

An Article on Security Threats Associated with the Nigeria–Benin Borders (1999–2020)

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Article History	Abstract	
Original Research Article	<i>This article examines the border security relationship between Nigeria and Benin Republic from 1999 to 2020, with a focus on the challenges, opportunities, and future directions of their bilateral relations. The purpose of this study is to investigate the dynamics of Nigeria - Benin Republic border security relations, identify the key issues affecting their cooperation, and explore potential areas for improvement. The study is anchored on the Independence theory, which posits that states prioritize their sovereignty and independence in their interactions with other states. This theoretical framework is relevant to understanding the dynamics of Nigeria-Benin Republic relations, particularly in the context of their shared border and economic ties. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a combination of primary and secondary sources, including official documents, academic literature, and expert interviews. The data collected is analyzed using thematic analysis, which enables the identification of patterns and themes in the relationship between Nigeria and Benin Republic. The findings of this study reveal that Nigeria-Benin Republic relations are characterized by a mix of cooperation and challenges. While the two countries have made efforts to strengthen their economic and security cooperation, their relationship is also marked by issues such as border porosity, smuggling, and human trafficking. The study also finds that Benin’s economic dependence on Nigeria is a significant factor in their relationship, with Benin's economy heavily reliant on Nigeria’s market. This study submits that the economic dependence of Benin Republic on Nigerian Trade through Seme border has led to tension and unilateral actions to control border crimes, also the colonial legacy having contributed to the challenges and misunderstanding through border porosity and lack of effective management created by artificial border. The study recommends that both countries prioritize collective responsibility and shared efforts to address the security concerns and economic issues affecting their relationship. It also suggests that revising the borderline to define boundaries and prevent trespassing is crucial, as well as launching programs to reduce poverty among border communities. Furthermore, the study recommends that both countries enhance their diplomatic relations by implementing bilateral agreements and treaties effectively.</i> Keywords: Border Security, Security threat, Border relations, Bilateralism, Nigeria- Benin Relations.	
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Introduction

Borders are fundamental attributes of statehood and sovereignty in the modern international system, as they define the territorial limits within which a state exercises legitimate authority, collects revenue, enforces laws, and provides security for its citizens. In Africa, however, most borders are colonial constructs, arbitrarily drawn at the

Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 by European powers without regard for ethnic homogeneity, pre-colonial political structures, or long-standing economic and social linkages. The Nigeria-Benin border is a classic and enduring example of such artificial boundaries that divided homogenous peoples, fragmented ancient trade networks,

and created a permanent challenge for post-colonial border management, identity, and security in West Africa.

The Nigeria-Benin border is approximately 773 kilometers long, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the south at the coastal town of Seme-Krake to the tri-point where Nigeria, Benin, and Niger Republic meet in the north. It was formally delimited by the Anglo-French Agreement of 10th August 1889 and subsequently adjusted by additional protocols and survey exercises in 1906 and 1912. This extensive borderline cuts across several major ethnic groups, most notably the Yoruba sub-groups of Ketu, Yewa, Anago and Ogori, as well as the Gun, Bariba, and Fulani populations, who continue to maintain strong kinship, cultural, linguistic and economic ties across both sides despite the existence of the political boundary and different colonial legacies of Britain and France.¹

Historically, this borderland was not a barrier but a thriving zone of intense commercial, cultural and political interaction long before the advent of colonialism. The ancient and powerful kingdoms of Oyo, Dahomey, and Ketu operated sophisticated and well-organized trade routes that linked the coastal ports of Porto-Novo, Ouidah and Badagry with the hinterland markets of Oyo, Abeokuta, and beyond.² Commodities such as kola nuts, textiles, salt, and later palm oil moved freely across this region. These pre-colonial trade networks were severely disrupted but not entirely destroyed by colonial partition; rather, they adapted, went underground, and evolved into what is today referred to in official discourse as informal cross-border trade or smuggling, sustained by the same ethnic networks and geographical knowledge.³ Mr. Abdoulaye Amadou Orou stated,

At independence, both Nigeria in 1960 and Dahomey, which later became Benin Republic in 1960, inherited this long and porous border along with the formidable challenge of managing it in a way that balances national interest with regional solidarity. The two countries share membership in several critical regional and international organizations, including the United Nations, the African Union, and most importantly, the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, which was founded in Lagos in 1975 with the primary mandate of promoting economic integration, free movement, and collective security in the West African sub-region.⁴

The return to democratic rule in Nigeria in May 1999 marked a very significant turning point in Nigeria-Benin border relations and in border security management generally. The period from 1999 to 2020 coincides precisely with the Fourth Republic in Nigeria and represents an era of renewed commitment to regional

integration, trade liberalization, and democratic governance under ECOWAS. During this period, ECOWAS deepened its integration agenda and implemented major protocols such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, ETLS, the ECOWAS Common External Tariff, CET, which came into effect in 2015, the ECOWAS Brown Card for motor insurance, and the Inter-State Road Transit, ISRT, scheme designed to facilitate transit trade. In principle, these integration instruments were meant to fundamentally transform West African borders from barriers and zones of security concern into bridges of cooperation, economic growth and unity.⁵ The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment adopted in 1979 and implemented in phases guarantees visa-free entry for ninety days for all community citizens. The Nigeria-Benin border, particularly the Seme-Krake joint border post which is widely regarded as the busiest and most economically significant land border in West Africa, was expected to be a model for regional integration, facilitating the free and legitimate flow of people, goods, and services between Anglophone and Francophone West Africa.⁶

However, the reality on the ground between 1999 and 2020 sharply contradicted this noble ideal of integration and shared prosperity. Instead of serving purely as a corridor for legitimate trade and regional integration, the border became one of the most porous and crime-prone borders in the entire West African sub-region. While it is characterized by only two major official crossings, namely Seme-Krake in Lagos State and Idiroko-Igolo in Ogun State, it is surrounded and undermined by over one hundred known and well-established illegal routes, creeks, waterways, and bush paths through forests and remote border villages like Owode, Ijoun, Imeko, and Ipokia that are used daily by smugglers and other transnational criminals. The asymmetry and sharp divergence in the economic policies of the two neighbouring countries further exacerbated this porosity and criminality. While Nigeria, driven by the need to protect its infant industries, conserve scarce foreign exchange, and promote food security and self-sufficiency, adopted a strong protectionist trade policy characterized by outright import bans on rice, poultry, frozen foods, used vehicles, and textiles, Benin Republic adopted a completely opposite liberal, entrepot and warehouse economic model. Benin's economy relies heavily on its ports, especially the Autonomous Port of Cotonou, which serves as a major warehouse and transit hub for goods that are legally imported and then destined for Nigeria's large and lucrative market of over two hundred million people.⁷ Mr. Ekwerekwu Henry opined;

This fundamental policy divergence created a permanent and highly profitable economic

incentive for large-scale smuggling that proved almost impossible to control. Goods that are legally imported into Benin at very low tariffs are then smuggled into Nigeria through illegal routes where they command much higher prices due to import bans and high tariffs in Nigeria. The World Bank and the Nigerian Customs Service estimated that between 2015 and 2019 alone, Nigeria lost over 3.3 trillion naira in customs revenue to smuggling through the Benin corridor. This phenomenon goes far beyond mere trade; it constitutes a direct and severe threat to economic security, industrial development, and the survival of local manufacturing and agriculture in Nigeria.⁸

In addition Mrs. Yvonne Miriam Assogba added that,

Beyond economic sabotage and revenue loss, the period from 1999 to 2020 witnessed a dangerous escalation of more lethal and complex security threats through this border corridor. The collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 following the NATO intervention, coupled with the deepening crisis in the Sahel and the proliferation of armed groups in Mali and Burkina Faso, led to the massive and uncontrolled proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, SALW, across West Africa. The Nigeria-Benin border quickly became a major transit and entry route for these illicit arms, which are ingeniously smuggled in modified vehicles with specially constructed compartments, concealed inside bags of rice or other goods, or carried by foot through ungoverned bush paths.⁹

