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Why Border Governance Matters for Nigeria's Internal Security: Rethinking Borders as Policy Spaces.

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Introduction

Across the world, the governance of borders has become an increasingly contested site of policy innovation and political failure. Since the end of the Cold War, and in the wake of the renewed urgency of security shifts following the 11 September 2001 attacks, states have progressively reoriented their border policies towards securitisation, with an increasing emphasis on surveillance, enforcement and biometric systems as key tools of control. Yet, as Paasi (2009) and Newman (2006) have noted, such investments have not always been matched by a corresponding interest in the complex social, economic, and political roles that borders play. Borders create and constrain livelihoods; they structure and fracture kinship; they facilitate and criminalise trade. In the Global South, in particular, the security logic that informs most border policies has resulted in governance structures ill-equipped to address the complexity of the spaces they claim to govern. The conceptual outcome has been a long-standing gap between the intended and the actual needs of border zones.

In West Africa, these tensions take on particular salience. The region's colonial history produced borders drawn with little regard for pre-existing communities, trade networks, and ethnolinguistic identities, and cross-border movement has long been the norm rather than an exception (Okumu, 2011). Acknowledging this structural reality, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) designed protocols on the free movement of persons and goods to regulate borders through integration rather than restriction. However, these structures have failed to keep pace with security threats posed by transnational armed groups spanning the Sahel, especially those linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS in 2023 and 2024, and their establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), have further destabilised the regional governance architecture by removing three of the most security-critical states from shared institutional frameworks at precisely the moment when coordinated border governance is most urgently needed. In this increasingly challenging regional environment, Nigeria's own weaknesses in border governance have become more significant.

In August 2019, the Nigerian government, under former President Muhammadu Buhari, ordered the closure of its land borders. The announcement was framed primarily as a response to trade and smuggling. Authorities cited the porous movement of rice, arms, and petroleum products as justification for a sweeping shutdown that lasted over a year. Yet the closure quickly revealed something more fundamental: Nigeria has long treated its borders as administrative edges to be policed rather than as dynamic policy spaces to be governed. The costs of that framing have compounded considerably over time.

Scholars have long noted that border governance, understood as the deliberate and coordinated management of the political, security, economic, and social dimensions of border zones, is not a niche concern for immigration and customs officials (Newman, 2006; Okumu, 2011). It is a central pillar of a state’s internal security architecture. In Nigeria, the insecurity spreading across the northwest, northeast and middle belt does not stop at state boundaries, nor does it respect the logic of single-agency security responses. Understanding borders as policy spaces rather than enforcement lines is the conceptual shift Nigeria’s security governance urgently needs.

This piece advances that argument in four steps. It first identifies the structural governance gap at Nigeria’s borders. It then offers a conceptual reframing of the demands of border governance as a policy space. It situates Nigeria’s longstanding border governance weaknesses within the regional security vacuum deepened by the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Finally, it advances the harder argument: that Nigeria cannot enforce its way to stable borders, and that only an evidence-driven, community-anchored model of governance offers a path to durable security at its frontiers.

1.0. The Governance Gap at Nigeria's Borders

Nigeria shares approximately 4,900 kilometres of land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The National Boundary Commission reports that the country has 84 to 86 official crossing points and more than 1,400 illicit access routes, making Nigerian borders among the most porous in the world (National Boundary Commission 2022; Abayomi, 2024). This structural reality is not new. What is less frequently acknowledged in policy discourse is that the problem is not primarily one of infrastructure or manpower, though both are deficient. The deeper problem is governance (Ogunnubi & Adeola, 2021).

Border governance in Nigeria remains fragmented across multiple agencies, including the Nigeria Immigration Service, the Nigeria Customs Service, the Nigeria Police Force, the Nigerian Army and the National Boundary Commission, with limited coordination frameworks and chronic data-sharing deficits. This institutional fragmentation means that no single body holds a comprehensive picture of what is moving across Nigerian borders, in what quantities and with what security implications. Each agency operates within its own mandate and reporting structure, creating information silos that collectively add up to less than the sum of their parts (Okunade & Oni, 2021).

The consequences for internal security are direct. Firearms fuelling banditry in Zamfara and Sokoto states do not materialise domestically; they enter through border zones where governance is weak and surveillance capacity is inadequate (Idachaba & Adeola, 2023). Fighters affiliated with Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the northeast have historically exploited the Lake Chad Basin's porous boundaries to retreat, regroup and return (Okunade, 2019; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). Kidnapping networks operating across the northwest maintain supply chains that cross state and national boundaries with a fluency that formal security structures have not matched.

