POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS AND CONFLICT ANALYSIS

Cross-border Conflict Trends and Conflict Resilience of Border Communities in Eastern Benin and Western Nigeria

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This study draws on academic and gray literature to identify the dynamics that facilitate the emergence and proliferation of armed groups and increase vulnerabilities to violent extremism (VE). Given the growing concerns about the spread of VE to northern Benin and the rising incidents of violence, it is crucial to address these underlying factors in order to bolster community cohesion and resilience to violent conflict-particularly against recruitment and influence by violent extremist organizations (VEOs). VEOs in the Sahel have demonstrated social agendas "that speak to people's needs in ways that West African states and donor programming have not been able to do."[1] Therefore, it is imperative to address the underlying causes of conflict and vulnerability rather than responding solely with force.

This research paper seeks to acknowledge gaps in the analytical framework concerning socio-economic cross-border trends and the conflict resilience of border communities in Eastern Benin and Western Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the relationship between cross-border movement of goods and people and the presence or actions of armed actors in the Benin-Nigeria borderland regions.

The most significant underlying issue-and a major security risk-is the mismanagement of land assets by both formal and informal governance structures. Economic scarcity and precarious livelihoods fuel competition over resources and opportunities, while imbalanced governance systems marginalize certain ethnic and economic groups, fostering long-term resentment. Currently, the greatest security threat stems from VEOs capitalizing on these local grievances to exert control over cross-border movements of goods and people.

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1. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

A recent wave of literature has focused on the spillover of VE from the Sahel into the Gulf of Guinea states, warning of the growing threat of infiltration into coastal countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. Among these, Benin has been identified as particularly vulnerable to violent attacks, recruitment efforts, and radicalization by Sahelian jihadist groups.[2] The first incident attributed to VE in Benin occurred in 2019.[3] Since then events of kidnapping have surged, especially in 2022, correlating with the expanding influence of VE networks from the Sahel.[4]

Recent investigations have uncovered signs of dangerous linkages between violent extremist outlets and bandit groups operating in the Benin-Nigeria border region. Banditry is increasing in areas where VEOs are active, with notable ties to groups in Nigeria. VEOs are known to operate from national parks and other hard-to-monitor areas, and the presence of unidentified armed actors crossing the border has become increasingly common. The deeply rooted and diverse cross-border connections among communities in this region further facilitate the infiltration of violent extremists.

National parks and forested areas often serve as hideouts for VEOs, leading to frequent clashes with park rangers, smugglers, and other armed groups crossing these areas under the radar.[5] Unlike their broader strategy in the Sahel, where VEOs aim to establish alternative governance structures, their primary goal in this border geography is to assert strategic control over trafficking routes.[6] Consequently, organized crime networks represent a significant concern for the prevention of VE.

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2. Tracking Violent Extremism Spillover from the Sahel to Littoral West Africa

3. Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin.

4. Hostage to violent extremism: Kidnapping in northern Benin, March 7, 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hostage-to-violent-extremism-kidnapping-in-northern-benin/

5. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

6. UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY IN BORDER COMMUNITIES: The case of the Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger border.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, northern Benin—particularly the Atacora and Alibori departments—has witnessed a growing presence of VEOs such as *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) and Islamic State – Sahel (ISS). Initially concentrated in the central Sahel, these groups have progressively expanded southward, fueled by extremist activity in neighboring northwestern Nigeria and the opportunity to finance operations through illicit activities. The interconnected nature of these dynamics reflects the emergence of a complex threat: dangerous alliances between VEOs and criminal bandit networks, which now pose risks to the stability of both Benin and Nigeria.

This study draws on academic and gray literature to identify the dynamics that enable the emergence and proliferation of armed groups and increase vulnerabilities to VE. Amid rising concerns about the expansion of VE into northern Benin and growing evidence of increased violence, it is essential to address these drivers to strengthen community cohesion and resilience¾particularly in countering recruitment and influence by VEOs. In the Sahel, VEOs have presented social agendas that resonate with people's needs, something that West African governments and donor programs have struggled to achieve. Therefore, tackling the underlying causes of conflict and vulnerability is essential, rather than relying exclusively on security measures.

To respond to the lack of localized insight into the perceived impact of key cross-border trends, this report provides detailed, inclusive, and community-centered comparative perspectives on conflict resilience, socio-economic dynamics, human security issues, and population movement patterns in border areas. The research is grounded in a review of academic and gray literature to identify gaps in knowledge and highlight priorities for future research, programming, and policy. It critically assesses the current state of knowledge on cross-border dynamics in West Africa, with a particular emphasis on the transnational interactions between Nigeria and Benin. The analysis examines the interplay of political, economic, social, legal, and environmental factors across the Alibori, Borgou, and Collines departments in Benin and the Kebbi, Niger, and Kwara states in Nigeria, and evaluates their impact on community resilience to conflict.

**Map of
Benin and
Nigeria Borders**

This report begins with a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) to identify foundational factors, key actors, and institutions relevant to the research. It then presents a matrix of conflict drivers to highlight current trends and gaps in knowledge and practice. These drivers and vulnerabilities are organized using the PESTLE framework of the Interagency Conflict Analysis Framework (ICAF): Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental. The ICAF enables an exploration of potential conflict drivers and vulnerabilities stemming from the relationship between the state and local communities, while also identifying key actors who may influence or be involved in the conflict.

