Trans-Border Crime Along Nigeria-Benin Republic Borderlines

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Abstract

Trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin Republic borderlines has emerged as a pressing security and socio-economic challenge with far-reaching implications for both countries and the wider West African subregion. The porous nature of the border, coupled with weak surveillance capacity, inadequate law enforcement cooperation, and high levels of informal cross-border trade, has created an enabling environment for illicit activities. These include smuggling of petroleum products, arms trafficking, drug trade, human trafficking, cattle rustling, and the proliferation of counterfeit goods. Such activities not only undermine national security but also erode government revenue, distort local economies, and weaken public trust in state institutions. The situation is further complicated by the deep historical, cultural, and economic ties between border communities, which blur distinctions between legitimate and illicit cross-border interactions. Criminal networks exploit these linkages, often outpacing the capacity of security agencies to respond effectively. Additionally, high levels of poverty and unemployment in border areas incentivise local participation in trans-border crimes, making enforcement strategies more complex. This paper examines the dynamics of trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin border, analysing its drivers, manifestations, and implications for regional security. It argues that addressing the challenge requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced joint border patrols, improved intelligence sharing, community-based policing, and stronger regional collaboration through frameworks such as ECOWAS. Beyond security measures, sustainable solutions must also address socio-economic deprivation in border communities to reduce vulnerability to criminal recruitment. Strengthening governance and development in these areas is therefore central to curbing trans-border crime and fostering long-term stability. Policy implementation should be evidence-based, adequately funded, and monitored through transparent metrics. Universities, civil society, and border communities can contribute data, trust, and oversight. Investments in infrastructure, education, and livelihoods would complement enforcement, while legal harmonisation between states would close loopholes and reduce incentives for cross-border criminal enterprise activities.

Keywords: Transborder, Crime, Criminal, Security, West Africa

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La criminalité transfrontalière à la frontière Nigéria–Bénin

Résumé

La criminalité transfrontalière le long de la frontière entre le Nigéria et le Bénin constitue un défi socio-économique et sécuritaire majeur, aux répercussions considérables pour les deux pays et l'ensemble de la sous-région ouest-africaine. La porosité de la frontière, conjuguée à des capacités de surveillance insuffisantes, à une coopération policière inadéquate et à l'importance du commerce transfrontalier informel, crée un environnement propice aux activités illicites. Celles-ci comprennent la contrebande de produits pétroliers, le trafic d'armes, le trafic de stupéfiants, la traite des êtres humains, le vol de bétail ainsi que la prolifération de produits contrefaits.Ces activités compromettent non seulement la sécurité nationale, mais érodent également les recettes publiques, perturbent les économies locales et affaiblissent la confiance du public envers les institutions étatiques. La situation est davantage compliquée par les liens historiques, culturels et économiques profonds qui unissent les communautés frontalières, brouillant ainsi la distinction entre les interactions transfrontalières légitimes et illicites. Les réseaux criminels exploitent ces liens, souvent plus rapidement que les services de sécurité ne peuvent y répondre efficacement. De plus, les niveaux élevés de pauvreté et de chômage dans les zones frontalières incitent les populations locales à participer à la criminalité transfrontalière, ce qui complexifie les stratégies de lutte. Ce document examine la dynamique de la criminalité transfrontalière le long de la frontière entre le Nigéria et le Bénin, en analysant ses causes, ses manifestations et ses implications pour la sécurité régionale. Il soutient que relever ce défi exige une approche multidimensionnelle, incluant le renforcement des patrouilles frontalières conjointes, l'amélioration du partage de renseignements, le développement de la police de proximité et le renforcement de la collaboration régionale, notamment par le biais d'organisations telles que la CEDEAO. Au-delà des mesures de sécurité, des solutions durables doivent également s'attaquer aux vulnérabilités socio-économiques des communautés frontalières afin de réduire leur exposition au recrutement criminel. Le renforcement de la gouvernance et du développement dans ces zones est donc essentiel pour endiguer la criminalité transfrontalière et favoriser une stabilité à long terme. En outre, la mise en œuvre des politiques doit reposer sur des données probantes, bénéficier de financements adéquats et faire l'objet d'un suivi à l'aide d'indicateurs transparents. Les universités, la société civile et les communautés frontalières peuvent contribuer à la production de données, à la consolidation de la confiance et au contrôle citoyen. Enfin, les investissements dans les infrastructures, l'éducation et les moyens de subsistance viendraient compléter les mesures répressives, tandis que l'harmonisation juridique entre les États permettrait de combler les lacunes et de réduire les incitations aux activités criminelles transfrontalières.

