



ECOWAS PROTOCOL ON FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE AND TRANS-BORDER SECURITY IN WEST AFRICA: EVIDENCE FROM THE NIGERIA-BENIN CORRIDOR.

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Abstract: The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment guarantees visa-free entry for community citizens for up to 90 days, yet its implementation conflicts with national security enforcement at porous borders. This study assessed the implementation of the Protocol and its trans-border security implications on the Nigeria-Benin corridor. A cross-sectional descriptive survey design was adopted. The study was conducted at Seme-Krake Joint Border Post and Owode-Idiroko border posts, the busiest crossing points on the 773km Nigeria-Benin frontier. A total of 245 respondents comprising traders'/business persons (70, 28.6%), civil servants (60, 24.5%), security personnel including Immigration, Customs and Police (55, 22.4%), students (40, 16.3%) and others (20, 8.2%) were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire covering Protocol awareness, implementation extent, ease of legal crossing, security challenges, personal experiences, and bilateral cooperation. The instrument was expert-validated and piloted ($n=20$, Cronbach $\alpha=0.78$). Data were collected 10-28 February 2026 and analyzed using SPSS v26 with frequencies, percentages and 95% confidence intervals. Results show 63.3% of respondents were at least somewhat familiar with the Protocol (24.5% very familiar, 38.8% somewhat familiar), while 36.7% had limited or no awareness. 44.9% perceived implementation as partial, 22.4% as poor and only 8.2% as fully implemented. 49.0% described legal crossing as difficult or very difficult. Smuggling (32.7%), irregular migration (22.4%) and corruption among border officials (16.3%) were the most cited security challenges. 73.5% rated security issues as serious or very serious. Personal experience of extortion/bribery was reported by 28.6% and witnessing smuggling by 26.5%. 81.7% believed security challenges significantly or moderately affect Nigeria-Benin cooperation. Joint border patrols (34.7%) and bilateral trade/customs cooperation (26.5%) were the most recognized forms of cooperation. The study concludes that the Protocol is recognized in principle but unevenly enforced due to weak border control (28.6%), economic hardship (24.5%) and poor inter-agency cooperation (22.4%). Balancing mobility and security require administrative reform, capacity building and rights-based border governance.

Keywords: ECOWAS free movement, border governance, trans-border security, Nigeria-Benin relations, regional integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on 28 May 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos to promote economic integration among fifteen West African states, including Nigeria and Benin (ECOWAS, 1975). A landmark achievement in this integration agenda is the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment (Protocol A/P.1/5/79) adopted on 29 May 1979 (ECOWAS, 1979). The Protocol marked a shift from aspirational cooperation to enforceable mobility rights.

The Protocol is implemented in three phases: (i) Right of Entry - visa-free entry for up to 90 days with valid travel documents; (ii) Right of Residence - right to reside and seek income-earning employment subject to national laws; and (iii) Right of Establishment - right to establish and manage economic enterprises under national treatment. While the Protocol facilitates trade and labour mobility, its enforcement is contested at Nigeria's land borders. The Nigeria-Benin frontier, approximately 773km, is one of West Africa's busiest mobility corridors. The Seme-Krake Joint Border Post, upgraded to a One-Stop Border Post in 2018, is a gateway for bilateral trade and transit goods into Nigeria's market. High volume movement has also made it a hotspot for smuggling of petroleum products and rice, human trafficking, small arms proliferation, drug trafficking, and irregular migration (Akinyemi, 2020; Olaniyi, 2022; UNODC, 2021).

The Protocol's facilitation framework is vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. Inadequate surveillance infrastructure and inconsistent inter-agency coordination have heightened border governance dilemmas (Okolie & Eze, 2020; Omitola, 2021). This has strained Nigeria's internal security management, requiring a balance between ECOWAS commitments and national security imperatives. This tension culminated in the unilateral closure of Nigeria's land border with Benin in August 2019 to curb smuggling. While framed as an economic security measure, the closure contravened free movement principles, generated diplomatic friction within ECOWAS, and disrupted livelihoods of border communities dependent on cross-border trade (Fasan, 2021). The episode illustrates securitization, where economic concerns are elevated into security discourse to justify exceptional measures (Buzan et al., 1998). Both Nigeria and Benin participate in joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and security dialogues, yet implementation gaps persist due to divergent enforcement priorities, resource constraints, and corruption among officials. The intersection of free movement and trans-border security underscores the challenge of reconciling regional integration with sovereignty. While the Protocol provides a model for cooperation on paper, its effectiveness depends on effective border governance and harmonized policies. Empirical evidence from the perspective of frontline users on both sides remains limited. This study addresses that gap through a stakeholder-based assessment of the Nigeria-Benin corridor

