HUMANUS DISCOURSE Vol. 6. NO 2. 2026
ISSN 2787-0308 (ONLINE)

Regional Security Cooperation and Border Management in West Africa: The Role of ECOWAS and Its Implications for Nigeria's Security

Oluwafolake Omolade Micho[1]
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies;
Tai Solarin Federal University of Education,
Ijagun, Nigeria

Jamiu Kolawole Audu[2]
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies;
Tai Solarin Federal University of Education,
Ijagun, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examines regional security cooperation and border management in West Africa, with a particular focus on the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its implications for Nigeria's security. The research investigates the extent to which ECOWAS initiatives and frameworks have strengthened border security and addressed transnational challenges in the region. Motivated by rising threats, including terrorism, arms trafficking, human trafficking, smuggling, and irregular migration, the study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on secondary sources, including scholarly publications, ECOWAS documents, policy reports, and security analyses. Findings reveal that ECOWAS has made significant contributions through regional protocols, joint operations, intelligence sharing, and collaborative border management strategies. However, effectiveness remains constrained by weak institutional capacity, poor coordination, inadequate funding, porous borders, and limited enforcement mechanisms. The study concludes that while ECOWAS cannot fully resolve Nigeria's border security challenges, its frameworks and cooperative mechanisms remain essential for addressing transnational threats and promoting sustainable stability in West Africa. Greater commitment from member states, enhanced cooperation, and improved border governance are necessary to strengthen Nigeria's security and regional resilience.

Keywords: ECOWAS, border management, regional security cooperation, Nigeria's security, West Africa

Introduction

Border security has emerged as one of the most pressing security challenges confronting states in West Africa, particularly Nigeria. The region's borders are largely porous, weakly governed, and historically artificial, having been delineated during the colonial period without regard to ethnic, cultural, or

[1] E-mails:michooo@tasued.edu.ngContact: +234 8131653831
[2] E-mails:audujk@tasued.edu.ngContact: +234 806 281 4340

ISSN 2787-0308 (ONLINE)

economic realities. As a result, these borders have long facilitated intense cross-border interactions, both licit and illicit, which contemporary states now struggle to regulate effectively.[3]In Nigeria, border insecurity has become closely linked to terrorism, transnational organized crime, arms proliferation, smuggling, and irregular migration, all of which pose serious threats to national and regional stability.[4]

On 7 August 1990, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Standing Mediation Committee established the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) to help resolve the armed conflict that had broken out in Liberia the previous year. This was not the first deployment of an African multinational force. The 1993 Revised Treaty placed responsibility for regional conflict resolution on ECOWAS members, and subsequent policies defined the parameters of ECOWAS peacekeeping forces. ECOMOG, created as a ceasefire monitoring and peacekeeping force for civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, was disbanded after those conflicts ended. ECOWAS does not maintain a standing force; each mission-specific force is raised as needed.

Nigeria occupies a central position in West Africa's security architecture by virtue of its size, population, economic influence, and geopolitical location. It shares extensive land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, spanning over 4,000 kilometers and cutting across deserts, forests, rivers, and sparsely populated rural communities.[5] These border regions are often characterized by limited state presence, inadequate infrastructure, poverty, and strong informal economic networks, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation by criminal and insurgent groups.[6] The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria, for instance, has demonstrated how armed groups leverage porous borders to evade security forces, establish rear bases, and sustain cross-border supply chains.[7]

The transnational nature of Nigeria's border security challenges underscores the limitations of purely national approaches to security management. Despite repeated border closures, military deployments, and enforcement operations by Nigerian authorities, illicit cross-border activities persist.[8]This persistence reflects the broader reality that contemporary security threats in West Africa are deeply interconnected and regional in scope. Arms trafficked from conflict zones such as Libya circulate across the Sahel and into Nigeria, while criminal

3Adebajo, A., 2016, The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War, Oxford: Oxford University Press. .27.
4United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020, Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa, Vienna: UNODC. 11.
5Nigerian Immigration Service, 2018, Nigeria Border Management Report, Abuja: Nigerian Immigration Service. 6.
6International Organization for Migration, 2019, Border Management and Security in West Africa, Geneva: International Organization for Migration. 22.
7Pérouse de Montclos, M., 2014, Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria, Leiden: African Studies Centre. 93.
8Fawole, W. A., 2016, "Nigeria's External Relations and Border Security," Nigerian Journal of International Affairs. 8.