These illicit arms have been directly and empirically linked to the intensification of Nigeria's multifaceted internal security challenges, including armed robbery in the South-West, a surge in kidnapping for ransom across the country, cultism in higher institutions, herder-farmer conflicts that have claimed thousands of lives, and various communal and ethno-religious clashes. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, has consistently noted that over seventy percent of illicit small arms in circulation in West Africa enter through porous borders like the Nigeria-Benin border, making this corridor a critical source of insecurity and violence far beyond the immediate borderlands. Another major and growing security threat is the rise of transnational organized crime, particularly drug trafficking and human trafficking, which thrived along this corridor during the period under review. Benin's long coastline and relatively lax port controls and monitoring systems have been exploited by international drug cartels. Substances such as cannabis sativa, cocaine from South America, and various psychotropic substances are trafficked through Benin into Nigeria and onwards to Europe and other parts

of the world. Similarly, sophisticated human trafficking networks use the border to traffic young women and children from Benin, Togo, and Nigeria for purposes of forced labour in quarries, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation in Nigeria, Gabon, and Europe via Cotonou as a transit point.¹⁰ Mr. Ibrahim Moussa Sabi proposed:

The border is notoriously infamous for cross-border banditry, car snatching, and violent armed robbery that directly affect ordinary citizens and traders. Criminal gangs operate with a clear and sophisticated understanding of jurisdictional limitations and the lack of real-time intelligence sharing between security agencies of both countries, committing heinous crimes in one country and quickly escaping into the other where they find safe haven. Border communities such as Owode, Ilaro, Ajilete, Ipokia, and Seme have reported a marked increase in cases of violent attacks on traders, especially those who are forced to operate at night to avoid customs officials, leading to tragic loss of lives, goods, and property and creating an atmosphere of fear.¹¹

Additionally, Mrs. Aisha Lawal said:

Public health security emerged as a very significant and often overlooked threat associated with this border. The indiscriminate smuggling of fake, expired, and substandard pharmaceutical products, unregulated chemicals, bleaching creams, and contaminated food items through illegal routes poses a severe and direct danger to public health and safety in Nigeria.¹²

Furthermore, during major public health emergencies such as the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and subsequent outbreaks of Lassa fever and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the existence of numerous illegal routes and unmanned footpaths allowed people to bypass mandatory health screening and quarantine procedures at official border posts, thus facilitating the cross-border spread of highly infectious diseases. The persistence and escalation of these diverse threats are rooted in several deep structural and institutional factors that defined the 1999-2020 period. The first and most obvious is the inherent geographical porosity of the border and the lack of adequate surveillance technology and manpower. The border area is covered by dense forests, winding creeks, lagoons, and rivers that are extremely difficult to patrol effectively. Throughout this period, the Nigeria Immigration Service and the Nigeria Customs Service lacked adequate patrol vehicles, operational boats, drones, night-vision equipment, and reliable communication systems to provide effective coverage of the entire stretch of the border, leaving large portions ungoverned.¹³

The second critical factor is profound institutional weakness, lack of inter-agency coordination, and endemic corruption among border agencies. Multiple government agencies including Customs, Immigration, Police, NDLEA, NAFDAC, SON, and the Department of State Services all operate at the border, often with overlapping and conflicting mandates and without any effective coordination or intelligence sharing mechanism. Numerous reports by Transparency International, the National Human Rights Commission, and local investigative journalists have documented widespread cases of extortion, bribery, collusion with smugglers, and the existence of numerous illegal checkpoints where illegal tolls are collected daily, which fundamentally undermines formal border control and state legitimacy. The third major factor is the severe socio-economic deprivation and chronic underdevelopment of border communities themselves. Communities on both sides of the border are among the most neglected and underdeveloped in their respective countries, lacking basic social amenities such as good schools, functional hospitals, potable water, and motorable roads. For many youths and families in these areas, smuggling is not perceived as a crime or deviant behaviour but as a legitimate, inherited, and necessary livelihood and survival strategy, passed down from one generation to another, which makes it extremely difficult for security agencies to obtain community cooperation and intelligence.¹⁴

In response to these growing, complex, and multifaceted threats, the Nigerian government adopted several policy measures and security strategies between 1999 and 2020. These included the establishment of Joint Border Patrol Teams, the revitalization of the Nigeria-Benin Joint Border Commission, periodic joint security operations and information exchange meetings between security chiefs of both countries, the deployment of additional military personnel to border areas, and ultimately, the drastic and controversial measure of partial border closure from August 2019 to December 2020. This closure was primarily aimed at curbing rampant smuggling and forcing the Benin Republic to comply with ECOWAS protocols on transit trade and to take concrete action against smugglers using its territory.¹⁵

The overall effectiveness of these measures has been mixed, contested, and has generated significant debate among scholars and policymakers. While the border closure policy led to a temporary but significant increase in customs revenue, a reduction in smuggling of rice and poultry, and a notable boost in local rice production and agricultural investment in Nigeria, it also severely disrupted legitimate ECOWAS trade, increased the prices of basic food items for ordinary Nigerians, caused inflation, and strained diplomatic relations between Nigeria and its closest

Francophone neighbour, Benin. It also demonstrated a fundamental lesson that without holistically addressing the root causes such as policy asymmetry, corruption, poverty, and underdevelopment, security threats will only be temporarily displaced rather than permanently eliminated.

Therefore, studying the security threats associated with the Nigeria-Benin borders from 1999 to 2020 is not only academically important but also crucial for policy formulation and national security planning. This twenty-one-year period encapsulates the fundamental tension and paradox between regional integration and national security, between the ECOWAS ideal of free movement and the sovereign need for effective border control and protection. It provides a rich and highly relevant opportunity to examine how a democratic Nigeria managed its most economically significant land border and how non-traditional security threats evolved, mutated, and intensified in the context of globalization, regional integration, and state fragility in the Sahel. Consequently, this study will provide an in-depth, comprehensive, and evidence based analysis of the nature, dynamics, dimensions, and implications of these security threats. It seeks to move beyond the simplistic and often one-sided narrative that reduces border challenges to mere smuggling of rice to understand the complex, interconnected web of transnational crimes, their deep facilitating factors, and their far-reaching impact on Nigeria's national security, economic development, and the broader ECOWAS integration project, thereby providing empirical evidence and actionable recommendations for more sustainable, humane, and cooperative border management strategies that can benefit both nations.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the interdependence theory as its theoretical framework. The Interdependence Theory, first proposed by Thibaut and Kelley in 1959, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding social interactions. This theory suggests that relationships are evaluated based on their costs and rewards, with beneficial relationships being those where rewards outweigh costs. According to the theory, individuals assess their relationships by weighing the benefits against the costs, and the relationship's success depends on this delicate balance.¹⁶ The theory assumes that people are rational actors who make decisions based on their evaluation of the relationship's potential outcomes. By understanding the interdependence between individuals or group, we can better appreciate the dynamics of their interactions and the factor that influence their decisions. The Interdependence Theory is built on three core principles;

a. The Principle of Structure defines social interactions through six structural dimensions; level of dependence, co-

variation of interests, temporal structure, and information availability. These dimensions shape the nature of interactions and influence the outcomes of relationships.¹⁷ For instance, the level of dependence between individuals or group can affect their willingness to cooperate or compromise. Similarly, the mutuality of dependence can influence the distribution of power and resources within the relationship. By examining these structural dimensions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of relationships and identify potential areas of conflict or cooperation.

b. The Principle of Transformation highlights how individuals transform situational outcomes through psychological process. Rather than solely focusing on immediate self-interest, people often consider broader factors such as their partner's well-being or long-term goals. Individuals may prioritize different outcomes based on their values, emotions, or social norms, which can influence their behaviour and interactions.¹⁸ For example, in a relationship between two countries, one country may prioritize economic benefits, while the other may prioritize security or diplomatic relations. Understanding these transformations can help us better appreciate the motivations and actions of individuals or group in relationships.

c. The Principal of Interaction emphasizes that situational structures provide specific opportunities and activate corresponding motives in interaction partners.¹⁹ These motives, in turn, shape cognition and behaviour, influencing how individuals interact and respond to one another. By understanding these dynamics, we can better appreciate the intricacies of relationships. For instance, in a situation where two countries are negotiating a trade agreement, the structure of the negotiation can influence the motives and behaviour of the parties involved. If the negotiation is structured in a way that promotes cooperation and mutual benefit, the parties may be more likely to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. On the other hand, if the negotiation is structured in a way that emphasizes competition and individual gain, the parties may be likely to engage in conflict and struggle.²⁰

Applying the Interdependence Theory to the analysis of Nigeria - Benin Republic economic, defense/security, and diplomatic relations offers valuable insights. By evaluating the costs and rewards of their interactions, we can determine how Nigeria can maximize its benefits within the context of these relationships. For instance, Nigeria may prioritize economic benefits, such as increased trade and investment, while Benin Republic may prioritize security or diplomatic relations. By understanding the interdependence between these countries, we identify potential areas of cooperation and conflict. Additionally, the theory's cost-

benefit component allow us to assess the opportunities Nigeria may have missed in its relations with Benin Republic and how Benin Republic might be leveraging Nigeria's mistakes to its advantages. By examining the structural dimensions and their relationship, we can gain deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics and identify potential strategies for improving their interactions. The interdependence Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of relationships between nations, including Nigeria and Benin Republic. By examining the costs and rewards of interactions and applying the theory's principles, we gain a deeper understanding of how these countries can work together to achieve mutual benefits. The theory's emphasis on interdependence, structure, transformation and interaction can help us identify potential areas of cooperation and conflict, and develop strategies for improving their relationships. By applying the interdependence theory to the analysis of Nigeria- Benin Republic relations, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of their interactions and identify opportunities for mutual benefit.