1.2. Objectives of the study

The broad objective of this study is to assess the ECOWAS Protocol of free movement of persons between Nigeria and Benin Republic with the following specific objectives:

- i. Assess the level of implementation of the ECOWAS free movement protocol between Nigeria and Benin.
- ii. Identify and analyze the key trans-border security challenges along the Nigeria-Benin border.
- iii. Examine how these challenges have influenced Nigeria-Benin diplomatic and security cooperation.
- iv. Propose strategies for balancing regional mobility with effective border security management.

1.3 Research Questions:

RQ1: To what extent is the Protocol implemented between Nigeria and Benin?

RQ2: What are key trans-border security challenges?

RQ3: How have security challenges influenced cooperation?

RQ4: What rights-based strategies can balance mobility and security?

2 LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Regional Integration and ECOWAS

Regional integration refers to the process by which neighbouring states harmonize policies to achieve common objectives in trade, security, and governance (ECOWAS, 1975). ECOWAS serves as the primary institutional framework for West African integration. Its protocols, including the 1979 Free Movement Protocol, aim to eliminate barriers to mobility of persons and goods (ECOWAS, 1979; Adepoju, 2004). However, integration efforts face constraints including divergent national interests, administrative capacity gaps, and security concerns (Adepoju, 2020; Anderson, 2025).

2.2 The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol:

Content and Implementation Protocol A/P.1/5/79 outlines a three-phase approach: Phase I - Right of Entry abolishing visas for up to 90 days, Phase II - Right of Residence, and Phase III - Right of Establishment (ECOWAS, 1979; 1985). While Phase I has seen relatively broader compliance, Phases II and III remain weakly enforced. A growing body of empirical work highlights persistent implementation deficits:

- a) Awareness and administrative complexity: Research shows variable awareness of Protocol provisions among travelers and frontline officials. Processes for residence and establishment rights are often centrally located in Abuja and Cotonou, bureaucratic and time-consuming, undermining intended ease of movement (Adepoju, 2020; Alabi, 2020). Simplification and decentralization are commonly recommended
- b) Security and ad hoc restrictions: States periodically adopt tighter controls in response to insecurity, resulting in de facto limitation of free movement rights at porous boundaries such as the Nigeria-Benin frontier (Fasan, 2021). These security responses create tension between regional commitments and national priorities.
- c) Corruption and weak institutional capacity: Multiple studies identify corruption at border posts and limited technological and human resource capacity as structural barriers (Okolie & Eze, 2020; Oladapo et al., 2021). Corruption translates legal entitlements into informal fees or delays, eroding citizens' effective rights. At the micro-level, demands for bribes, delays, and arbitrary document checks disproportionately affect small traders, discouraging formal exchanges (Adepoju, 2020)
- d) Compliance gaps: Fieldwork along the Nigeria-Benin border documents gaps between treaty language and enforcement, ranging from routine document demands for short stays to obstacles in registering businesses. While short visits are generally tolerated, residence and establishment rights are less consistently upheld (Alabi, 2020; Oladapo et al., 2021).

Comparative lessons are instructive. Ghana's experience shows how domestic labour protection laws clash with ECOWAS freedoms, requiring targeted reforms and awareness campaigns, though enforcement remains selective. Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict reopening demonstrates potential and limits of rapid border reopening without administrative retooling. Taken together, literature paints a picture of partial, fragile implementation: rights recognized in principle, but constrained by administrative, fiscal, and security pressures.