© humanusdiscourse@gmail.com , http://humanusdiscourse.website2.me

networks operate seamlessly across multiple jurisdictions.[9] Consequently, effective border security in Nigeria cannot be achieved in isolation but requires sustained regional cooperation and institutional coordination.

It is within this context that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has assumed an increasingly prominent role in regional security governance. Established in 1975 primarily to promote economic integration, ECOWAS has gradually expanded its mandate to include peace, security, and conflict management.[10] This transformation was driven largely by the civil wars that engulfed Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, which exposed the security vulnerabilities of the region and the inadequacy of existing continental mechanisms.[11] Nigeria played a decisive role during this period, providing leadership, troops, and financial resources to ECOWAS-led interventions, thereby positioning itself as the organization's principal security anchor.[12]

Over time, ECOWAS institutionalized its security role by adopting legal and policy frameworks to prevent conflict, manage crises, and address transnational threats. These include the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security; the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework; and the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network.[13]More recently, ECOWAS has sought to address border-related security challenges through initiatives such as the Integrated Border Management Strategy, which promotes cooperation among border agencies, harmonization of border policies, and enhanced intelligence sharing among member states.[14]

For Nigeria, ECOWAS represents both an opportunity and a constraint in border security governance. On the other hand, regional cooperation under ECOWAS provides a platform for intelligence sharing, joint operations, and coordinated responses to cross-border threats.[15] However, Nigeria must balance its national security priorities with ECOWAS principles such as the free movement of persons, which, while central to regional integration, complicate border control and enforcement.[16] This tension between openness and security lies at the heart of Nigeria's border governance dilemma.

Despite the growing literature on ECOWAS and regional security, relatively few studies have systematically examined the organization's role in border security

9Small Arms Survey, 2018, Armed Actors and Illicit Arms Flows in West Africa, Geneva: Small Arms Survey. 61.
10ECOWAS Commission, 1993, Revised Treaty of ECOWAS, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 3.
11Adebajo, A., 2002, Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 41.
12Nwolise, O. B. C., 2014, "Nigeria and Regional Security in West Africa," African Journal of International Affairs. 48.
13ECOWAS Commission, 2008, ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 5.
14ECOWAS Commission, 2011, Integrated Border Management Strategy, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 9.
15Ukeje, C., 2013, "The Dynamics of Security Cooperation in West Africa," Conflict Trends. 38.
16ECOWAS Secretariat, 1979, Protocol A/P.1/5/79 on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, Lomé: ECOWAS Secretariat. 1.

with a specific focus on Nigeria. Existing scholarship often concentrates on peacekeeping interventions or counter-terrorism efforts, paying limited attention to the everyday governance of borders and the institutional mechanisms that shape border security outcomes.[17] This gap is significant, given that borders constitute the primary interface between national and regional security dynamics.

This research seeks to address this gap by examining the role of ECOWAS in border security with particular emphasis on Nigeria. It analyzes ECOWAS' legal and institutional frameworks, operational interventions, and Nigeria's leadership role within the organization, while also assessing the constraints that limit the effectiveness of regional border security initiatives. By situating Nigeria's border challenges within the broader ECOWAS security architecture, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of regional security governance in West Africa and highlights pathways for strengthening border security cooperation.