Smuggling and Economic Sabotage

Smuggling is the most pervasive, visible, and economically damaging security threat associated with the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020, and it constitutes the foundation upon which other transnational crimes thrive. It is defined as the clandestine movement of goods across borders in order to evade customs duties, import bans, and regulatory controls. On the Nigeria-Benin corridor, smuggling is not an occasional criminal act but a highly organized, well-financed, and deeply institutionalized informal economy with its own financiers, transporters, informants, and protection networks that operate across Seme-Krake, Idiroko-Igolo, and over a hundred illegal bush paths and creeks.

The structural driver of this massive smuggling is the fundamental asymmetry in trade policies between the two countries that defined the entire period under study. While Nigeria pursued a protectionist and import-substitution policy to protect local agriculture and manufacturing, banning the importation of commodities such as foreign parboiled rice, frozen poultry, vegetable oil, used vehicles popularly called Tokunbo, and textiles, Benin Republic adopted a liberal entrepot economic model that depends on low tariffs and high volume imports through the Autonomous Port of Cotonou. This policy divergence meant that goods banned or heavily taxed in Nigeria could be legally imported into Benin and then smuggled into Nigeria where they command a huge price differential, creating an irresistible profit margin of over one hundred percent for smugglers.²¹ According to Mr. Idrissou Amoussou;

The most smuggled commodity during this period was foreign parboiled rice, which is a staple food in Nigeria. Despite billions invested by Nigerian governments from Obasanjo to Buhari in local rice production through initiatives like the Presidential Rice Initiative and the Anchor Borrowers' Programme, foreign rice from Thailand and India imported through Cotonou continued to flood Nigerian markets through smuggling. Smugglers used modified vehicles, trucks with false compartments, and even motorcycles and canoes through creeks at night. This act directly sabotaged Nigeria's food security agenda, discouraged local farmers, led to the collapse of many local rice mills, and drained foreign exchange that the country was trying to conserve.²²

Similarly, the smuggling of frozen poultry products posed both an economic and public health threat of enormous magnitude. Nigeria banned frozen chicken to protect its poultry industry which employs millions of Nigerians, but Benin, a country with less than thirteen million people, was importing over three hundred thousand metric tons of frozen chicken annually, far beyond its domestic consumption, clearly destined for the Nigerian market. These products were often transported without a cold chain, stored in unhygienic conditions for days in the bush, and then sold to unsuspecting consumers in Nigeria, posing serious risks of food poisoning and disease, while simultaneously crippling Nigerian poultry farms in Ogun, Oyo, and Kaduna States.

Petroleum products smuggling, popularly known as bunkering of subsidized fuel, became another major dimension of economic sabotage along this border. Because Nigeria subsidized petrol to keep domestic prices low while prices in Benin and other neighbouring countries were much higher and determined by market forces, a lucrative black market emerged. Tankers, jerry cans, and even underground pipes were used to siphon fuel from Lagos and Ogun State to Benin, Togo, and Ghana. This not only caused artificial fuel scarcity in border communities and in Nigeria generally, but also cost the Nigerian government trillions of naira in subsidy payments that were actually consumed outside Nigeria, representing a massive leakage of national resources. The smuggling of used vehicles and second-hand goods also had a devastating impact on government revenue and industrial policy. Importers avoided paying high import duties at Nigerian ports by importing vehicles through Cotonou and smuggling them through illegal routes, often with the collusion of some corrupt customs officials who would issue fake customs papers. This deprived the Nigeria Customs Service of vital revenue needed for national development and undermined

the Federal Government's automotive policy which sought to encourage local vehicle assembly plants. The Nigeria Customs Service reported that it seized thousands of smuggled vehicles annually, but these seizures represented only a fraction of the actual volume that entered the country undetected. The scale of this economic sabotage cannot be overstated when viewed in terms of revenue loss and de-industrialization. Between 2015 and 2019 alone, estimates from the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Customs Service indicated that Nigeria lost over 3.3 trillion naira in customs revenue to smuggling through the Benin corridor. This is revenue that could have been used to fund education, health, and infrastructure. More importantly, smuggling made local production uncompetitive, as local manufacturers who pay taxes and employ Nigerians could not compete with smuggled goods that evaded all duties, leading to factory closures, job losses, and increased unemployment, which itself is a driver of insecurity.²³

This threat was sustained and facilitated by a complex network of institutional failure, corruption, and poverty. The border is manned by multiple agencies including Customs, Immigration, Police, Department of State Services, NDLEA, and others, whose overlapping mandates created confusion and multiple illegal checkpoints where extortion was rife. Many reports documented how smugglers paid predetermined bribes at each checkpoint, making smuggling a routine and almost legalized business. Furthermore, border communities themselves provided support, intelligence, and manpower for smuggling operations because they have been historically neglected by the state, lack basic infrastructure, and view smuggling as their only viable means of survival and economic empowerment. The security implication of smuggling extends far beyond economic loss, as it provides the logistical infrastructure and financial capital for more dangerous crimes. The same routes, vehicles, informant networks, and corrupt officials used for smuggling rice and poultry are also used for smuggling small arms and light weapons, illicit drugs, and for human trafficking. Money realized from smuggling is often used to finance armed robbery, kidnapping, and other violent crimes. In this sense, smuggling is not just an economic offence but the backbone of transnational organized crime and a direct threat to national security in its broadest definition.

In response to this persistent economic sabotage, the Nigerian government under President Muhammadu Buhari took the drastic decision to partially close all land borders in August 2019, including the Nigeria-Benin border, and later to completely close borders in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate impact was a significant increase in customs revenue, which rose by over 15 percent in the following months, and a visible boost in

local rice and poultry production as local farmers suddenly had a protected market. However, the closure also led to inflation in food prices, hardship for legitimate traders, and diplomatic tension with Benin and ECOWAS, which argued that the closure violated regional free trade protocols.

Smuggling and economic sabotage along the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020 represents a clear example of how economic policy divergence, state weakness, and community survival strategies combine to produce a formidable security threat. It undermined Nigeria's economic sovereignty, sabotaged its agricultural and industrial policies, drained its revenue, threatened public health, and provided funding and logistics for violent crimes. Addressing it therefore requires more than militarization of borders, but a comprehensive approach that includes harmonizing trade policies with Benin, fighting corruption among border agencies, developing border communities, and deploying modern surveillance technology to make smuggling less profitable and more difficult to execute.