Mots-clés : Transfrontalier, criminalité, sécurité, Afrique de l'Ouest

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria shares a border of approximately 700 kilometers with the Republic of Benin (Ashafa, 2018). This boundary has historically served as a centre for socio-economic interaction, particularly in the southwest corridor, where Lagos and Badagry in Nigeria and Cotonou and Porto Novo in Benin function as major commercial hubs (Agbo-Sossou, 2011). Since colonial times, these markets have maintained close economic integration, facilitating both legal trade and informal cross-border exchanges. The high permeability of the border has enabled goods, services, and people to move freely, but it has also created opportunities for illicit activities, including smuggling, human trafficking, arms trade, and drug trafficking (Afrika et al., 2012).

Geographically, the border connects major urban consumption centres in both countries, enhancing its economic importance. Benin relies heavily on informal re-export trade with Nigeria, making this corridor vital for its economy (Lares, 2005). The porous nature of the boundary is further reinforced by shared ethnic, cultural, and kinship ties. Groups such as the Yoruba, Egun, Bariba, and Hausa live on both sides of the border, maintaining social and commercial networks that often override formal national boundaries.

This cultural continuity, while beneficial for trade and integration, also facilitates the movement of illicit goods and the operations of human trafficking networks. Economically, the border region is central to the flow of goods. Subsidised petroleum in Nigeria incentivises fuel smuggling into Benin, while commodities such as rice, frozen foods, and textiles are smuggled into Nigeria to bypass import restrictions.

Additionally, the region has become a route for small arms and light weapons trafficking, contributing to insecurity in southwestern Nigeria and neighboring areas. The corridor also plays a role in drug trafficking, with cannabis, cocaine, and heroin moving through the border en route to Europe and North America. Human trafficking is another significant concern, as women and children are trafficked for forced labor or sexual exploitation, facilitated by irregular migration across the border. Livestock theft and illegal grazing frequently provoke conflicts between herders and farmers, further complicating security dynamics.

Several factors drive these criminal activities. The extensive length of the border and limited surveillance resources allow numerous unofficial crossing points to flourish. Economic disparities, particularly differences in fuel and commodity prices, incentivise smuggling. Poverty and unemployment in border communities push residents to participate in illicit trade, while corruption among border officials enables criminal networks to operate with relative impunity. The presence of extremist groups in the broader West African region further increases demand for arms trafficking routes.

The consequences of trans-border crime are manifold. Economically, smuggling deprives governments of revenue and distorts local markets. Security-wise, arms trafficking and organised crime contribute to violence, banditry, and terrorism. Human trafficking and irregular migration endanger vulnerable populations, while corruption erodes public trust in governance.

Regionally, criminal networks undermine ECOWAS's objectives by destabilising cross-border trade and cooperation. Effectively addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts at the national, bilateral, and regional levels, integrating robust border management, anti-corruption measures, community engagement, and socio-economic development strategies. By strengthening governance and law enforcement while promoting legitimate trade and development in border communities, Nigeria and Benin can mitigate the risks associated with trans-border crime and enhance regional stability.

This paper examines the factors behind cross-border crime at the Nigeria-Benin border and efforts to combat it. This is an important case study for these two main reasons. First, this zone is known for cross-border crime and trafficking. Secondly, the two countries are both members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN) and the Non-Aligned Movement, the Guinea Commission, the Nigeria-Benin Joint Commission, among other bilateral and multilateral engagements.