PEA

Foundational Factors

What geographical, socioeconomic and other relatively enduring factors shape the institutional environment and constrain or enable the actions of various actors?

Benin, one of West Africa's coastal states, occupies a strategic location between the turbulent Sahel to the north, the Gulf of Guinea to the south, and Nigeria¾one of the region's largest economic powers¾to the east. However, the geostrategic benefits of this position are concentrated primarily in the more densely populated southern regions of the country.

Nigeria shares a 770-kilometer border with Benin and trade between the two nations is of critical importance. Informal trade with Nigeria accounts for approximately 75% of Benin's GDP, while it represents only about 20% of Nigeria's GDP¾illustrating a markedly unequal economic relationship. The borderlands are vital to both countries, but Benin is particularly dependent on informal trade and the re-exportation of goods from Nigeria.[1]

Institutions or Rules of the Game

What are the formal and informal rules that shape the incentives of the various actors?

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provides a baseline framework for border management, particularly through its Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Goods, and Services.

On the Nigerian side, conflicts over resources may be addressed by a variety of actors, including traditional authorities, the police, courts, the army, and both local and state governments. In North-Central Nigeria, traditional leaders continue to hold considerable authority over communities and play a key role in conflict resolution¾though their influence can at times be undermined by local government officials.[2]

In northern Benin¾as in much of West Africa¾formal (state) and informal (traditional) systems of governance coexist. These structures often operate in parallel, at times complementing one another, but also frequently competing. In remote areas, traditional authorities are often more visible

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1. CROSS-BORDER FLOWS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BENIN: What Are the Challenges for (Human) Security?

2. Natural Resource Conflict in North-Central Nigeria.

and accessible than formal state institutions. However, corruption and inconsistencies between customary and statutory legal systems contribute to ambiguity around land claims, property rights, and access to justice provision.[3]

Despite the persistence of customary authority, local government institutions in northern Benin typically play a more dominant role than traditional leaders. This has implications for land transactions, legal disputes, and access to justice¾particularly between urban and rural communities, settled communities and pastoralists, and established residents and newcomers.[4]

Language, ethnicity, and culture play a powerful role in shaping Nigeria's political economy. They influence the distribution of resources and can act as tools of social exclusion.[5] Social and political structures¾at the household, community, institutional, and national level¾impact different groups in different ways.

The following section presets a gender analysis of northern Benin using a five-dimension model, examining the effects of governance on women.

Gender matrix

Governance/ state presence	Household	Community	Relevant Institutions	National
Laws, policies, regulations, and institutional practices	Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women: ratified.	Protocol on the Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women: signed.		Gender Policy: 2008 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol): ratified.
Cultural norms and beliefs	40% of women experience discrimination in the family, and 28% restrictions in their physical integrity.	Unequal gender dynamics have also contributed to the breakdown of the political economy of pastoralism and have fueled intercommunal violence.		National awareness-raising and legal literacy program: the Ministry of Family and National Solidarity implemented 1,600 awareness-raising actions to decrease the acceptance of domestic violence. In 2001, 60% of women and 31% of men agreed that domestic violence is sometimes justified; in 2012, only 16% of women and 15% of men said that.

3. Don't Call It Farmer-Herder Conflict, FEBRUARY 9, 2024, https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/dont-call-it-farmer-herder-conflict/

4. Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover, June 2021, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/northern-benin-and-risk-violent-extremist-spillover

5. POSITION PAPER: THE DIMENSIONS OF ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN NIGERIA, Nigeria: Drivers of Change, Component Three – Output 28, Prepared for DFID, Nigeria, Roger Blench, Mallam Dendo.

Gender roles, responsibility, and time spent	Beninese women's unmet need for family planning stands at 32%. The median age at which women report first marrying is 19 while the median age at first sexual intercourse is 17. Fertility rate in northern Benin is between 5.2-5.8, slightly above the national average (4.9). 22% of married women experience violence by their husband or partner.		Female relatives of wholesalers are often involved in fuel smuggling. Most traders in the border area are women. They are at risk of physical abuse when travelling illegal or informal trading routes where armed actors are usually operational. Women are also involved in artisanal gold mines, sieving and washing extracted sand.	
Access to and control over resources	36% of women experience restriction in their access to productive and financial resources. Men have control over productive household resources (agricultural equipment, land, and labor). As women get access to these resources after men, they plant their fields late and cannot harvest their crops until the rainy season, becoming more exposed to crop failure from drought.		The average number of years of schooling for women is 3 compared to 4.4 for men. 25% of women have secondary or higher education.	Approximately half of the population is women. Legal reforms to protect women's land rights are backed by legal literacy programs to help women and communities understand their rights to property.
Patterns of power and decision-making	7.3% of women are circumcised.	Businesswomen and men from Nigeria travel to the borderland to access traded goods.	53% of women experience restrictions in their civil liberties. As in many other West African countries, discriminatory practices or informal laws restrict women's access to public spaces, for instance, Beninese laws restrict women to work in factories.	Benin has the second lowest proportion of women in parliament in West Africa, after Nigeria, at 7% and 6% respectively, compared to a global average of 22%.
Main questions: (lack of) involvement in/ impact on women, girls, men and boys (+ different communities), secondary failed presence of state or state-sponsored violence		Women may report abductions of their children or family members to the community but not to the police, because they are afraid of accusations of involvement with VEOs. This results in under-reporting of kidnappings.	VEOs kidnap young girls for forced marriage and boys for forced labor. The trafficking of young men and women is regular in the border area. Benin is a main transit country of human trafficking with the main destination of Nigeria. However, for trafficking of women, Nigeria is rather a country of departure.	