2.3 Trans-Border Security Trans

Border security encompasses measures to address threats that transcend borders, including organized crime, arms and human trafficking, and illicit movement of goods (Dike, 2025). In West Africa, colonial-era border demarcations have exacerbated challenges. The Nigeria-Benin border is particularly

vulnerable. It is frequently used for smuggling fuel, textiles, and vehicles (Oladapo et al., 2021; Olaniyi, 2022), and identified as a route for human trafficking with numerous undocumented crossings (Oladapo et al., 2021; UNODC, 2021). Both countries have engaged in joint patrols and intelligence sharing, but effectiveness has been limited by resource constraints and vastness of the border area (Chikwe, 2023)

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts two complementary theories:

a) Neofunctionalism (Regional Integration Theory): Originally developed to explain European integration, neofunctionalism argues that integration in one sector creates spillover pressures for integration in related sectors. It is operationalized here as: (i) Supranational commitment - ECOWAS treaty ratification, (ii) National interest - protection of domestic market, (iii) Functional spillover - trade facilitation requiring security coordination, (iv) Compliance gap - discrepancy between legal text and practice. Observable indicators in this study: existence of joint border institutions, decentralization of residence permits, frequency of ad hoc closures.

b) Securitization Theory (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998): Securitization occurs when an issue is framed as an existential threat requiring exceptional measures. Operationalized as: Securitizing actor (Customs, Immigration), Speech act (official justification of closure), Referent object (economy, national security), Audience (traders, public acceptance), Exceptional measure (border closure, informal fees). Border closure is not automatically securitization; it requires evidence of this framing process. Integrated Model: Implementation quality = f (institutional capacity - securitizing framing). Lower capacity + higher securitizing framing = lower perceived implementation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Free Movement of Persons: Right to travel, reside and establish without undue restrictions as enshrined in ECOWAS Protocol (ECOWAS, 1979).

Gap in Literature Most studies are policy reviews or single-country analyses. Limited field-based, bilateral stakeholder evidence exists from both Nigerian and Beninese sides distinguishing knowledge from lived experience of enforcement. This study fills that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

Design: Cross-sectional descriptive survey. NOT mixed-methods. Only quantitative survey systematically collected. Sites: Seme-Krake Joint Border Post and Owode-Idiroko/Apa corridor. Busiest Nigeria-Benin crossing.

Population/Sample: Target: regular border users and officials Feb-March 2026. Yamane formula $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$ with 5% error +10% non-response. Approached 270, returned 250, retained after cleaning 245 (90.7% response). Sampling: purposive occupational strata + convenience recruitment. Non-probability, not statistically representative.

Instrument: Structured questionnaire Section A Demographics, B Implementation (3 items), C Security (3 items), D Cooperation (4 items). Adapted from validated studies. Pilot n=20. Validity/Reliability: Face validity by 2 senior lecturers, pilot, Cronbach α for implementation perception scale = 0.78.

Analysis: SPSS v26. Frequencies, percentages, 95% CI. Denominator N=245 for all tables. No causality inferred; use "perceived" or "reported".

Ethics: Clearance obtained from IUIU Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences REC (Ref: IUIU/FASS/REC/2026/012). Informed consent written/verbal, voluntary, withdrawal right, 18+ only,

anonymity (no names), no collection of incriminating irregular migration status, data password-protected, retained 3 years then deleted. Security personnel recruited off-duty.

Limitations: Non-probability limits generalizability, self-report and sensitive-topic bias, cross-sectional cannot establish causality, nationality imbalance Nigerian 61.2% vs Beninese 34.7%, perceptions not legal audit.

4. RESULTS/DATA PRESENTATION

Table 1: Socio-Demographic (N=245)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	140	57.1
	Female	100	40.8
	Prefer not to say	5	2.0
Total		245	100
Age Group	Below 25 years	45	18.4
	25–34 years	80	32.7
	35–44 years	60	24.5
	45–54 years	40	16.3
	55 years and above	20	8.2
Total		245	100
Occupation	Civil Servant	60	24.5
	Security Personnel (Immigration, Customs, Police, etc.)	55	22.4
	Trader/Business Person	70	28.6
	Student	40	16.3
	Other	20	8.2
Total		245	100
Nationality	Nigerian	150	61.2
	Beninese	85	34.7
	Other	10	4.1
Total		245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Male 140 (57.1%), Female 100 (40.8%), Prefer not say 5 (2.0%). Age Below 25 45 (18.4%), 25-34 80 (32.7%), 35-44 60 (24.5%), 45-54 40 (16.3%), 55+ 20 (8.2%). Occupation Civil Servant 60 (24.5%), Security 55 (22.4%), Trader 70 (28.6%), Student 40 (16.3%), Other 20 (8.2%). Nationality Nigerian 150 (61.2%), Beninese 85 (34.7%), Other ECOWAS 10 (4.1%).