Thirdly, their colonial masters are members of the United Nations Security Council. This paper is divided into three sections: firstly, introduction, secondly, objectives, thirdly, results, fourth, discussion, fifth, conclusion.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research article are to:

1. Identify the major forms of trans-border crimes prevalent along the Nigeria–Benin border.
2. Examine the socio-economic and political factors that drive trans-border crime in the border communities.
3. Analyse the impact of trans-border crime on national security, economic development, and social stability in both countries.
4. Assess the effectiveness of existing border security measures and bilateral cooperation mechanisms.
5. Examine the role of local communities in either facilitating or preventing trans-border crime.
6. Propose sustainable policy and security strategies for reducing trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin border.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper will report the materials and methods used. Secondary sources of data for this paper include books, journals, monographs, and internet materials. The secondary sources constitute the greater percentage of the data sources of this paper. The internet serves as a research tool, functioning much like a modern library: it provides access to a broad range of primary and secondary sources, rather than being a source of knowledge.

For this paper, the internet was primarily used to locate peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, official statistics, and digital archives, which informed the analysis of trans-border crime, informal trade, and trafficking dynamics. While online sources facilitated efficient access to data, they were carefully cross-checked against official publications and field reports to ensure reliability, validity, and academic rigor. In this sense, the internet is a conduit to credible sources, complementing traditional research methods without replacing them.

RESULTS

The findings from this paper underscore the complexity and persistence of trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin frontier. Evidence drawn from academic literature, policy reports, and documented cases reveals that cross-border criminality in this corridor is both structurally embedded and institutionally enabled. Rather than isolated criminal incidents, trans-border crimes between Nigeria and Benin constitute a networked system sustained by economic incentives, governance weaknesses, and regional integration dynamics.

First, the results show that porous borders remain a primary enabler of criminal activity. The over 700-kilometer Nigeria–Benin boundary, particularly through corridors such as Badagry–Seme and Ogun State's multiple unofficial crossings, facilitates smuggling, human trafficking, and arms proliferation (Flynn,1997; Ebaye & Okon, 2021). The existence of more than eighty informal crossing points in Ogun State alone illustrates the limitations of conventional border control mechanisms. These vulnerabilities are compounded by weak institutional coordination, corruption among border officials, and inadequate surveillance infrastructure.

Second, economic asymmetries between Nigeria and Benin significantly drive informal and illicit trade. Benin's liberal import policies and re-export economy contrast sharply with Nigeria's protectionist trade regime. This disparity, coupled with differences in currency valuation (the Naira and the CFA franc), creates strong incentives for smuggling petroleum products, vehicles, textiles, frozen foods, and pharmaceuticals. Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT), while technically illegal in many instances, functions as a survival mechanism for border communities. Estimates that the informal sector accounts for approximately 75 percent of Benin's GDP and 20 percent in Nigeria highlight its structural importance (Medina & Schneider, 2018).

Thus, enforcement-only approaches fail to account for the livelihood dimension of cross-border exchange.

Third, the results confirm that transnational organised crime (TOC) in West Africa is increasingly sophisticated and globally connected. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), organised crime generates hundreds of billions of dollars annually worldwide (UNODC, 2011). West Africa's strategic geographic position between South America and Europe makes it a transit hub for narcotics trafficking. Evidence from the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA) and joint ECOWAS–INTERPOL operations reveals that millions of kilograms of narcotics have transited through Benin en route to Nigerian and international markets (GIABA, 2011). Criminal networks now operate through flexible transnational linkages connecting actors across Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. This networked model blurs the line between local and global criminal economies.

Fourth, human trafficking remains one of the most devastating manifestations of trans-border crime. Reports indicate that an estimated 200,000 children in West and Central Africa are victims of trafficking and forced labor, with Benin often functioning as a transit state and Nigeria as a major destination (INTERPOL, 2019). Joint operations such as Épervier II demonstrate that bilateral enforcement can produce measurable successes; however, the persistence of trafficking networks reflects deeper structural drivers, including poverty, unemployment, and weak social protection systems (INTERPOL, 2019). Vulnerable populations, especially women and children, are frequently coerced or deceived into acting as couriers or laborers within illicit supply chains.

Fifth, arms proliferation through the Nigeria–Benin corridor contributes to broader regional instability. It is estimated that a significant proportion of small arms circulating in West Africa are located in Nigeria, many entering through neighboring states (Small Arms Survey, 2018).). The northern Benin frontier's proximity to Sahelian conflict zones has further intensified concerns about militant infiltration and weapons flows. This dynamic underscore the interconnectedness of West African security challenges and the inadequacy of isolated national responses.