Corruption and underfunding compound the institutional problem. Okunade and Ogunnubi (2018) document how weak legal frameworks and incentive structures at border posts create conditions in which border officers are economically vulnerable to inducement by illicit actors. More recent work confirms that this dynamic has not been substantively addressed and that poor inter-agency coordination continues to produce operational gaps that non-state armed groups and criminal networks systematically exploit (Ogbonna, Lenshie & Nwangwu, 2023).

2.0. Borders as a Contentious Policy Spaces

The framing of borders as policy spaces, rather than territorial lines to be defended, draws on a growing body of scholarship in border studies that challenges purely security-centred approaches to border management. Newman (2006) argues that borders perform multiple simultaneous social, economic, and political functions, and that effective governance requires frameworks capable of holding those functions in view at once, rather than collapsing them into a single security logic. Paasi (2009) similarly insists that borders are not passive lines but active social constructs that organise space, identity and power in ways that governance strategies must account for.

For Nigeria, the practical implications of this reframing are significant. The 2019 border closure demonstrated what happens when enforcement logic dominates without a broader policy-space perspective. Research on the closure's effects documents that smuggling routes shifted rather than disappeared, that border communities dependent on cross-border petty trade experienced severe economic distress, and that the policy was implemented in ways that violated several

ECOWAS protocols on the free movement of persons and goods (Ogbonna, Lenshie & Nwangwu, 2023; Idoniboye-Obu, 2022). The enforcement-first approach produced disruption without resolution.

A policy-space framing asks different and more productive questions. Who lives and works in the border zone? What are their economic relationships with communities across the boundary? What do local actors know about movement patterns, unfamiliar arrivals and changes in the informal economy that formal surveillance systems do not capture? How can border administration be designed to serve the legitimate economic and social needs of border populations while reducing the governance gaps that armed and criminal actors exploit? These are not idealistic questions; they are analytically necessary for any governance strategy that aims for durable rather than temporary security effects.

Awosusi & Valery (2024) make a related point, arguing that Nigeria's lingering cross-border challenges are not simply the product of porous borders but of patronage networks and internal political crises that have pervaded domestic governance. In their analysis, treating the border as the primary site of the problem systematically misidentifies the origins of governance failures and therefore produces strategies that address symptoms rather than causes. Border communities are not passive backdrops to insecurity; they are either inadvertent enablers of it when governance leaves them no alternative, or potential partners in early warning, local conflict resolution and community policing. That choice is substantially a governance choice.

3.0. The Regional Dimension: West Africa's Fracturing Security and Increasing Governance Complexities

Nigeria's border governance challenges do not exist in a regional vacuum. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2023 and 2024 have materially altered the political architecture in which Nigeria's northern border governance operates. These three countries share long borders with Nigeria's Niger and Borno states, regions already marked by high insecurity, humanitarian distress, and the active presence of transnational armed groups.

The ECOWAS framework provided a normative and institutional foundation for regional security cooperation, border harmonisation and joint counter-terrorism efforts. Okunade & Ogunnubi (2018) have noted that ECOWAS protocols on the free movement of persons created a particular border governance logic in West Africa, oriented towards economic integration rather than securitisation. The AES withdrawal does not simply reduce ECOWAS's membership; it removes three of Nigeria's most security-critical neighbours from that shared governance architecture. Coordination mechanisms that were already weak have been further strained, and the prospect of joint border management arrangements with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has become more diplomatically and institutionally complex.

Ogunnubi & Awosusi (2021) observed, before the AES crisis, that Nigeria's border diplomacy has historically been characterised more by idealistic pan-Africanism than by strategic calculation, prioritising regional goodwill over the harder work of operational security cooperation. That observation is even more consequential now than when it was made. Nigeria's response to the regional shift produced by the AES has so far been reactive rather than strategic. The humanitarian impulse, resisting punitive measures against the civilian populations of the three states, has been the dominant register of Nigerian engagement. But beyond humanitarian considerations, Nigeria needs a proactive border governance strategy that accounts for the

possibility of longer-term estrangement from its northern neighbours within formal regional frameworks and that builds bilateral and community-level cooperation mechanisms that do not depend entirely on the health of the ECOWAS architecture.

4.0. Evidence, Knowledge and the Governance of Borders

A persistent and underappreciated problem in Nigeria's border governance is the weak integration of available evidence into decision-making. The National Boundary Commission, the National Intelligence Agency and the various security agencies each generate data on border dynamics, but the translation of that data into actionable and coordinated policy is inconsistent and poorly institutionalised. Research institutions, civil society organisations and community-based actors that possess granular knowledge of border zone dynamics are rarely consulted in the design of border management policies (Ogunnubi & Adeola 2021).