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Framework

A clear conceptual and theoretical grounding is essential for understanding ECOWAS's role in border security and its implications for Nigeria. Border security is a complex and contested concept that intersects with sovereignty, regional integration, migration governance, and security cooperation. Similarly, regional security initiatives such as those undertaken by ECOWAS are best understood within established theoretical frameworks that explain why and how states cooperate to address shared security threats. This section clarifies the key concepts employed in the study and outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

Border security broadly refers to the set of policies, institutions, and practices through which states regulate the movement of people, goods, and services across territorial boundaries in order to safeguard national security, economic stability, and social order.[18] Traditionally, border security was understood primarily in military and territorial terms, emphasizing the defense of state boundaries against external aggression. However, in the contemporary era, the concept has expanded to include non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, transnational organized crime, irregular migration, and the trafficking of arms and persons.[19]

In the Nigerian context, border security encompasses a wide range of challenges that extend beyond territorial defense. Nigeria's borders are key sites where issues of security, development, governance, and regional integration intersect. Border areas often function as economic lifelines for local communities engaged in cross-border trade and social exchange, while simultaneously serving as

17Akinrinade, S., 2019, "ECOWAS and Regional Security: The Nigerian Dimension," Journal of African Union Studies. 60.
18Bigo, D., 2002, "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease," Alternatives. 63.
19Buzan, B., 1991, People, States and Fear, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 19.

transit routes for illicit activities.[20] As a result, border security in Nigeria involves a delicate balance between enforcement and facilitation, between preventing threats and enabling legitimate mobility. At the regional level, border security is further complicated by the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, which guarantees visa-free entry and residence for citizens of member states.[21] While this protocol is central to regional integration, it complicates national border control efforts by limiting the extent to which states can restrict cross-border movement. Consequently, border security within ECOWAS is not solely a national responsibility but a shared regional concern requiring coordinated policies and harmonized enforcement mechanisms.[22]

Regional Security and Transnational Threats

Regional security refers to the collective efforts of states within a geographic region to address threats that transcend national boundaries. In West Africa, such threats include terrorism, arms proliferation, drug trafficking, maritime piracy, and human smuggling. These threats are inherently transnational, exploiting weak governance structures, porous borders, and uneven state capacity.[23] Nigeria's security challenges vividly illustrate the regional nature of contemporary threats. Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province operate across Nigeria's borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, drawing strength from cross-border mobility and regional support networks.[24] Similarly, arms trafficked from conflict zones in North Africa circulate across the Sahel and into Nigeria, fueling violence and criminality.[25] These dynamics highlight the limitations of unilateral national responses and reinforce the necessity of regional security cooperation.

ECOWAS has increasingly framed border security as an integral component of regional security governance. Through policy instruments and institutional mechanisms, the organization seeks to promote collective action against transnational threats while respecting the sovereignty of member states.[26] This approach reflects a growing recognition that security in West Africa is indivisible and that instability in one state can quickly spill over into others.

20International Crisis Group, 2021, Nigeria's Borderlands: Security and Governance Challenges, Brussels: International Crisis Group. 7.
21ECOWAS Secretariat, 1979, Protocol A/P.1/5/79 on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, Lomé: ECOWAS Secretariat. 2.
22ECOWAS Secretariat, 1979, Protocol A/P.1/5/79 on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, Lomé: ECOWAS Secretariat. 2.
23United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Security Sector Reform in West Africa, New York: United Nations Development Programme. 14.
24Pérouse de Montclos, M., 2016, "Regional Implications of Boko Haram," African Security Review. 168.
25Small Arms Survey, 2018, Armed Actors and Illicit Arms Flows in West Africa, Geneva: Small Arms Survey. 44.
26Ukeje, C., 2013, "The Dynamics of Security Cooperation in West Africa," Conflict Trends. 36.