DISCUSSIONS

Studies on African borderlands are extensive (Asiwaju & Mosselman, 1997), yet a brief conceptual overview remains necessary for understanding the dynamics of cross-border movement and interaction. Research by Okorn and Ndum (2020), for instance, provides valuable insight into the nature of transnational crime in the Mfum border area between Nigeria and Cameroon. Their study identifies the harsh socio-economic conditions experienced by residents of the border community as a major factor driving involvement in illicit economic activities. Poor living standards and limited employment opportunities have led some residents to engage in smuggling and other informal survival strategies. The Nigeria–Benin border reflects the enduring consequences of colonial boundary-making. Communities of common ancestry, especially the Yoruba, were divided between two states. Settlements such as Ketu, Ohori, and Anago straddle the frontier, sharing kinship ties that long predate colonial intervention (Asiwaju, 1990). Within Ogun State, four local government areas, Imeko-Afon, Yewa North, Yewa South, and Ipokia — border Benin, yet many of these areas lack natural barriers or visible demarcations, making effective policing difficult. The cultural continuum between southwestern Nigeria and southeastern Benin is especially pronounced among Yoruba subgroups such as the Anago and Egun, who maintain mutual linguistic intelligibility, intermarriage, and active trade relations (Afolayan, 2000).

Historical accounts of the Oyo Empire's influence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries further explain these enduring ties (Ayandele & Akinjogbin, 1980).

Contemporary interactions through weekly markets and kin-based exchanges blur the distinction between national territories, illustrating how colonial borders remain socially permeable. Economic life along the Ogun–Benin corridor exists in a grey zone between legality and informality. Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) dominates the region's economy, driven by stark differences in tariff regimes and currency values. Benin's liberal import policies contrast sharply with Nigeria's protectionist measures, incentivising smuggling through unregulated routes that long predate formal border institutions (Golub, 2012).

The informal sector contributes an estimated 75 percent of Benin's GDP and around 20 percent in Nigeria, reflecting its role as a survival economy for border communities (Afrika & Ajumbo, 2012). Commonly traded commodities include petroleum products, textiles, second-hand goods, food items, and pharmaceuticals. While technically illegal, these transactions sustain livelihoods in areas where formal employment is scarce. This dual economy formal in appearance but informal in practice illustrates how state policies inadvertently sustain cross-border smuggling. One of the major illicit economic activities that has persisted along the Nigeria–Benin border since the mid-1980s is the smuggling of contraband goods. Contraband refers to commodities that are either prohibited from entering a country or subject to high import tariffs intended to discourage their importation through official channels such as seaports and regulated land borders. In Nigeria, successive governments have implemented protectionist trade policies, including embargoes and high tariffs on certain commodities, primarily to protect domestic industries and promote local production.

These policies are also intended to stimulate economic growth and generate employment opportunities for Nigerian citizens. Despite these protectionist measures, smuggling has remained widespread along Nigeria's borders, particularly along the frontier with the Republic of Benin (Hoffmann & Melly, 2015). The persistence of smuggling activities has been attributed to factors such as porous borders, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the significant economic incentives associated with cross-border trade. In response to the scale of illicit trade, the Nigerian government temporarily closed sections of the Nigeria–Benin border in 2003 under the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo to curb smuggling activities (Okoro,2003).

A substantial proportion of the goods exchanged between traders in Nigeria and Benin occurs through informal or illegal channels. Many goods officially imported into Benin are subsequently re-exported or smuggled across the border into Nigeria. This pattern reflects the broader dynamics of informal cross-border trade in West Africa, where regulatory disparities and economic incentives encourage traders to bypass formal customs procedures. The unofficial nature of this trade has had significant economic and security implications for Nigeria. The smuggling of substandard and counterfeit products, including adulterated pharmaceutical goods and other fake commodities, has posed serious risks to public health and consumer safety.