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Proliferation

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, commonly referred to as SALW, represents the most lethal and destabilizing security threat associated with the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020, far more dangerous than the smuggling of rice or poultry because it directly fuels violence and loss of lives. Small arms include revolvers, pistols, rifles and assault rifles such as the AK-47, while light weapons include heavy machine guns, grenade launchers and portable anti-aircraft guns. These weapons are durable, easy to conceal, simple to operate, and highly portable, which makes them ideal for smuggling through the numerous illegal footpaths, creeks, and bush routes that characterize the 773 kilometer Nigeria-Benin borderland. The period from 1999 to 2020 witnessed an unprecedented influx of illicit arms into West Africa due to a combination of external and internal factors that made the Nigeria-Benin corridor a preferred transit route. Externally, the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi led to the looting of Gaddafi's massive arms stockpiles, which then flowed southwards through the Sahel into Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and ultimately into Nigeria through its porous borders with Benin and Niger. The Malian crisis of 2012 and the rise of jihadist groups in the Sahel further expanded the black market for arms, while internally, Nigeria's own prolonged Niger Delta militancy, communal conflicts, and later the Boko Haram insurgency created a huge and sustained domestic demand for illicit weapons.²⁴

The Nigeria-Benin border became particularly attractive for arms smugglers due to its geographical porosity, the high

volume of commercial traffic that provides cover, and the weak maritime and border surveillance capacity of both countries. Unlike the northern borders where the terrain is desert, the Seme-Idiroko axis is characterized by dense forests, lagoons, and coastal creeks that are difficult to patrol. Arms smugglers adopted sophisticated methods of concealment that evolved over the two decades. Weapons were hidden inside false compartments of fuel tankers, inside bags of rice, inside second-hand refrigerators and vehicles imported through the Port of Cotonou, and sometimes disassembled and carried in bits by motorcycle riders known as *okada* through bush paths at night to evade detection.

This illicit arms trade was not a random activity but was driven by a highly organized transnational criminal network that operated with precision and protection. The network included arms dealers based in Cotonou and Lagos, financiers who provided capital, transporters who specialized in border crossing, informants who monitored the movements of customs and security agencies, and critically, some corrupt security personnel on both sides who provided safe passage for a fee. The profitability was enormous, as an AK-47 rifle that costs a few hundred dollars in Libya or Mali could be sold for over two thousand dollars in Nigeria, creating a powerful economic incentive that sustained the trade despite periodic seizures by the Nigeria Customs Service and the military. The impact of this proliferation on Nigeria's internal security between 1999 and 2020 has been catastrophic and multifaceted. In the South-West zone, which directly shares the border with Benin, the influx of illicit arms led to a dramatic rise in violent crimes such as armed robbery, car snatching, and later kidnapping for ransom. Many of the notorious armed robbery gangs that terrorized Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo States during the early 2000s were found to be armed with sophisticated weapons smuggled through the Benin corridor. The easy availability of small arms also militarized communal and land disputes, transforming what were previously conflicts fought with machetes and Dane guns into deadly confrontations with automatic rifles.²⁵ Mr. Ogbuka Nnamdi contributed;

Beyond the South-West, weapons smuggled through the Benin border diffused into other conflict theatres across Nigeria, demonstrating the transnational linkages of insecurity. Intelligence reports and arms tracking by the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons, PRESCOM, indicated that weapons that entered through Seme and Idiroko found their way to the Niger Delta militants who used them to attack oil installations, to herder-farmer conflict zones in the North-Central, and to criminal bandits operating in

the North-West. This diffusion means that a security failure at the Benin border had national security implications, fueling violence in regions far from the border itself and complicating the state's ability to contain multiple security challenges simultaneously.²⁶

One of the most alarming dimensions of this threat was its role in empowering non-state armed groups and undermining the state's monopoly on the use of force. Between 1999 and 2020, Nigeria witnessed the rise of ethnic militias such as the Odua Peoples Congress, OPC, in the South-West, whose access to illicit arms increased their capacity for violence during communal clashes and political crises. The availability of cheap and easily smuggled arms also lowered the threshold for violence, as small disputes could quickly escalate into armed confrontations, leading to a culture of gun violence that eroded human security and made everyday life unsafe for ordinary citizens in border communities and beyond. Border communities themselves became both victims and participants in this arms economy. In towns like Owode, Ilaro, Ajilete, and Ipokia, the proliferation of arms led to increased insecurity, as rival smuggling gangs fought over routes and as armed robbers targeted wealthy smugglers. Young men in these communities, faced with unemployment and poverty, were recruited as couriers for arms, often without fully understanding the risk. The presence of arms also complicated traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, as elders could no longer control youths who possessed superior firepower, leading to a breakdown of social cohesion and traditional authority in many border settlements.

The response of the Nigerian state to SALW proliferation through the Benin border was largely reactive and inadequate throughout most of the period under review. While the Nigeria Customs Service made periodic seizures, such as the notable interception of large caches of pump-action rifles concealed in a truck at Seme in 2017, these seizures represented only a tiny fraction of the actual inflow. PRESCOM, established in 2013 to coordinate efforts against SALW, was poorly funded, lacked enforcement powers, and struggled with inter-agency rivalry. The lack of a comprehensive national database for arms, weak forensic capacity to trace seized weapons, and absence of real-time intelligence sharing with Benin Republic meant that most smugglers operated with impunity. The international and regional frameworks meant to address this threat also proved ineffective during this period. The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, adopted in 2006, prohibits the transfer of small arms into the region without approval, but enforcement was

weak. The United Nations Programme of Action on SALW also lacked binding enforcement mechanisms. On the bilateral level, Nigeria and Benin signed several agreements on security cooperation and joint patrols, but these were often limited to high-level meetings without concrete operational cooperation on the ground, such as joint intelligence fusion centres or coordinated border surveillance.

The border closure of August 2019 to December 2020, while primarily targeted at rice smuggling, also had a significant impact on arms smuggling, as the heavy military deployment along illegal routes temporarily disrupted the flow of weapons. However, the closure also pushed smugglers to devise even more sophisticated and clandestine methods, including increased use of maritime routes through the creeks and lagoons to bypass land checkpoints. This demonstrates that while closure can be a temporary deterrent, it is not a sustainable solution to arms proliferation without addressing the underlying drivers of demand and supply.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons through the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020 represents a classic example of how porous borders, regional instability, and domestic demand for weapons combine to create a severe national security threat. It transformed local conflicts into deadly violence, empowered criminal groups, undermined state authority, and directly contributed to loss of lives across Nigeria. Addressing this threat requires more than physical border closure; it demands a comprehensive strategy that includes strengthening border surveillance technology such as drones and scanners, establishing a robust national arms control commission with real enforcement powers, deepening intelligence cooperation with Benin Republic, creating alternative livelihoods for border youths, and addressing the broader regional arms flows from the Sahel through a coordinated ECOWAS approach.

Transnational Organized Crime

Transnational Organized Crime has emerged as one of the most complex and insidious security threats associated with the Nigeria-Benin borders between 1999 and 2020, because it goes beyond simple smuggling to involve highly structured criminal enterprises that operate across multiple jurisdictions with sophistication and impunity. Unlike petty smuggling which is often for survival, transnational organized crime along this corridor is driven by powerful syndicates with international linkages, substantial financial capital, and the ability to corrupt state officials and exploit legal differences between Nigeria and Benin. This form of crime undermines the rule of law, erodes state legitimacy, and creates a parallel criminal economy that is more profitable and efficient than the formal state system. One of

the most prevalent manifestations of this threat is drug trafficking, which transformed the Nigeria-Benin border into a significant corridor for narcotics between 1999 and 2020. Benin's long and poorly policed coastline, its relatively lax port controls at the Port of Cotonou, and its position as a transit hub between South America, West Africa, and Europe made it attractive to international drug cartels. Cannabis sativa cultivated in both countries, cocaine from Latin America, heroin from Asia, and synthetic drugs such as tramadol and methamphetamine were trafficked through this border. The drugs were concealed using ingenious methods, including inside industrial machines, false compartments of vehicles, and even ingested by human couriers, with Seme-Krake serving as the exit point into Nigeria's large domestic market and onward to global markets.²⁷

Equally devastating is human trafficking and migrant smuggling, which flourished along this border due to poverty, ignorance, and the free movement protocols of ECOWAS that are often abused by traffickers. Between 1999 and 2020, the Nigeria-Benin border became a major source, transit, and destination route for human trafficking. Young women and girls from rural communities in Benin, Togo, and Nigeria's South-West were lured with promises of jobs in Lagos or abroad, but were trafficked for domestic servitude, forced labour in quarries and markets, and sexual exploitation in brothels in Lagos, Cotonou, and even in Europe. Children were also trafficked as house helps and forced to work in hazardous conditions. This trade in human beings represents a gross violation of human rights and a direct threat to human security, as it destroys lives, spreads diseases, and creates a generation of traumatized victims.