ISSN 2787-0308 (ONLINE)

Integrated Border Management (IBM)

Integrated Border Management (IBM) is a key concept underpinning ECOWAS's approach to border security. IBM refers to a coordinated and multi-agency strategy that brings together customs, immigration, security services, and other relevant actors to manage borders efficiently and securely.[27]Rather than relying on isolated agencies operating independently, IBM emphasizes information sharing, joint operations, and the harmonization of procedures. ECOWAS adopted the Integrated Border Management Strategy to address the fragmentation and inefficiency of border governance in the region. For Nigeria, IBM offers a framework for improving coordination among border agencies such as the Nigerian Immigration Service, the Nigeria Customs Service, and security forces.[28] It also promotes cooperation with neighboring states through joint border committees and shared surveillance initiatives. However, the effective implementation of IBM remains uneven, constrained by institutional weaknesses and resource limitations.[29]

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory

This paper is anchored in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which provides a useful lens for analyzing ECOWAS's role in border security. RSCT, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waver, posits that security threats tend to cluster regionally and that states within a region are interdependent in terms of their security dynamics.[30] According to the theory, the security of each state cannot be considered in isolation from that of its neighbors, as threats are often shared and mutually reinforcing. West Africa constitutes a distinct regional security complex characterized by weak state institutions, porous borders, and a high prevalence of transnational threats. Within this complex, Nigeria occupies a central position due to its demographic weight, economic influence, and military capacity.[31]ECOWAS functions as the institutional expression of this regional security complex, providing a platform for collective threat assessment, policy coordination, and joint responses.

RSCT is particularly relevant for understanding border security in Nigeria because it emphasizes the interconnectedness of national and regional security challenges. Nigeria's border insecurity is not merely a domestic problem but part of a broader regional pattern involving neighboring states. ECOWAS border security initiatives can therefore be seen as attempts to manage the West African security complex through institutionalized cooperation.[32]In addition to

27European Commission, 2016, Integrated Border Management in Practice, Brussels: European Union. 5.
28Nigerian Immigration Service, 2018, Nigeria Border Management Report, Abuja: Nigerian Immigration Service. 12.
29Fawole, W. A., 2017, "Border Management and Security Governance in Nigeria," Nigerian Journal of International Affairs. 21.
30Buzan, B. and Wæver, O., 2003, Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 44.
31Adebajo, A., 2007, "Nigeria: Africa's Regional Power?" Journal of Contemporary African Studies. 3
32Akinrinade, S., 2019, "ECOWAS and Regional Security Governance," Journal of African Union Studies. 63.

© humanusdiscourse@gmail.com , http://humanusdiscourse.website2.me

RSCT, elements of Hegemonic Stability Theory are relevant to understanding Nigeria's role within ECOWAS. This theory suggests that regional stability is often underpinned by the leadership of a dominant state willing and able to provide public goods such as security.[33] Nigeria's financial contributions, troop deployments, and diplomatic leadership have positioned it as the de facto hegemon within ECOWAS. However, hegemonic leadership also generates tensions. Smaller member states may perceive ECOWAS security initiatives as Nigeria-driven, leading to resistance or limited cooperation.[34] These dynamics shape the effectiveness of ECOWAS border security initiatives and highlight the importance of legitimacy and consensus-building in regional governance.

ECOWAS Legal and Institutional Frameworks for Border Security

The role of ECOWAS in border security is anchored in a set of legal instruments, policy frameworks, and institutional mechanisms developed over several decades. Although ECOWAS was originally conceived as an economic integration organization, persistent insecurity and violent conflict in West Africa necessitated a gradual expansion of its mandate into peace and security governance. Border security has emerged as a critical component of this expanded mandate, given the centrality of borders to transnational threats confronting member states, particularly Nigeria. The transformation of ECOWAS into a regional security actor began in earnest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the outbreak of civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. These conflicts exposed the absence of effective continental mechanisms for crisis response and highlighted the vulnerability of West African states to regional instability.[35] In response, ECOWAS adopted the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security in 1999, establishing a formal basis for collective security action.[36]This mechanism provided ECOWAS with the authority to intervene in member states in cases of armed conflict, political instability, and humanitarian crises. Nigeria played a decisive role in shaping and operationalizing the mechanism, contributing the bulk of troops and financial resources to ECOWAS peace operations.[37]The institutionalization of collective security marked a turning point in ECOWAS' evolution and laid the groundwork for subsequent border security initiatives.