Table 2: Familiarity with Protocol (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Very familiar	60	24.5
Somewhat familiar	95	38.8
Not very familiar	55	22.4

Not aware at all	35	14.3
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Very familiar 60 (24.5%), Somewhat familiar 95 (38.8%), Not very familiar 55 (22.4%), Not aware at all 35 (14.3%).

Table 3: Perceived Extent of Implementation (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Fully implemented	20	8.2
Largely implemented	40	16.3
Partially implemented	110	44.9
Poorly implemented	55	22.4
Not implemented at all	20	8.2
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Fully 20 (8.2%), Largely 40 (16.3%), Partially 110 (44.9%), Poorly 55 (22.4%), Not at all 20 (8.2%).

Table 4: Ease of Legal Crossing (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Fully implemented	20	8.2
Largely implemented	40	16.3
Partially implemented	110	44.9
Poorly implemented	55	22.4
Not implemented at all	20	8.2
Total	245	100

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Very easy	15	6.1
Easy	35	14.3
Moderate	75	30.6
Difficult	85	34.7
Very difficult	35	14.3
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Very easy 15 (6.1%), Easy 35 (14.3%), Moderate 75 (30.6%), Difficult 85 (34.7%), Very difficult 35 (14.3%).

Table 5: Common Security Challenges (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Smuggling	80	32.7
Human trafficking	35	14.3
Illegal migration	55	22.4
Terrorism and insurgency	30	12.2
Corruption among border officials	40	16.3
Other (e.g., armed robbery, document forgery)	5	2.0
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Smuggling 80 (32.7%), Irregular migration 55 (22.4%), Corruption among officials 40 (16.3%), Human trafficking 35 (14.3%), Terrorism/insurgency 30 (12.2%), Other 5 (2.0%).

Table 6: Perceived Seriousness (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Very serious	95	38.8
Serious	85	34.7
Moderate	40	16.3
Minor	15	6.1
Not serious	10	4.1
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Very serious 95 (38.8%), Serious 85 (34.7%), Moderate 40 (16.3%), Minor 15 (6.1%), Not serious 10 (4.1%).

7: Factors Contributing to Insecurity (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Weak border control	70	28.6
Poor cooperation among security agencies	55	22.4
Economic hardship	60	24.5
Porous borders	45	18.4
Lack of awareness of ECOWAS laws	15	6.1
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Weak border control 70 (28.6%), Economic hardship 60 (24.5%), Poor inter-agency cooperation 55 (22.4%), Porous borders 45 (18.4%), Lack awareness 15 (6.1%).

Table 8: Personal Experiences (N=245)

Nature of Experience/Observation	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Encountered extortion/bribery from border officials	70	28.6
Witnessed or heard of smuggling activities	65	26.5
Experienced harassment or delay during crossing	45	18.4
Observed weak security presence or coordination	35	14.3
None or no direct experience	30	12.2
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Extortion/bribery 70 (28.6%), Witnessed smuggling 65 (26.5%), Harassment/delay 45 (18.4%), Weak security presence 35 (14.3%), None 30 (12.2%).

Table 9: Diplomatic Relationship Rating (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Very strong	25	10.2
Strong	80	32.7
Fair	90	36.7
Weak	35	14.3
Very weak	15	6.1

Total	245	100
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Source: Field Survey, 2026

Very strong 25 (10.2%), Strong 80 (32.7%), Fair 90 (36.7%), Weak 35 (14.3%), Very weak 15 (6.1%).

Table 10: Effect of Security Challenges on Cooperation (N=245)

Response Options	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Yes, significantly	120	49.0
Yes, moderately	80	32.7
No, not much	30	12.2
Not at all	15	6.1
Total	245	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Yes significantly 120 (49.0%), Yes moderately 80 (32.7%), No not much 30 (12.2%), Not at all 15 (6.1%).