Vehicle trafficking and car theft syndicates also operated extensively along this border, creating a major security threat for citizens and insurance companies. Criminal gangs specialized in stealing vehicles in Lagos and other Nigerian cities and quickly driving them across the border into Benin through illegal routes, where they would be re-registered and sold in Benin or shipped to other African countries. Conversely, stolen vehicles from Benin and Togo were also smuggled into Nigeria. This cross-border car theft was often accompanied by violence, as armed robbers would kill or injure car owners during snatching operations. The Idiroko and Seme corridors became notorious for this crime, with syndicates operating with sophisticated communication gadgets and with insider information on security patrols, making recovery of stolen vehicles extremely difficult.²⁸

The smuggling of counterfeit and substandard products, particularly pharmaceuticals and chemicals, is another deadly dimension of transnational organized crime along

this border that directly threatens public health. Between 1999 and 2020, large quantities of fake, expired, and unregistered drugs, including anti-malarial drugs, antibiotics, and painkillers, were smuggled from Asia through Cotonou into Nigeria. Organizations like NAFDAC made several large seizures at Seme border, but the trade persisted because it is extremely lucrative, with profit margins of over five hundred percent. The consumption of these fake drugs led to treatment failures, drug resistance, and avoidable deaths, while counterfeit agro-chemicals destroyed farmlands and fake electrical cables caused fires, representing a silent but deadly threat to national security and economic development.

A critical factor that enabled the flourishing of transnational organized crime was the institutionalization of corruption and the existence of a criminalized border economy. Multiple security agencies operating at the border, including Customs, Immigration, Police, and NDLEA, often operated at cross-purposes with overlapping mandates and without coordination. This fragmentation was exploited by criminal syndicates who established a well-organized system of bribery, where predetermined amounts were paid at various checkpoints to ensure safe passage of illicit goods. This corruption not only facilitated crime but also delegitimized the state in the eyes of border communities, who came to see the border officials as part of the criminal enterprise rather than as protectors, thereby reducing the willingness of citizens to provide intelligence. The border communities themselves, while often victims, also played a complex role as both facilitators and enablers of transnational crime due to socio-economic realities. Communities in Ipokia, Imeko-Afon, Badagry, and Seme-Krake are among the most underdeveloped in Nigeria, lacking basic amenities such as good roads, hospitals, and schools, despite generating huge revenue for the state. For many youths, participation in transnational criminal networks as informants, transporters, or guides through the bush paths was seen as a survival strategy and a form of resistance against a state that had neglected them. Their intimate knowledge of the terrain, kinship ties across the border, and ability to navigate creeks and forests at night made them invaluable assets to criminal syndicates, creating a strong community-crime nexus that is difficult to break.²⁹

The impact of transnational organized crime on Nigeria's national security and regional integration during this period was profound. Economically, it led to massive revenue loss, de-industrialization, and the collapse of legitimate businesses that could not compete with smuggled and counterfeit goods. Socially, it fueled drug abuse among youths, increased gender-based violence through human trafficking, and spread public health crises through fake

drugs. Politically, it corrupted state institutions, undermined the rule of law, and strained diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Benin, as Nigeria accused Benin of complicity and unwillingness to control its ports. The ECOWAS ideal of free movement for development was perverted into free movement for criminals, thereby threatening the entire integration project.

The response of the Nigerian and Beninois governments between 1999 and 2020 was largely inadequate and reactive. While joint border patrols and bilateral security meetings were held, they lacked operational effectiveness, real-time intelligence sharing, and modern surveillance technology such as drones, scanners, and biometric systems. The establishment of the Seme-Krake Joint Border Post in 2018, funded by the European Union, was intended to promote one-stop border control and reduce corruption, but it was not fully operationalized before the border closure of 2019. The border closure itself disrupted organized crime temporarily but also pushed criminal networks to become more sophisticated, using maritime routes through the numerous creeks and lagoons to bypass land checkpoints entirely.³⁰

Transnational organized crime along the Nigeria-Benin border from 1999 to 2020 represents a clear failure of border governance where globalization, policy asymmetry, institutional weakness, and poverty converged to create a haven for criminal enterprises. It is a security threat that transcends traditional notions of territorial invasion, as it attacks the state from within by corrupting its officials, destroying its economy, and harming its citizens through drugs, trafficking, and counterfeit products. Effectively addressing this threat requires a paradigm shift from mere physical control of borders to intelligence-led border management, deep anti-corruption reforms among border agencies, genuine development of border communities to provide alternative livelihoods, harmonization of trade policies between Nigeria and Benin to remove incentives for smuggling, and institutionalized cross-border judicial cooperation to ensure that criminals cannot exploit jurisdictional gaps to evade justice.

Irregular Migration and Identity Fraud

Irregular migration and identity fraud represent a subtle but deeply corrosive security threat associated with the Nigeria-Benin borders between 1999 and 2020, because they directly undermine the ability of the Nigerian state to know who is within its territory, to plan for its population, and to distinguish between legitimate ECOWAS citizens exercising their right to free movement and criminals exploiting that freedom for illicit purposes. Irregular migration refers to the movement of persons across international borders without complying with the legal requirements for entry, residence, or work, while identity

fraud involves the deliberate falsification, alteration, or illegal acquisition of travel documents, national identity cards, and passports to misrepresent one's identity, nationality, or status. Along the 773 kilometer Nigeria-Benin border, these two phenomena became intertwined and endemic throughout the Fourth Republic.

The period from 1999 to 2020 was characterized by a significant increase in irregular migration across this corridor due to a combination of push and pull factors that intensified after the return to democracy in Nigeria. On the push side, economic hardship, political instability, and environmental degradation in Benin, Togo, and other neighbouring countries drove many young people to seek better economic opportunities in Nigeria's relatively larger economy and in Lagos in particular, which is seen as a land of opportunity. On the pull side, Nigeria's booming informal sector, construction industry, and demand for cheap labour in domestic service and agriculture created a ready market for irregular migrants. The existence of over a hundred illegal bush paths and creek routes around Seme and Idiroko made it extremely easy to bypass official immigration checkpoints, allowing thousands to enter Nigeria daily without any form of documentation or security screening. This uncontrolled irregular migration poses a direct threat to national security because it creates a large population of undocumented persons whose identities, backgrounds, and intentions are unknown to the state. Between 1999 and 2020, Nigeria experienced a surge in various forms of insecurity including armed robbery, kidnapping, and communal clashes, and security agencies often found that some perpetrators were irregular migrants who could not be traced because they had no records in the national database. The inability to account for who is in the country also complicates census planning, electoral integrity, and resource allocation, while placing enormous pressure on social amenities in border communities and urban slums where many irregular migrants settle, leading to competition for jobs, housing, and resources that can trigger xenophobic tensions and communal conflicts.³¹

Identity fraud emerged as the essential enabler that made irregular migration sustainable and difficult to detect during this period. Because the ethnic groups on both sides of the border, particularly the Yoruba, Gun, and Egun, share the same language, culture, and physical features, it became extremely easy for Beninois to claim Nigerian nationality and fraudulently obtain Nigerian identity documents. Syndicates specializing in identity fraud operated openly in border towns like Badagry, Owode, and Seme, where they facilitated the illegal acquisition of Nigerian birth certificates, local government certificates of origin, national identity cards, voters' cards, and even Nigerian passports for non-Nigerians for a fee. This fraudulent acquisition of

citizenship not only undermines national identity but also allows criminals to hide their true nationalities and evade deportation when arrested. The methods used for identity fraud along this border became increasingly sophisticated between 1999 and 2020. With the introduction of new identity systems in Nigeria, including the National Identity Management Commission, NIMC, and the biometric voters register, criminal networks adapted by bribing officials at local government councils to issue genuine documents with false information, a practice known as insider fraud. Other methods included the use of counterfeit documents that were so well forged that they could pass visual inspection at checkpoints, impersonation where one person uses another person's genuine documents, and the acquisition of multiple identities where a single individual holds both Beninois and Nigerian passports and uses them interchangeably depending on which is more convenient for evading security or gaining economic benefits.