One of the most significant legal instruments shaping border governance in West Africa is the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment.[38]The protocol grants citizens of member states the right to enter, reside, and establish businesses within the territory of other

33Gilpin, R., 1981, War and Change in World Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 72.
34Fawole, W. A. and Ukeje, C., 2015, The Changing Structure of West African Security, Ibadan: University Press. 88.
35Adebajo, A., 2016, The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War, Oxford: Oxford University Press. .85.
36Gambari, I. A., 1999, "ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Regional Security in West Africa," African Affairs. 95.
37ECOWAS Secretariat, 1999, Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, Abuja: ECOWAS Secretariat. 4.
38Nwolise, O. B. C., 2015, "Nigeria and Peacekeeping in West Africa," African Journal of International Affairs. 22.

© humanusdiscourse@gmail.com , http://humanusdiscourse.website2.me

member states without visas.[39] For Nigeria, this protocol has facilitated trade, labor mobility, and regional integration, reinforcing its position as a regional economic hub.

However, the protocol also presents substantial security challenges. The ease of movement across borders complicates the identification and monitoring of individuals involved in criminal or insurgent activities.[40] Nigerian security agencies have repeatedly expressed concerns that the protocol is exploited by terrorists, smugglers, and traffickers who move undetected across borders.[41]ECOWAS has sought to address these concerns by promoting the harmonization of travel documents and the adoption of biometric identity systems, though implementation remains uneven across member states.[42]

Adopted in 2008, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) represents a comprehensive approach to security governance in West Africa. The framework emphasizes early warning, preventive diplomacy, mediation, peacebuilding, and security sector reform.[43]Border security is implicitly embedded within the ECPF, as cross-border threats are recognized as key drivers of conflict and instability in the region. Nigeria benefits from the ECPF through enhanced regional coordination on security issues and access to early-warning information on the cross-border movements of armed groups.[44]The framework also underscores the importance of addressing the structural drivers of insecurity, such as poverty, marginalization, and weak governance in border regions, factors that are particularly pronounced in Nigeria's northern and northeastern borderlands.[45]The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) serves as the organization's primary mechanism for monitoring security threats and providing timely alerts to decision-makers. ECOWARN operates through zonal bureaus and national early warning centers, collecting data on political, economic, social, and security indicators.[46]

Nigeria hosts one of the most active national early warning units within ECOWARN, reflecting its central role in regional security dynamics. Information generated through the network supports Nigerian efforts to anticipate cross-border threats, including insurgent movements and communal

39ECOWAS Secretariat, 1979, Protocol A/P.1/5/79 on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, Lomé: ECOWAS Secretariat. 5.
40Akinrinade, S., 2018, "Regional Integration and Border Security in West Africa," Journal of African Union Studies. 41.
41Nigerian Senate Committee on Interior, 2019, Report on National Border Security, Abuja: National Assembly. 14.
42International Organization for Migration, 2019, Border Management and Security in West Africa, Geneva: International Organization for Migration. 36.
43ECOWAS Commission, 2008, ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 8.
44Ukeje, C., 2015, "Security Governance in ECOWAS," Conflict Trends, Durban: ACCORD Publishers. 29.
45United Nations Development Programme, 2017, Preventing Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin, New York: United Nations Development Programme.18.
46ECOWAS Commission, 2016, ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) Manual, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 5.

