-based radar systems and biometric identification systems to monitor and secure the borders.
- Target specific hotspots and disrupt criminal networks, demonstrating unity against cross-border crime.

NGOS

Short-term (0–6 months):

- Utilize traditional and new media, meetings and workshops to educate communities about the dangers of cross-border crime and encourage reporting.
- Support state authorities in developing mobile apps or online platforms for anonymous reporting of suspicious activity.
- Organize workshops and forums with officials, law enforcement personnel and communities to foster dialogue and collaboration.

Medium-term (6–12 months):

- Train local NGOs and community organizations to actively contribute to prevention efforts.
- Establish programmes for rehabilitation and reintegration of cross-border crimes perpetrators.
- Engage with policymakers to advocate for legislation facilitating joint efforts against crime networks.
- Implement robust mechanisms to assess programme effectiveness and adapt strategies based on findings.

Long-term (12 months and beyond):

- Implement vocational training and livelihood programmes in border communities.
- Conduct research on crime trends and share findings with stakeholders.
- Collaborate with global organizations with expertise in specific crime areas.
- Utilize local and international media to highlight success stories, raise awareness and advocate for collaborative efforts against cross-border crime.

LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADERS (INCLUDING CROSS-BORDER INTER-MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES) AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Short-term (0–6 months):

- Establish confidential ways of reporting criminal activity or suspicious individuals on both sides of the border.
- Equip community members to act as 'eyes and ears' for security forces when it comes to illicit activities.
- Raise awareness the about the dangers of cross-border crime, the importance of cooperation and reporting mechanisms.
- Organize meetings between political leaders and communities to build trust, understanding and collaboration on security challenges

Medium-term (6–12 months):

- Encourage practices and mediation efforts to prevent local disputes from escalating.
- Encourage active participation of women in security discussions and decision-making processes, leveraging their unique perspectives and leadership skills.
- Bridge the gap between communities, government agencies, security forces and NGOs..

Long-term (12 months and beyond):

- Promote legitimate partnerships that can help create shared interests and reduce the appeal of illicit activities.
- Advocate for government and international support of community-led development projects.
- Encourage private sector engagement in initiatives that create legitimate livelihoods and sustainable economic opportunities for those in border communities.

PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS

Short-term (0–6 months):

- Engage in corporate social responsibility initiatives focused on community development and crime prevention in border areas, including investments in education, health care and infrastructure.
- Ensure transparent and ethical business practices that mitigate the risk of facilitating crime.
- Support state authorities in utilizing technologies to track and monitor goods, thereby preventing the trafficking of illicit items.

Medium-term (6–12 months):

- Invest in advanced surveillance systems and border security technologies, such as ground-based radar systems, fixed surveillance towers, RVSS, satellite imaging, and seismic, acoustic and magnetic sensors.
- Work with government, law enforcement and communities to develop joint initiatives against cross-border crimes.
- Advocate for policies and collaborate with authorities to create an environment conducive to collaboration in anti-crime efforts.
- Partner with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration, INTERPOL or the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in order to gain access to relevant resources, information and networks.

Long-term (12 months and beyond):

- Focus on educational, healthcare and infrastructure development projects in border areas to improve living conditions and reduce drivers of crime.
- Implement skills development programmes that offer training and employment opportunities, reducing unemployment and providing alternatives to crime.
- Ensure ethical sourcing and distribution of products throughout the supply chain.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Short-term (0–6 months):

- Establish dedicated units focused on intelligence, border surveillance and operations against criminal networks.
- Foster collaboration aimed at improving border security and the prevention of smuggling and trafficking.
- Implement secure channels for real-time information exchange between agencies across borders.
- Equip law-enforcement personnel with the necessary skills to tackle cross-border crimes.
- Partner with communities on both sides of the border for the purposes of information sharing and reporting suspicious activities.

Medium-term (6–12 months):

- Utilize data analytics and surveillance systems capable of improving border control and tracking criminal activities.
- Advocate for agreements facilitating law-enforcement and intelligence-sharing cooperation.
- Work towards streamlining extradition processes and cross-border prosecutions.

Long-term (12 months and beyond):

- The UN and EU should facilitate dialogue between international organizations, governments and local stakeholders to monitor progress and address evolving challenges.

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