A particularly dangerous dimension of identity fraud was its direct link to transnational terrorism and organized crime, which elevated it from an administrative offence to a serious national security threat. Intelligence reports during the period indicated that criminal elements, including human traffickers, drug couriers, and armed robbers, used fraudulently obtained Nigerian ECOWAS passports to travel across West Africa and to Europe, thereby damaging Nigeria's international reputation and leading to stricter visa requirements for genuine Nigerian citizens. More alarmingly, the weak identity management system at the border meant that persons with criminal records or those on international watchlists could potentially enter Nigeria undetected using false identities, a risk that became more pronounced after the Libyan crisis in 2011 and the rise of jihadist groups in the Sahel who sought to expand their networks into coastal West Africa. The complicity and institutional weakness of border control agencies significantly contributed to the proliferation of irregular migration and identity fraud. The Nigeria Immigration Service, which is primarily responsible for border control, was throughout this period hampered by inadequate manpower, poor funding, lack of modern biometric verification equipment at most border posts, and endemic corruption. At both official and illegal checkpoints, immigration officers often collected bribes to allow undocumented migrants to pass without questioning. The absence of a centralized, real-time database that could instantly verify the authenticity of identity documents presented at the border meant that officers had to rely on visual inspection, which was easily defeated by high-quality forgeries, making the border effectively open for anyone who could afford to pay.³²

The socio-economic dynamics of border communities further entrenched this threat, as local residents facilitated irregular migration and identity fraud as a form of economic survival and communal solidarity. Due to historical kinship ties that predate colonialism, border communities do not distinguish between Nigerians and Beninois, and they see it as their moral obligation to help their kinsmen cross the border and obtain documents to facilitate their integration into Nigeria. Many local government officials in border local governments such as Ipokia, Imeko-Afon, and Badagry are themselves from these border communities and are under intense social pressure to issue certificates of origin to non-Nigerians who are considered kith and kin, thereby institutionalizing identity fraud at the grassroots level of the Nigerian state. The efforts made by the Nigerian government to address this threat between 1999 and 2020 achieved limited success due to poor implementation and lack of coordination. Initiatives such as the introduction of the ECOWAS biometric passport, the establishment of the Combined Expatriate Residence Permit and Aliens Card, CERPAC, for legal migrants, and the deployment of the Migration Information and Data Analysis System, MIDAS, at some border posts were steps in the right direction, but their coverage was limited to the two official posts at Seme and Idiroko, leaving the numerous illegal routes completely unmonitored. The border closure from August 2019 to December 2020 temporarily reduced irregular migration but also revealed the depth of the problem, as many undocumented migrants were stranded and the economic activities of border communities that depended on cross-border movement were severely disrupted.³³

Irregular migration and identity fraud along the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020 illustrate how a failure to effectively manage identity and mobility can create a fundamental vulnerability that underpins all other security threats. When a state does not know who is entering, residing, or operating within its territory, it cannot effectively combat smuggling, arms proliferation, or transnational crime, because criminals can easily melt into the large pool of undocumented persons with false identities. Addressing this threat therefore requires a holistic and modern approach that goes beyond physical border patrols to include comprehensive border community development to reduce incentives for facilitating illegal entry, thorough reform and digitization of the birth registration and local government identification system to prevent insider fraud, deployment of biometric verification systems across all border routes including illegal ones, and genuine bilateral cooperation with Benin Republic on joint border surveillance and real-time sharing of criminal databases to ensure that free movement under ECOWAS does not translate into free movement for criminals and undocumented persons.

Cross-Border Banditry and Armed Robbery

Cross-border banditry and armed robbery represent the most direct and violent manifestation of insecurity along the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020, because they involve the use of lethal force against innocent citizens and traders and bring the reality of border porosity into the daily lives of people in the most brutal form. Cross-border banditry refers to criminal activities where armed groups operate across international boundaries, committing crimes such as robbery, kidnapping, murder, and cattle rustling in one country and then escaping into another to evade arrest and prosecution. Along the 773 kilometer Nigeria-Benin corridor, this threat became endemic during the Fourth Republic, transforming the borderland from a zone of commerce into a zone of fear and impunity where state authority was constantly challenged. The geographical and institutional characteristics of the Nigeria-Benin borderland provided the perfect enabling environment for banditry and armed robbery to flourish throughout this period. The border area is characterized by dense forests, isolated farm settlements, winding creeks, and over a hundred unmanned illegal routes that crisscross around major towns such as Seme, Owode, Ilaro, Ajilete, and Idiroko. Criminal gangs exploited their intimate knowledge of this difficult terrain to mount roadblocks, attack traders and commuters, and then disappear into the bush and cross into Benin within minutes before security agencies could respond. The jurisdictional limitation of Nigerian security operatives, who cannot pursue criminals across an international boundary without formal diplomatic protocols, gave these bandits a significant tactical advantage and a safe haven in the neighbouring country.³⁴

The primary targets of these cross-border bandits and armed robbers were the thousands of traders, transporters, and ordinary commuters who use the Lagos-Seme and Abeokuta-Idiroko highways daily for legitimate business. Between 1999 and 2020, there was a documented surge in highway robberies, particularly during night hours and early morning, where gangs armed with sophisticated rifles and pump-action guns, many of which were smuggled through the same border, mounted illegal roadblocks and dispossessed traders of cash, goods, and vehicles. Market women traveling to Cotonou to buy goods and Nigerian traders returning from Benin were especially vulnerable, as they were known to carry large amounts of cash. Many victims who resisted were killed or maimed, leading to a profound sense of insecurity and a decline in legitimate cross-border trade as people became afraid to travel. A particularly notorious dimension of this threat was the rise of organized vehicle snatching and cross-border car theft syndicates that operated with precision and violence. Armed robbery gangs operating in Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo

States would steal vehicles at gunpoint, often in broad daylight in urban centers, and within a few hours smuggle the vehicles through bush paths into Benin Republic where they would be given new registration documents and sold. This crime was highly organized, involving spotters who identified expensive vehicles in Lagos, armed robbers who snatched them, drivers who specialized in high-speed border crossing, and collaborators in Benin who forged documents. The Seme and Idiroko corridors became so infamous for this that insurance companies increased premiums for vehicles in the South-West, and many victims never recovered their vehicles due to lack of cross-border judicial cooperation.³⁵

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons through this same border corridor directly escalated the lethality and audacity of banditry and armed robbery during this period. The collapse of Libya in 2011 and the crisis in the Sahel led to a massive influx of AK-47 rifles and other automatic weapons into West Africa, many of which entered Nigeria through the Benin border. This transformed the nature of armed robbery from the use of locally made Dane guns and pistols in the early 2000s to the use of military-grade assault rifles by 2015, making it extremely difficult for the police, who were often poorly armed and outgunned, to confront these gangs. The availability of such firepower also meant that robberies became more deadly, with bandits showing little hesitation to kill their victims and to engage security agencies in gun battles. Cross-border banditry also included the rustling of livestock and the raiding of farm settlements, which severely affected food security and rural livelihoods in border communities. In areas like Imeko-Afon, Ipokia, and Yewa North, Fulani herders and farming communities reported repeated attacks by armed bandits who would cross from Benin, rustle cattle, destroy farmlands, and abduct farmers for ransom. These attacks often triggered reprisal attacks and inter-communal clashes, further destabilizing the borderland. The ransom economy that emerged from kidnapping for ransom, which became rampant after 2015, was facilitated by the border, as victims were sometimes taken across the border into Benin to make tracking by Nigerian security forces more difficult, while ransom money was used to purchase more arms.³⁶

The institutional weaknesses and corruption within border security agencies significantly contributed to the persistence of this threat and created a culture of impunity. Multiple security checkpoints mounted by Police, Customs, Immigration, and military along the border highways were often more interested in extorting money from traders than in providing security, and in many cases, bandits operated within sight of these checkpoints, suggesting collusion or at least negligence. The lack of real-time intelligence sharing between Nigerian and Beninois security agencies meant

that even when a robbery occurred in Nigeria, Benin authorities were not immediately alerted to intercept the criminals. Furthermore, the poor funding, lack of patrol vehicles, communication gadgets, and night vision equipment for the Nigeria Police Force made rapid response to distress calls from border communities almost impossible. Mr. Ogbuka Nnamdi noted;