violence.[47]However, the effectiveness of ECOWARN is constrained by uneven data quality, limited analytical capacity, and delays in translating warnings into preventive action.[48]Recognizing the need for a more coordinated approach to border governance, ECOWAS adopted the Integrated Border Management (IBM) Strategy in 2011. The strategy seeks to enhance border security while facilitating legitimate trade and mobility through inter-agency cooperation, information sharing, and harmonized procedures.[49] For Nigeria, IBM offers a framework for addressing long-standing coordination challenges among border management agencies such as the Nigerian Immigration Service, the Nigeria Customs Service, and security forces. The IBM Strategy also promotes cross-border cooperation through joint patrols, shared infrastructure, and bilateral border committees. Nigeria has participated in several such initiatives, particularly along its borders with Benin and Niger.[50] Despite these efforts, implementation has been hindered by institutional rivalries, resource constraints, and weak political commitment at both national and regional levels.[51]Nigeria's influence within ECOWAS has been instrumental in shaping the organization's border security agenda. As the largest contributor to ECOWAS's budget and peace operations, Nigeria wields considerable political leverage.[52] Nigerian policy priorities, particularly counter-terrorism and border control, have increasingly informed ECOWAS security strategies. At the same time, Nigeria's dominance raises concerns about legitimacy and ownership among smaller member states. Some states perceive ECOWAS security initiatives as reflecting Nigerian interests more than collective regional priorities.[53] These perceptions can undermine cooperation and limit the effectiveness of regional border security frameworks.

ECOWAS Operational Interventions and Border Security in Nigeria

While legal and institutional frameworks provide the foundation for regional border security cooperation, the effectiveness of ECOWAS is ultimately measured by its operational interventions on the ground. In Nigeria, ECOWAS has been involved directly and indirectly in a range of security operations aimed at addressing cross-border threats, particularly terrorism, arms trafficking, and organized crime. These interventions demonstrate both the potential and the limitations of regional approaches to border security.[54]

47Nigerian Office of the National Security Adviser, 2020, National Early Warning Report, Abuja: Office of the National Security Adviser. 9.
48International Crisis Group, 2020, Stopping Nigeria's Slide into Chaos, Africa Report No. 288, Brussels: International Crisis Group. 22.
49ECOWAS Commission, 2011, Integrated Border Management Strategy, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 11.
50Nigeria–Benin Joint Border Committee, 2018, Communiqué of the Seme Border Meeting, Cotonou: Joint Border Committee Secretariat. 1.
51Fawole, W. A., 2018, "Border Governance and Regional Cooperation in Nigeria," Nigerian Journal of International Affairs, Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. 17.
52Adebajo, A., 2007, "Nigeria as a Regional Hegemon," Journal of Contemporary African Studies, London: Routledge. 7.
53Rashid, I., 2017, "Power Asymmetries and Regional Security Cooperation in ECOWAS," African Security Review, Pretoria: Taylor & Francis. .255.
54Williams, P. D., 2018, Fighting for Peace in Somalia, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 14.

The rise of Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), has posed the most significant border-related security challenge to Nigeria in recent decades. These groups operate across Nigeria's borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, exploiting weak border controls and local community networks to sustain their activities.[55] Although the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) operates under the Lake Chad Basin Commission, ECOWAS has played a complementary role by facilitating political coordination, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic support among West African states.[56]

Nigeria has benefited from ECOWAS-led diplomatic engagement that helped secure regional consensus against violent extremism. ECOWAS counter-terrorism strategy emphasizes information exchange, capacity building, and the harmonization of legal frameworks among member states.[57] Through these mechanisms, Nigerian security agencies have improved cooperation with neighboring countries, particularly Niger and Benin, in tracking the movement of suspected militants across borders.[58]

ECOWAS has promoted joint border patrols as a practical mechanism for enhancing border security among member states. These patrols are designed to foster trust, improve communication, and enable coordinated responses to cross-border crime. Nigeria has participated in several joint patrol initiatives along its western and northern borders, particularly with Benin and Niger.[59] At the Seme border, one of Nigeria's busiest crossing points, ECOWAS-supported initiatives have sought to improve cooperation between Nigerian and Beninese security agencies. These efforts have contributed to reductions in smuggling and human trafficking, although progress remains uneven.[60]Resource constraints, language barriers, and differing national priorities continue to limit the effectiveness of joint patrols.[61]

Illicit arms trafficking represents a major threat to Nigeria's internal security, particularly in border regions affected by communal violence and banditry. ECOWAS has addressed this challenge through the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which seeks to regulate the manufacture, transfer, and possession of weapons within the region.[62] Nigeria has