In addition, the prevalence of informal and undocumented trade has resulted in considerable revenue losses for the Nigerian government, as goods entering the country through illegal routes remain largely untaxed and unrecorded (Hoffmann & Melly, 2015). According to Osuntokun, a substantial portion of trade between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin occurs outside formal regulatory frameworks, primarily through smuggling networks. This situation not only weakens state revenue generation but also undermines economic planning and national security (Osuntokun,2003). International assessments further illustrate the magnitude of the problem. World Bank reports estimate that goods worth approximately ₦750 billion (about $5 billion) are smuggled into Nigeria annually through the Benin corridor alone. (Gateway,2011) The report also indicates that more than $400 million in import duties is lost each year due to smuggling activities across Nigeria's sub-regional borders (Gateway, 2011). These developments demonstrate the high economic costs of illicit cross-border trade and highlight the challenges Nigerian authorities face in regulating trade along the Nigeria–Benin frontier.

One of the major features of Nigeria-Benin relations is informal cross-border trade, which is vital to both countries and the sub-region. This forms an informal dynamic for interaction and integration. The Beninese economy depends on this informal cross-border trade with Nigeria, especially in the re-exportation of imported goods. The attractiveness stems from the non-harmonisation of the currencies of both countries (the Naira and the CFA franc). This has its roots in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Security is a determining factor in the relationship among countries with contiguous borders. This becomes the case with Nigeria and Benin. Poor governance and weak institutional oversight have contributed to inadequate border management and pervasive corruption along the Nigeria–Benin frontier.

The porous nature of this boundary exposes both states to diverse transnational threats, posing severe risks to national and regional security. As Shelley (1995) notes, transnational criminal activities are inherently destabilising, generating regional and global tensions that erode state authority. Such crimes not only divert public resources but also undermine governance structures by competing with legitimate economic systems and promoting systemic corruption. Smuggling and political suspicion particularly Nigerian accusations that Benin permitted humanitarian supplies to reach Biafran secessionists through the port of Cotonou during the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War further aggravated tensions between the two countries. These allegations contributed to deterioration in bilateral relations and were associated with a series of border clashes between Nigeria and Benin in 1969 (Aluko, 1977; Omede, 2006). Such episodes illustrate how weak governance, cross-border smuggling, and mutual insecurity historically entrenched cycles of instability along the Nigeria–Benin frontier.

Porous borders have created opportunities for various forms of transnational crime. Ogun State reportedly contains more than eighty unofficial crossing points (The Cable, 2014), which facilitate smuggling, human trafficking, and arms proliferation. Weak institutional capacity, corruption, and limited inter-agency coordination further undermine enforcement. Illicit arms trafficking represents a critical security concern. It is estimated that about 70 percent of small arms circulating in West Africa are in Nigeria, many entering through Benin (WANEP, 2013). These weapons fuel local conflicts and insurgencies. Similarly, the narcotics trade exploits weak border governance. Benin functions as a key transit hub for narcotics destined for Nigerian markets and beyond (GIABA, 2012). Globalisation has further complicated border management. As Duvell (2003) observes, global trade liberalisation and mobility have weakened traditional notions of sovereignty. Regional policies such as the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, while designed to enhance integration, inadvertently facilitate the movement of contraband and irregular migrants. Poor infrastructure and pervasive extortion by officials exacerbate these vulnerabilities (Ibeanu, 2007). Over the past two decades, the operations of global criminal organisations have expanded significantly in scope and complexity (Albanese, 2011).

Contemporary transnational crime no longer involves isolated or autonomous groups; rather, it operates through flexible networks that connect state and non-state actors in mutually beneficial arrangements (Zabyelina, 2009). This transformation has created major challenges for West African states, including Nigeria and Benin, where weak governance and porous borders provide fertile ground for illicit activities.

In Nigeria's case, international criminal actors originating from regions such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Western Europe have become embedded within local trafficking and smuggling systems (Picarelli, 2010). These groups typically operate through loosely organised networks that rely on financial and logistical links across countries like Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Unlike informal cross-border traders who depend on small-scale survival economies, these transnational criminals function within sophisticated global supply chains designed to conceal financial flows and evade detection.