The socio-economic conditions of border communities played a dual role as both victims and unwilling facilitators of this violent crime. Towns along the border remain among the most neglected in terms of development, with high youth unemployment, poor educational facilities, and lack of basic infrastructure, despite the huge revenue generated from the border. This neglect made many youths vulnerable to recruitment into banditry and robbery gangs, which offered quick financial returns compared to farming or petty trading. At the same time, the local population lived in constant fear, as they were the first victims of bandit attacks. Their farms were destroyed, their daughters and wives were harassed, and their economic activities were disrupted, forcing many to pay protection money to bandits or to migrate away from the borderland entirely. The Nigerian government adopted several measures between 1999 and 2020 to address cross-border banditry and armed robbery, but these measures were largely reactive and achieved only temporary relief. Operations such as the Joint Border Patrol Teams involving Police, Customs, and Immigration, the deployment of military personnel under Operation MESA and Operation Puff Adder along the Lagos-Seme expressway, and periodic joint security meetings with Benin were initiated. While these operations led to the arrest of some bandits and the recovery of stolen vehicles and arms, they were not sustained due to logistical challenges and lack of political will. The border closure from August 2019 to December 2020 led to a temporary reduction in armed robbery along the border highways due to heavy military presence, but it also pushed bandits to shift their operations to interior routes and to become more violent in their attacks.³⁷

Cross-border banditry and armed robbery along the Nigeria-Benin border between 1999 and 2020 demonstrate how porosity of borders, proliferation of small arms, institutional corruption, and socio-economic deprivation converge to create a direct threat to human life and personal security. Unlike smuggling which is primarily an economic crime, banditry is a violent crime that directly claims lives,

destroys livelihoods, and erodes public confidence in the ability of the state to protect its citizens. It shows that border security is not just about preventing smuggling of goods but about protecting people. Effectively addressing this threat requires more than checkpoint policing; it demands a comprehensive strategy that includes establishing a permanent bilateral security cooperation mechanism with Benin that allows for hot pursuit and immediate intelligence sharing, modernizing the police with patrol vehicles and communication equipment, deploying community-based policing that involves border communities as partners rather than suspects, and critically, developing the border region economically to provide legitimate employment for youths who would otherwise be recruited into violent criminal gangs.

Public Health and Environmental Threats

Public health and environmental threats along the Nigeria-Benin borders between 1999 and 2020 represent a silent but profoundly destructive category of security threats that are often overlooked in conventional analyses that focus on arms and smuggling, yet they directly attack the survival, wellbeing, and productivity of the Nigerian population. Traditional security studies often prioritize military threats, but the human security framework adopted in this study recognizes that threats to health and environment are equally existential because they can claim more lives than armed robbery and can undermine national development more insidiously. The porous nature of the 773 kilometer border, with its over a hundred illegal routes through creeks, forests, and bush paths, made it extremely difficult to control the movement of hazardous goods, contaminated products, and infectious diseases, turning the border into a major conduit for public health and environmental insecurity.

One of the most dangerous public health threats during this period was the large-scale smuggling of fake, expired, counterfeit, and substandard pharmaceutical products through the Benin corridor. Because the Autonomous Port of Cotonou has relatively lax regulatory controls and serves as a warehouse for goods originating from Asia, large consignments of fake drugs were imported into Benin and then smuggled into Nigeria through Seme and Idiroko illegal routes to evade inspection by NAFDAC. These included fake anti-malarial drugs, antibiotics, analgesics, and lifestyle drugs that contained little or no active pharmaceutical ingredient, or contained toxic substances such as chalk and boric acid. Between 1999 and 2020, NAFDAC made several spectacular seizures at Seme border, including containers of fake drugs worth billions of naira, but these represented only a fraction of what entered undetected and were sold in open drug markets in Lagos, Onitsha, and Kano, leading to treatment failures, drug

resistance, prolonged illness, and thousands of preventable deaths among Nigerians.³⁸

Closely linked to drug counterfeiting is the smuggling of contaminated and unwholesome food items that directly threatened food safety and public health. The ban on frozen poultry, for instance, did not stop its smuggling; instead, it created a black market where frozen chicken and turkey imported through Cotonou were transported for days without cold chain facilities, often in the back of overcrowded buses and trucks under the scorching sun, before being smuggled through bush paths into Nigeria. By the time these products reached Nigerian markets, they had decomposed and become heavily contaminated with harmful bacteria such as *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, causing severe food poisoning, typhoid, and other gastrointestinal diseases. Similarly, smuggled vegetable oil was often adulterated with industrial chemicals, and expired canned foods and drinks that had been rejected in Benin were repackaged and sold to unsuspecting Nigerian consumers, posing a severe health risk. The smuggling of unregulated chemicals, bleaching creams, cosmetics, and substandard industrial goods also constituted a major health and environmental threat that intensified between 1999 and 2020. Large quantities of highly toxic skin bleaching creams containing mercury and hydroquinone far above permissible levels, fake cosmetics, and banned agrochemicals such as paraquat and fake herbicides were smuggled into Nigeria through the Benin border. These products caused skin cancers, kidney failure, and environmental pollution when used. Furthermore, substandard electrical cables, gas cylinders, and building materials smuggled through illegal routes led to frequent incidents of fire outbreaks, building collapses, and gas explosions in Nigeria, resulting in loss of lives and property. This shows how economic smuggling directly translates into public health and safety disasters far from the border. The environmental dimension of this security threat is equally alarming and often irreversible. The Nigeria-Benin borderland is ecologically sensitive, comprising lagoons, creeks, mangrove forests, and rich biodiversity that support fishing and farming communities. However, the activities of smugglers, particularly the smuggling of petroleum products and the dumping of hazardous waste, led to severe environmental degradation. The smuggling of subsidized petrol from Nigeria to Benin involved the use of rickety boats and jerry cans that frequently spilled fuel into the creeks and lagoons, polluting water sources, killing fish, and destroying mangroves. Additionally, there were reported cases of electronic waste and industrial waste being smuggled and dumped in border communities, where they leached heavy metals into soil and groundwater, contaminating drinking water and causing chronic health problems for local residents.³⁹

Perhaps the most critical public health security threat that exposed the dangers of a porous border was the cross-border spread of infectious and epidemic-prone diseases between 1999 and 2020. During major public health emergencies, including the Ebola Virus Disease outbreak in 2014, the recurring Lassa fever outbreaks, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the existence of numerous illegal routes allowed people to completely bypass health screening, temperature checks, and quarantine procedures at official border posts at Seme and Idiroko. Traders and irregular migrants who were aware that they were ill or who came from affected areas used bush paths to enter Nigeria undetected, thereby facilitating the rapid spread of highly infectious diseases. The 2014 Ebola crisis, for instance, highlighted how a single infected person crossing a porous border could trigger a national health emergency, and the same pattern was repeated during COVID-19 when the border closure became necessary primarily as a public health containment measure. The institutional capacity to address these public health and environmental threats at the border was extremely weak throughout the period under review. Agencies such as NAFDAC, the Standard Organisation of Nigeria, SON, the Nigeria Customs Service, and Port Health Services were supposed to ensure that only safe and quality goods entered the country, but they were hampered by inadequate staffing, lack of modern laboratory testing equipment at the border, corruption, and overlapping mandates that created confusion. While NAFDAC maintained a presence at Seme, most illegal routes had no form of health or standards inspection whatsoever, meaning that anything could be smuggled through. The lack of real-time data sharing between Nigerian and Beninois health authorities also meant that there was no early warning system for disease outbreaks or for the movement of hazardous goods.⁴⁰

The socio-economic conditions of border communities further exacerbated these threats and made local populations the first and worst victims. Communities in Badagry, Ipokia, Imeko-Afon, and Seme lack access to clean potable water, functional primary health care centers, and proper waste disposal systems, making them highly vulnerable to diseases caused by polluted water and fake drugs. Because of poverty, many residents patronize smuggled and cheaper fake drugs and expired foods, even when they suspect their quality, because they cannot afford genuine products. Fishermen in the creeks have seen their fish stocks decline due to pollution from fuel smuggling, forcing them deeper into poverty and into the smuggling economy itself, creating a vicious cycle where environmental degradation drives more insecurity and criminality. The Nigerian government attempted to respond to these public health threats through several measures between 1999 and 2020, including strengthening NAFDAC

under Dora Akunyili between 2001 and 2008 which led to increased seizures and public enlightenment campaigns, the establishment of Port Health Services at official borders, and the eventual border closure in August 2019 which was partly justified on public health grounds to stop the influx of harmful and substandard goods. While these measures achieved some temporary successes, such as the reduction in fake drugs and improved food safety during the border closure, they did not address the root causes. The closure itself also created new public health challenges, as it increased food prices and led to scarcity, which in turn encouraged the smuggling of even more desperate and dangerous substitutes through more hazardous routes.⁴¹

Public health and environmental threats associated with the Nigeria-Benin borders from 1999 to 2020 demonstrate that national security must be understood in its broadest sense beyond guns and bombs to include the safety of what Nigerians consume, breathe, and drink. The smuggling of fake drugs, contaminated foods, toxic chemicals, and the uncontrolled cross-border spread of infectious diseases through over a hundred illegal routes represent a direct assault on human security that kills silently but on a massive scale, undermines the health system, destroys the environment, and erodes trust in the state. Effectively addressing this threat requires a paradigm shift towards health security at the borders, including deploying well-equipped laboratory and screening facilities at both official and strategic illegal routes, strengthening NAFDAC and SON with modern technology, establishing a joint Nigeria-Benin disease surveillance and early warning system, genuine development of border communities with clean water and healthcare, and public enlightenment campaigns to reduce demand for smuggled substandard goods.