55Pérouse de Montclos, M., 2021, Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 102.
56International Crisis Group, 2019, Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Africa Report No. 273, Brussels: International Crisis Group. 17.
57ECOWAS Commission, 2013, ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 6.
58Nigerian Office of the National Security Adviser, 2021, Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Report, Abuja: Office of the National Security Adviser. 12.
59International Organization for Migration, 2020, Joint Border Patrols in West Africa, Geneva: International Organization for Migration. 21.
60Nigeria Customs Service, 2019, Seme Border Operations Report, Abuja: Nigeria Customs Service. 9.
61Fawole, W. A., 2020, "Operational Challenges of Border Security in Nigeria," Nigerian Journal of International Affairs, Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. 25.
62ECOWAS Commission, 2006, ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 1.

domesticated the convention and established a National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons, aligning national policy with regional norms.[63]

Operationally, ECOWAS has supported information sharing and capacity building aimed at disrupting arms trafficking networks. Nigerian law enforcement agencies have benefited from training programs and technical assistance coordinated by ECOWAS in collaboration with international partners.[64] Nevertheless, the scale of arms proliferation fueled by conflicts in the Sahel and North Africa continues to overwhelm regional control mechanisms.[65]Furthermore, irregular migration and human trafficking are persistent challenges along Nigeria's borders. ECOWAS commitment to free movement complicates enforcement efforts, as border officials must balance facilitation with security. ECOWAS has sought to address this dilemma through regional migration policies that emphasize rights-based border management and cooperation among immigration authorities.[66]

Nigeria has participated in ECOWAS-led initiatives to combat human trafficking, particularly through collaboration with the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). These initiatives have strengthened cross-border referral mechanisms and victim protection frameworks.[67] However, weak border infrastructure and corruption among border officials continue to undermine enforcement efforts.[68] Nigeria's leadership role in ECOWAS security operations has been both a strength and a source of strain. Nigeria contributes a significant share of financial and human resources to regional security initiatives, often exceeding those of other member states.[69] This leadership enhances ECOWAS operational capacity but also places a heavy burden on Nigeria, particularly at a time of domestic security and economic challenges.

Furthermore, Nigeria's unilateral actions, such as the 2019 closure of its land borders, have at times conflicted with ECOWAS principles and strained regional relations.[70] While such measures were justified on security and economic grounds, they highlight the tension between national sovereignty and regional commitments. ECOWAS's limited enforcement authority constrains its ability to mediate such disputes effectively.[71]

63National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons, 2021, Annual Report, Abuja: National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons. 4.
64Small Arms Survey, 2020, Measuring Illicit Arms Flows, Geneva: Small Arms Survey. 74.
65United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020, Global Study on Firearms Trafficking, Vienna: UNODC. 49.
66ECOWAS Commission, 2008, ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 13.
67National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, 2020, Annual Trafficking Report, Abuja: NAPTIP. 18.
68Transparency International, 2019, Corruption Risks at Borders, Berlin: Transparency International Secretariat. 33.
69Adebajo, A., 2018, "Nigeria's Regional Security Burden," African Security Review, Pretoria: Taylor & Francis. 301.
70World Trade Organization, 2020, Trade Policy Review: Nigeria, Geneva: World Trade Organization. 57.
71Ukeje, C. and Adebanwi, W., 2018, "ECOWAS and the Limits of Regional Security Governance," African Affairs, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 422.

Challenges and Prospects for Strengthening ECOWAS Border Security in Nigeria

Despite the expansion of its security mandate and policy frameworks, ECOWAS continues to face significant challenges in effectively addressing border security threats in Nigeria and across West Africa. These limitations stem from issues such as the strong principle of state sovereignty, which often leads member states to prioritise national interests over regional commitments, as seen in Nigeria's occasional reliance on unilateral border measures like the 2019 land border closure. In addition, weak coordination among national and regional security agencies, inconsistent information sharing, and bureaucratic delays undermine the implementation of ECOWAS-led initiatives.[72] The organisation also struggles with limited financial and technical resources, delayed contributions from member states, and inadequate infrastructure and equipment within national border agencies. Furthermore, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, while promoting regional integration and trade, creates security challenges by complicating border control and facilitating transnational crimes.[73] Socio-economic conditions in border communities, including poverty, marginalisation, and dependence on informal cross-border trade, further complicate enforcement efforts and weaken trust in state institutions. These challenges are exacerbated by regional instability in the Sahel, the proliferation of arms and militant activities, and the involvement of external actors operating outside ECOWAS frameworks, all of which limit the organisation's capacity to manage border security in the region effectively.[74]