Evidence from the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA, 2012) highlights the scale of the problem. A joint ECOWAS–INTERPOL operation uncovered nearly 7.9 million kilograms of narcotics trafficked through Benin, confirming its role as a key regional hub. Vehicle smuggling and the illegal importation of commodities, particularly Nigerian petroleum products, remain widespread (Sasse & Carsten, 2017). Nigerian criminal groups also exploit Benin's seaports, taking advantage of administrative corruption to facilitate these operations (Bavier, 2013). Beyond narcotics and contraband, human trafficking and child labor have intensified across the continent, reflecting broader socioeconomic disparities and weak law enforcement mechanisms (Bhalla, 2018). These developments underscore the growing interconnectedness of global and regional criminal economies and highlight the urgent need for coordinated international action to address the structural enablers of organised crime in West Africa. Nigeria's relatively large and diversified economy has long served as a magnet for both licit and illicit cross-border activities within the West African subregion. The country's porous borders, coupled with weak enforcement mechanisms, have made it particularly vulnerable to drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking networks that operate across neighboring states such as Benin (Iziengbe, 2017). Most official entry and exit points, as well as numerous informal crossings, are exploited by criminal actors to facilitate the movement of narcotics and contraband goods into and out of the country.

West Africa's geographical position between South America and Europe makes it a strategic transit corridor for the international cocaine trade (Ellis, 2009). Reports from the United States Drug Enforcement Administration highlight the region's growing role in global narcotics flows, with Nigerian and Beninese ports frequently implicated in transshipment routes (Adetula, 2015). The political and socioeconomic conditions in many West African states, characterised by limited law enforcement capacity, corruption, and high unemployment, create a conducive environment for these criminal enterprises. Smuggling and trafficking operations are often tolerated or indirectly supported by corrupt officials and poorly motivated security personnel. In some instances, political elites have been implicated in facilitating or benefiting from these illicit networks, further weakening institutional integrity and public trust. Consequently, the persistence of transnational crime poses serious threats to peace, governance, and sustainable development in West Africa. The intersection of economic opportunity, governance failure, and criminal enterprise thus underscores the need for a coordinated regional response to border management and security reform.

A major implication of Nigeria's porous borders and evolving trafficking networks is the increasing sophistication of methods used by drug traffickers to evade law enforcement. Trafficking syndicates frequently employ intermediaries or unsuspecting individuals to transport narcotics across borders, making detection and prosecution more complex (Hamilton, 2016). These couriers, often children, women, or individuals in vulnerable socioeconomic conditions, are sometimes deceived about the nature of the goods they carry or coerced into participation through financial inducement or intimidation. In certain cases, influential members of society have also been implicated in facilitating or shielding such operations, thereby undermining enforcement efforts. The Nigerian government has occasionally attempted to address these challenges through border control policies. One notable example was the closure of Nigeria's land borders between 2019 and 2020. The policy was introduced partly to curb smuggling and protect domestic agricultural production, particularly the rice industry. While the closure contributed to increased local production in some sectors, it also generated significant economic disruption for traders and border communities (Adeniran & Adejumo, 2020). Critics argued that the policy undermined the principles of regional integration established under the ECOWAS protocol on the free movement of goods and persons.

The reliance on human couriers persists largely due to structural weaknesses in law enforcement institutions and limited capacity for advanced surveillance. High levels of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment make many citizens susceptible to recruitment by trafficking networks. Similarly, systemic corruption and poor governance enable traffickers to operate with relative impunity. The intersection of vulnerability and criminal exploitation thus reveals that combating drug trafficking in West Africa requires not only border control measures but also broader socioeconomic reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of participation in illicit activities.