Impact of security threats on Nigeria - Benin Borders

The impact of security threats associated with the Nigeria-Benin borders between 1999 and 2020 was profound, multidimensional, and far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate border communities but the entire Nigerian state, its economy, its regional diplomacy, and the daily lives of ordinary citizens. This twenty-one-year period, which coincides with Nigeria's Fourth Republic, witnessed the transformation of what was supposed to be a model corridor for ECOWAS integration and prosperity into one of the most volatile and challenging security frontiers in West Africa. The cumulative effect of smuggling, arms proliferation, transnational organized crime, irregular migration, banditry, and public health threats created a complex security burden that undermined national development, eroded state legitimacy, and strained relations between two historically friendly neighbours. The most immediate and devastating impact was on Nigeria's national economy and revenue generation, representing a

massive case of economic sabotage that crippled industrial and agricultural policies. Between 1999 and 2020, Nigeria lost an estimated trillions of naira in customs revenue due to large-scale smuggling through over a hundred illegal routes around Seme and Idiroko. This leakage meant that money that should have funded schools, hospitals, roads, and infrastructure was lost to smugglers and corrupt officials. More critically, the influx of smuggled rice, poultry, textiles, and used vehicles made local production uncompetitive and led to the collapse of many industries in the South-West, including textile mills in Ogun and poultry farms across the country. Millions of jobs were lost, unemployment surged, and Nigeria's quest for food security and self-sufficiency through programmes like the Anchor Borrowers Programme was constantly undermined by cheaper smuggled alternatives that evaded all taxes.⁴²

The second major impact was on national security and the proliferation of violence across Nigeria, as the border became the principal entry point for small arms and light weapons that fueled insecurity far beyond the borderland. Weapons smuggled through the Benin corridor, particularly after the collapse of Libya in 2011 and the crisis in the Sahel, did not remain in the border area; they diffused into armed robbery gangs in Lagos and Ogun, into Niger Delta militants, into herder-farmer conflict zones in the Middle Belt, and into kidnapping and banditry networks in the North-West and North-Central. This diffusion meant that a security failure at Seme had national consequences, contributing directly to loss of lives, destruction of property, and the creation of a culture of gun violence that made Nigeria one of the most insecure countries in Africa during this period. The border thus became a critical node in the national insecurity architecture.

Human security at the community level was severely impacted, as border communities became the epicentre of violence, exploitation, and underdevelopment. Towns such as Badagry, Owode, Idiroko, Ajilete, Imeko, and Ipokia, which should have benefited from cross-border trade, instead experienced increased armed robbery, car snatching, kidnapping, and assaults on traders, particularly women. Farmers abandoned their farmlands due to fear of bandits and due to environmental pollution from fuel smuggling in the creeks, leading to reduced agricultural output and food insecurity at the local level. Moreover, the smuggling of fake drugs, contaminated frozen poultry, and toxic chemicals posed a direct threat to the health of residents who often consumed these substandard products due to poverty and lack of alternatives, leading to increased morbidity and mortality in communities that already lacked functional healthcare facilities. The security threats also had a severe impact on public health and the integrity of Nigeria's health system, especially during epidemic

outbreaks. The porous nature of the border and the existence of illegal routes that bypassed Port Health Services meant that infectious diseases could spread unchecked. During the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the inability to control movement across the border forced the Nigerian government to take drastic measures, including total border closure, which itself had economic consequences. Furthermore, the influx of fake anti-malarial drugs and antibiotics through this border contributed to drug resistance and treatment failures in hospitals across Nigeria, undermining the entire public health system and causing avoidable deaths, demonstrating how border insecurity translates into a silent but deadly health crisis.⁴³

Diplomatically and regionally, the security threats severely strained Nigeria-Benin relations and undermined the ECOWAS integration project that both countries championed. Nigeria repeatedly accused Benin Republic of operating a deliberate warehouse economy that thrived on smuggling into Nigeria and of failing to enforce ECOWAS rules of origin, the Common External Tariff, and the Inter-State Road Transit Scheme. This mistrust culminated in Nigeria's unilateral decision to close its land borders from August 2019 to December 2020, a move that Benin and other ECOWAS members saw as a violation of free movement protocols. While the closure increased Nigeria's customs revenue and boosted local rice production temporarily, it also disrupted legitimate regional trade, increased prices of goods, caused diplomatic tension, and raised questions about the future of regional integration when national security interests clash with regional commitments.

Another critical impact was the institutional erosion and delegitimization of the Nigerian state and its border agencies due to endemic corruption associated with these threats. The huge profits from smuggling and transnational crime created a powerful incentive for corruption among Customs, Immigration, Police, and other agencies stationed at the border. Numerous reports and investigations between 1999 and 2020 documented cases of officers collecting bribes to allow contraband to pass, operating illegal checkpoints for extortion, and even colluding with smugglers and armed robbers. This institutionalized corruption not only made border control ineffective but also eroded public trust in government, as citizens in border communities came to see state officials as part of the criminal enterprise rather than as protectors, thereby reducing intelligence sharing and making community policing impossible.

The threats also impacted the social fabric and identity of border communities, creating a distorted economy and a culture of illegality that became intergenerational. Because

the formal state was largely absent in terms of providing infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and jobs, smuggling became the main economic activity and was seen as a legitimate livelihood and a right, passed from parents to children. This criminalization of the border economy meant that many youths dropped out of school to engage in smuggling, and the high profit from smuggling funded other vices such as drug abuse, prostitution in border towns, and gang culture. The traditional value system was eroded, as wealth from smuggling was celebrated regardless of its source, and honest labour was devalued, creating long-term social challenges that will persist beyond 2020. Furthermore, the security threats had a significant impact on Nigeria's international image and reputation. The Nigeria-Benin border became notorious globally as a hub for drug trafficking, human trafficking, and vehicle smuggling, leading to negative travel advisories and stricter visa scrutiny for Nigerian travellers. The trafficking of persons through this corridor for sexual exploitation in Europe damaged Nigeria's human rights record and attracted international criticism from organizations like the US State Department and UNODC. Similarly, the smuggling of counterfeit goods through this border affected Nigeria's trade relations, as trading partners questioned the country's ability to enforce intellectual property rights and standards, thereby discouraging foreign direct investment that is crucial for economic development.⁴⁴

The impact of security threats along the Nigeria-Benin borders from 1999 to 2020 was comprehensive and systemic, touching every aspect of national life from economy to health to diplomacy to social cohesion. It demonstrated that border security is not a peripheral issue but is central to national security, economic development, and regional integration. The period showed that when borders are porous and poorly governed, the consequences go far beyond revenue loss to include loss of lives through armed violence and fake drugs, destruction of industries and jobs, erosion of state legitimacy through corruption, and diplomatic crises that undermine regional unity. Addressing these impacts therefore requires more than military deployment or periodic border closures; it requires a holistic and sustainable strategy that integrates economic policy harmonization with Benin, modern technology-driven border management, genuine development of border communities, institutional reform to curb corruption, and strengthened bilateral and ECOWAS cooperation to transform the border from a zone of threat into a bridge of genuine and secure prosperity.⁴⁵

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