Despite the challenges confronting ECOWAS border security governance, emerging regional dynamics and policy innovations present opportunities to enhance its effectiveness. Nigeria, as a leading political and economic actor in West Africa, could leverage ECOWAS frameworks to strengthen both national border security and regional stability by promoting stronger political commitment among member states and advocating regular high-level security dialogues on border governance.[75] Reforms to the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement could also improve identity management, traveller screening, and information sharing without undermining regional integration, particularly through the adoption of interoperable biometric systems and shared travel databases.[76] Furthermore, effective implementation of Integrated Border Management (IBM) through improved inter-agency coordination, joint border posts, shared surveillance systems, and coordinated patrols could strengthen border control along strategic corridors.[77] Enhancing intelligence cooperation,

72Acharya, A., 2014, Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia, London: Routledge. 58.
73Otubanjo, F., 2015, "National Interest and Regional Security in Nigeria," African Security Review, Pretoria: Taylor & Francis. 212.
74World Bank, 2020, Nigeria: Border Closure and Its Economic Implications, Washington, DC: World Bank Publications. 4.
75Nigerian Immigration Service, 2019, Inter-Agency Border Management Assessment, Abuja: Nigerian Immigration Service. 10.
76International Crisis Group, 2019, Managing Border Insecurity in West Africa, Africa Briefing No. 154, Brussels: International Crisis Group. 8.
77ECOWAS Commission, 2020, Annual Budget Report, Abuja: ECOWAS Commission. 15.

particularly by strengthening the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) and integrating it with Nigeria's national intelligence structures, would improve the monitoring and response to cross-border threats. Community-

Conclusion

This study has highlighted ECOWAS's critical role in regional security cooperation and border management, particularly in relation to Nigeria's security challenges. While ECOWAS has advanced collective security through protocols, joint operations, intelligence sharing, and integrated border management strategies, effectiveness remains constrained by weak institutional capacity, poor coordination, inadequate funding, porous borders, and limited enforcement mechanisms. Nigeria's border insecurity is inseparable from regional dynamics, reinforcing the need for sustained cooperation. This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the difficulty of measuring the operational effectiveness of ECOWAS initiatives. Future research should incorporate primary data from border officials, comparative studies with other ECOWAS member states, and deeper examinations of community-level impacts to provide richer insights into everyday border governance and the socio-economic drivers of insecurity.

Several policy recommendations emerge from this analysis to strengthen ECOWAS's role. The full operationalization of Integrated Border Management across member states is essential, with harmonized procedures, improved inter-agency coordination, and standardized data collection. Intelligence sharing should be enhanced by strengthening the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network, investing in data analysis, and integrating outputs into Nigeria's national decision-making. Sustainable funding mechanisms must be institutionalized to reduce dependence on external donors, with Nigeria advocating for a dedicated ECOWAS security fund. Community engagement should be central to border security strategies, addressing socio-economic drivers of insecurity through development-oriented interventions such as infrastructure investment and livelihood programs. Finally, ECOWAS should consider the gradual establishment of a standing regional border security force or rapid-response unit, supported by Nigeria's leadership and experience in peacekeeping.

Ultimately, while ECOWAS alone cannot fully resolve Nigeria's border security challenges, its frameworks and cooperative mechanisms remain indispensable. Greater political commitment, enhanced cooperation, and improved governance are required to consolidate gains and ensure that border security strategies contribute to both stability and regional integration in West Africa.

© humanusdiscourse@gmail.com , http://humanusdiscourse.website2.me