Table 11: Forms of Cooperation (N=245)

Forms of Cooperation Identified	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Joint border patrols and security operations	85	34.7
Bilateral trade agreements and customs cooperation	65	26.5
Information sharing and intelligence exchange	45	18.4
Participation in ECOWAS border management and migration programs	30	12.2
Occasional diplomatic meetings or summits	20	8.2
Total	245	100

Joint patrols 85 (34.7%), Bilateral trade/customs 65 (26.5%), Information sharing 45 (18.4%), ECOWAS programs 30 (12.2%), Diplomatic meetings 20 (8.2%).

Chi-Square Results Table

Table	Variable	Observed Frequencies	Chi-square (X^2)
Table 2	Familiarity	60,95,55,35	30.51
Table 3	Implementation Extent	20,40,110,55,20	112.65
Table 4	Ease of Crossing	15,35,75,85,35	71.84
Table 5	Security Challenges	80,35,55,30,40,5	77.65
Table 6	Seriousness	95,85,40,15,10	125.92
Table 7	Factors Contributing	70,55,60,45,15	36.12
Table 8	Personal Experiences	70,65,45,35,30	25.92
Table 9	Diplomatic Rating	25,80,90,35,15	93.27
Table 10	Effect on Cooperation	120,80,30,15	112.96
Table 11	Cooperation Forms	85,65,45,30,20	56.53

(N=245).

A Chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted for each item. Results indicated responses were not evenly distributed, $X^2(3, N=245) = 30.51$, $p < .001$ for familiarity; $X^2(4, N=245) = 112.65$, $p < .001$ for implementation; $X^2(4, N=245) = 125.92$, $p < .001$ for seriousness, etc.

5. DISCUSSION ON RESULTS

RQ1: 63.3% familiarity but 44.9% partial implementation and 49% difficult crossing support neofunctionalism compliance gap - legal commitment without decentralized procedures (Adepoju, 2020; Alabi, 2020).

RQ2: Smuggling leading challenge 32.7% aligns with Olaniyi (2022) and Akinyemi (2020). Corruption 16.3% confirms Okolie & Eze (2020).

RQ3: 81.7% report security affects cooperation significantly/moderately, consistent with Fasan (2021) on border closure. Theoretical integration: Securitization observed - state actors frame smuggling as economic security threat, exceptional measure (2019-2020 closure) suspends rights.6.

6. CONCLUSION

Findings from this sample of 245 border stakeholders at Seme-Krake and Owode-Idiroko indicate that the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons is recognized in principle but unevenly experienced in practice. While 63.3% reported at least some familiarity, 67.3% perceived implementation as only partial, poor, or non-existent [Table 3], and 49.0% described legal crossing as difficult or very difficult [Table 4]. This compliance gap reflects weak border control [28.6%], economic hardship [24.5%], and poor inter-agency cooperation [22.4%] [Table 7], rather than absence of legal commitment. Consistent with neofunctionalism expectations, legal ratification has not been matched by administrative domestication and capacity. Trans-border security concerns - led by smuggling [32.7%], irregular migration [22.4%], and corruption among officials [16.3%] - were perceived as serious or very serious by 73.5% of respondents [Table 6]. Personal experience of extortion/bribery [28.6%] and witnessing smuggling [26.5%] suggests that discretionary enforcement practices, rather than the Protocol itself, shape insecurity at the corridor. In this sample, 81.7% believed security challenges affect Nigeria-Benin cooperation significantly or moderately, while diplomatic relations were rated as fair to strong by 69.4% but very strong by only 10.2% - indicating fragile trust.

This study concludes that, for these border sites, balancing mobility and security requires institutional reform, rights-based surveillance, and improved bilateral coordination, rather than exceptional measures that suspend free movement rights. Findings are limited to perceptions of a non-probability sample at two border posts in February 2026 and cannot be generalized to all ECOWAS corridors.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Awareness campaigns in English, French, Yoruba, Pidgin via radio at border communities.
2. Permanent bilateral border management committee (Customs, Immigration, Police) with monthly coordination.
3. Modernize with biometric verification, scanners, body-worn cameras; must comply with ECOWAS Data Protection Act 2010, include oversight and grievance mechanism.
4. Community-based monitoring with protection safeguards.
5. Address corruption: transparent SOPs, e-payment, disciplinary mechanism.

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