Recent data indicate that smuggling through the Badagry–Seme axis remains extensive, accounting for roughly one-third of illicit trade between both countries in 2024 (Vanguard, 2025). Smuggled goods range from petroleum and frozen foods to vehicles and fast-moving consumer goods. Law enforcement occasionally reports major seizures; for example, the Federal Operations Unit intercepted a syndicate that was forging customs documents for over 600 vehicles valued at ₦501.4 million (Babalola, 2023). In human trafficking, joint operations such as Épervier II have rescued hundreds of victims trafficked across the Nigeria–Benin border (Interpol, 2019). Additional cases in 2024 involved the interception of trafficked persons en route to Burkina Faso and the rescue of victims by the Nigerian Navy (The Guardian, 2024; Daily Post, 2024). The northern Benin frontier has also become a hotspot for arms and militant infiltration due to its proximity to conflict-affected Sahelian states such as Niger and Burkina Faso (Global Initiative, 2024). These dynamics underscore the interconnectedness of insecurity across the region. While Nigeria and Benin have established multiple bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) to enhance border cooperation, implementation remains inconsistent. Differences in tariff regimes, subsidy structures, and fuel prices continue to create incentives for smuggling. Structural poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods push local residents into the informal economy. Scholars note that enforcement remains largely reactive rather than preventive (Adenipekun, 2022). Institutional corruption further undermines enforcement. Border officials are often implicated in document forgery and the facilitation of illicit activities (Luqman et al., 2023). The absence of harmonised data systems or coordinated patrols allows criminal networks to exploit regulatory loopholes. Revenue losses from smuggling are substantial, estimated at over US$3 billion annually for both countries combined. The human cost of trans-border crime is severe. Victims of trafficking, particularly minors, experience abuse, forced labor, and social marginalisation. Periodic border closures aimed at curbing smuggling also disrupt legitimate trade and kinship networks, threatening livelihoods in already fragile communities. These measures often exacerbate poverty and distrust toward state authorities. Moreover, persistent crime undermines the credibility of state institutions. When policy pronouncements fail to translate into tangible improvements, public confidence erodes. The challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling security imperatives with socioeconomic realities.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin Republic border represents a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, political, and institutional dynamics that have long defined interactions between both states. Over the years, the porous and poorly policed nature of these borders has made them susceptible to a multiplicity of illicit activities, including smuggling, human trafficking, arms proliferation, drug trade, currency counterfeiting, and the movement of stolen vehicles and contraband goods. The persistence of such crimes underscores the structural weaknesses of border management regimes in West Africa and reflects the deep-seated socio-economic interdependence between border communities, which often operate beyond the effective reach of central authorities. This conclusion synthesizes the study's central findings, draws implications for national and regional security, and outlines policy pathways to address trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin Republic frontiers.

Historically, the Nigeria–Benin border was an artificial colonial creation that divided ethnic and kinship groups such as the Yoruba, Egun, and Bariba across two distinct sovereignties. These communities maintained cultural and economic interactions despite formal state boundaries. Consequently, cross-border trade became a vital source of livelihood but also created a social space in which legal and illegal economic activities are deeply intertwined. The colonial and postcolonial state failed to integrate these peripheral regions effectively, leaving them marginalised from state development programs. This marginalisation provided fertile ground for informal economic networks that evolved into entrenched smuggling and trafficking networks. As such, trans-border criminality along the Nigeria–Benin corridor cannot be understood merely as a product of individual deviance but must be interpreted as a structural outcome of historical neglect, weak governance, and socio-economic inequality.

The economic dimension of trans-border crime is particularly profound. The Nigeria–Benin border is one of the busiest trade corridors in West Africa, linking Nigeria's commercial centres, such as Lagos, to Benin's Cotonou port and beyond. The heavy flow of goods, people, and vehicles facilitates both legitimate trade and criminal enterprise. Smuggling of petroleum products from Nigeria to Benin has been especially pervasive, driven by differences in fuel pricing regimes and subsidy policies. Similarly, Benin serves as a conduit for the importation of prohibited or high-tariff goods, such as used vehicles and rice, into Nigeria through informal routes.

These economic crimes, while often portrayed as illegal, are embedded in the survival strategies of border populations who rely on smuggling as a primary source of livelihood in the absence of viable alternatives. Therefore, trans-border crime cannot be effectively addressed without tackling the economic dislocations and policy inconsistencies that incentivise it.

Security implications are equally significant. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons across the Nigeria–Benin border has contributed to rising insecurity in the region. Banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence in northwestern Nigeria are indirectly sustained by the availability of illicit arms trafficked through Benin and other neighboring states. The inability of security forces to effectively monitor border routes, coupled with corruption among customs and immigration officials, has allowed criminal syndicates to operate with relative impunity. In recent years, transnational criminal networks have expanded their activities beyond smuggling to include drug trafficking and money laundering, linking local actors to global illicit economies. These developments blur the boundaries between local criminality and international organised crime, thereby escalating the security threat to both nations and the broader ECOWAS subregion.