The regional dimension compounds this problem in ways that are rarely acknowledged in domestic policy discourse. ECOWAS has developed a substantive normative and operational architecture for border governance, including the ECOWAS Border Management Strategy and Action Plan, which was endorsed by member states to advance regional border governance and security cooperation. The strategy envisages an integrated digital platform connecting Border Management Information Systems across member states to enable data sharing and interoperability; the deployment of the ECOWAS National Biometric Identity Card (ENBIC) across all air, land and sea borders; joint patrols and cross-border counter-terrorism operations; and the establishment of community resource governance committees and cross-border peace mechanisms to reduce intercommunal tensions in border zones. ECOWAS has also partnered with the International Organisation for Migration and the African Union Commission to support implementation. Yet Nigeria's domestic border governance architecture remains poorly aligned with these regional instruments. The ECOWAS framework offers a ready evidence base and a set of operational tools that Nigerian border governance policy has not systematically drawn upon; the failure to do so is not merely a technical gap but a governance choice that carries compounding security costs.

This is not a uniquely Nigerian failure, but it carries specific Nigerian costs. Border communities in Sokoto, Kebbi, Borno, Adamawa, and Cross River states have developed locally adapted knowledge about movement patterns, seasonal trade dynamics, kinship networks that cross national boundaries and the early signals of security deterioration. That knowledge constitutes an underutilised policy resource. Idachaba & Adeola (2023) argue, in their examination of the nexus between border management and peacebuilding, that community-level knowledge and participation in border governance is not a supplementary consideration but a structural requirement for conflict transformation approaches to take root. Integrating community knowledge into governance frameworks, through participatory early warning systems, community liaison structures and formal channels for community input into border administration, would not resolve all of Nigeria's border security challenges, but it would substantially narrow the information gaps that armed actors currently exploit.

The broader point is that effective border governance requires an evidence architecture, not merely a security architecture. Data collection, knowledge synthesis, research on border zone dynamics and structured community intelligence need to be treated as governance infrastructure rather than academic footnotes. The decisions made about how Nigeria's borders are managed will have consequences for millions of Nigerians living in and around those boundaries. They deserve to be informed by the best available evidence, produced through credible and transparent research processes, and translated into policy through functional institutional channels.

5.0. Towards an Integrated and Evidence-Based Policy Response

Addressing Nigeria's border governance deficit is not a matter of deploying more personnel to border posts, though adequate staffing is a necessary precondition. What is required is a conceptual and institutional reorientation: one that is evidence-driven, inter-agency in its coordination, and anchored in the communities that actually live the consequences of governance failure. Three areas of action stand out as particularly important to realising that reorientation.

First, inter-agency coordination must be operationalised rather than merely proclaimed. Joint border management centres that bring together immigration, customs, police, military and intelligence actors under shared operational protocols and data systems would reduce the fragmentation that currently limits the effectiveness of each agency. Okunade & Oni (2021) identified this coordination deficit as one of the defining obstacles to effective Nigerian border governance, noting that overlapping mandates and bureaucratic inefficiencies produce operational paralysis even where individual agencies are adequately resourced. The administrative resistance to integration is real, but so is the security cost of continued inaction.

Second, border zone communities must be treated as governance partners rather than as suspects or passive subjects of security operations. Community policing models adapted to border zone contexts, formal channels for community early warning inputs and economic inclusion initiatives that reduce the material incentives for participation in illicit border economies would each contribute to shrinking the space that armed and criminal networks currently occupy. As Idachaba & Adeola (2023) have argued, peacebuilding efforts that do not engage border communities as participants rather than as objects of intervention tend to produce fragile and reversible outcomes.

Third, Nigeria needs a border diplomacy strategy that is proactive and bilateral in scope, capable of maintaining functional cooperation with its northern neighbours even in the absence of robust regional frameworks. This means investing in bilateral agreements, people-to-people contact mechanisms, and shared technical arrangements for border management that do not depend entirely on the health of the ECOWAS architecture. Ogunnubi & Awosusi (2021) called for a more strategic and less idealistic Nigerian border diplomacy; the changed regional context following the AES formation makes that call more urgent than ever.

6.0. Conclusion

Nigeria's borders are neither the cause nor the cure of the country's internal security challenges. But they are a critical mediating space, one whose governance determines whether the country can interrupt the supply chains of armed groups, reduce the flows of illicit weapons, and provide border communities with a genuine alternative to economic marginalisation and vulnerability to recruitment.

Rethinking borders as policy spaces rather than enforcement lines is not a semantic exercise. It is a practical reorientation that opens up a wider range of governance tools, a richer evidence base and a more effective set of partnerships, and that situates border communities as agents rather than afterthoughts in national security strategy. Nigeria's security cannot be managed at its administrative centre alone. It must be governed thoughtfully and coherently, all the way to its edges.

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