Institutional weaknesses further exacerbate the situation. Both Nigeria and Benin suffer from limited border management capacity, overlapping jurisdictional mandates, and weak inter-agency coordination. Corruption among border officials undermines enforcement efforts, as bribes and informal payments enable smugglers to pass through checkpoints with minimal resistance. In addition, the vast and often unmarked nature of the border terrain makes effective surveillance nearly impossible. The deployment of security personnel is often concentrated in formal entry points, leaving hundreds of informal routes unmonitored. As a result, state control is effectively absent across large swaths of the borderland, which has become a semi-autonomous economic and social space governed by local power brokers, traders, and criminal intermediaries.

Regional cooperation mechanisms have made some progress but remain inadequate. Institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have promoted frameworks for regional security collaboration and border management, including the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. However, the practical implementation of these instruments has been limited by weak political commitment, resource constraints, and conflicting national interests. The ECOWAS principle of free movement, while economically beneficial, has inadvertently facilitated the movement of criminals and contraband. Consequently, effective responses to trans-border crime must reconcile the tension between regional integration and national security imperatives.

From a governance perspective, the persistence of cross-border crime exposes the inadequacy of conventional state-centric approaches to security. The state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and regulation of trade is constantly undermined by non-state actors who control alternative networks of authority and commerce. Therefore, addressing trans-border criminality requires a paradigm shift from purely militarised, enforcement-driven strategies to inclusive, development-oriented approaches. Border communities must be integrated into the design and implementation of security policies. Community-based intelligence networks, participatory policing, and livelihood diversification programmes can strengthen social resilience against criminal recruitment and reduce dependence on illicit economies.

Another critical dimension is the need for harmonised economic and customs policies between Nigeria and Benin. The recurring conflicts arising from Nigeria's unilateral border closure, most notably in 2019, demonstrate the fragility of economic relations and the counterproductive nature of isolated national actions. Such closures, intended to curb smuggling, often inflict severe hardship on legitimate traders and border communities, while failing to dismantle entrenched criminal networks. Sustainable solutions must therefore focus on aligning tariff structures, simplifying customs procedures, and strengthening joint border patrols and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. The establishment of bilateral or joint border management commissions could provide a formal platform for sustained cooperation and policy coordination.
Technological innovation also offers promising prospects. The use of satellite surveillance, biometric data systems, and digital customs management tools can enhance transparency and monitoring along the borders. However, technology must complement, not substitute, institutional reforms. Without addressing corruption, political interference, and institutional inertia, technological solutions alone will have a limited impact. Investment in training, logistics, and inter-agency collaboration is equally essential to ensure that border security personnel are equipped, motivated, and accountable.

In the final analysis, trans-border crime along the Nigeria–Benin Republic borderlines is both a symptom and a cause of broader governance and developmental deficits. It thrives in the interstices of state weakness, economic disparity, and social exclusion. Effective management of this phenomenon demands a multidimensional strategy that integrates security, development, and governance reforms. Both countries must recognise that borderlands are not merely peripheries of national sovereignty but critical frontiers of integration, opportunity, and shared responsibility. Strengthening bilateral relations, deepening regional cooperation under ECOWAS, and investing in borderland development can transform these zones from spaces of insecurity into corridors of legitimate commerce and regional connectivity.

Ultimately, the fight against trans-border crime is inseparable from the quest for human security, inclusive growth, and regional stability. The Nigeria–Benin border, long characterised by informality and contestation, can evolve into a model of cooperative governance if underpinned by political will, institutional innovation, and community participation. By confronting the socio-economic roots of cross-border criminality, harmonising economic policies, and reinforcing collective security mechanisms, Nigeria and Benin can not only curtail illicit activities but also promote a new vision of border management that aligns national interests with regional aspirations. Such a transformation would signify not merely the containment of crime but the realisation of a more integrated, secure, and prosperous West African subregion.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: There is no conflict of interest.

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