5-dimension model in Benin

Gender-based discrimination in West Africa manifests in several forms:

- Discriminatory norms and practices, including child and early marriage and limited access to education for girls;

- Harmful physical practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C);

- Legal and customary discrepancies that restrict women's ability to own, control, and inherit land;

- Low political participation of women in decision-making spaces.

Barriers to gender equality include:

- Restrictions on women's mobility, employment, entrepreneurship, land ownership, reproductive health, and political engagement;

- Male-dominated household structures and male control over women's reproductive health-seeking behavior;

- Weak political will and inadequate institutional capacity to implement and enforce gender policies and anti-discrimination laws;

- Persistence of harmful traditional practices, such as FGM/C, and early/ child marriage;

- Widespread societal acceptance of domestic and intimate partner violence across the region.[6]

Actors

Who or what are the relevant actors (especially organizations and interest groups, including those that might bring the perspective of less powerful social groups), and why do they behave in the way they do?

For the purposes of this study, the relevant actors in the region include local populations involved in cross-border trade, farmers and herders, organized crime networks, commercial trading enterprises, community-based armed groups, VEO offshoots from the Sahel, traditional chieftaincy institutions, state security forces and civilian services, ECOWAS bodies, and other international stakeholders active in the region. These actors pursue their interests¾shaped by ideological leanings, affiliations, and economic incentives¾in response to the region's evolving security and climate conditions.

Potential parties to natural resource conflicts—farmers, pastoralists, fishermen, and hunters—are increasingly in tension with state-established conservation mechanisms, including national parks, forests and biodiversity reserves.[7]

The conflict analysis framework outlined below offers further insight into the interplay among these actors and the dynamics at work.

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6. Note that most of the statistical data is sourced from USAID WEST AFRICA REGION GENDER ANALYSIS from 2018.

7. Mallam Dendo, "Natural Resource Conflict in North-Central Nigeria," A Handbook and Case Studies, August 2004.

Synthesis

What are the PE factors or clusters of factors that appear most powerful in explaining the problem(s) of concern?

The most powerful underlying issue and security risk is the mismanagement of land assets by both formal and informal governance structures. Economic scarcity and precariousness drive competition over resources and opportunities, while imbalanced governance systems disenfranchise certain ethnic and economic groups, leading to long-term resentment. The highest current security risk is that VEOs are exploiting these local grievances to assert control over cross-border movements of goods and people. A recent wave of literature has begun to explore the spillover of VE from the Sahel into the Gulf of Guinea states, warning of the threat of VE infiltration into coastal states such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. Benin has been identified as facing a particularly high level of threat from violent attacks, recruitment, and radicalization from jihadists in the Sahel.[8] The first incident attributed to VE in Benin occurred in 2019.[9] Kidnappings surged in 2022, correlating with the expansion of VE from the Sahel.[10]

Recent investigations have revealed signs of dangerous liaisons between violent extremist networks and bandit groups in the Benin-Nigeria border area. Banditry is rising in zones of VEO activity, with apparent links to Nigeria. VEOs are present in national parks and other difficult-to-monitor areas, and unidentified armed actors crossing the border have become increasingly prevalent. The deep and diverse social ties across borderland communities facilitate the infiltration of violent extremists. VEOs often take refuge in national parks and forests, triggering conflict with park rangers, smugglers, and other armed groups moving through these areas undetected.[11]

Contrary to VEO strategies of governance-building seen in the Sahel, the primary objective of armed groups in this context is to assert strategic control over trafficking routes.[12] Therefore, organized crime networks pose a significant threat for efforts aimed at prevention.

CONFLICT ANALYSIS MATRICES

Through the Conflict Analysis Framework (ICAF), the following political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental (PESTLE) factors were identified as having significant impacts on socio-economic cross-border trends and the conflict resilience of border communities in eastern Benin and western Nigeria. More specifically, these factors help illuminate the complex relationship between the cross-border movement of goods and people and the presence or actions of armed actors in the Benin-Nigeria borderland regions. The matrices in the following section provide detailed insights into various conflict drivers, helping to identify both current trends and critical gaps in knowledge and practice that must be addressed.

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8. Aneliese Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading to the Gulf of Guinea Littoral States, and a New Approach to Countering it is Needed." Modern War Institute. 9 September 2021.

9. Jeannine Ella A Abatan and William Assanvo, "Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin," Institute for Security Studies, June 2023, https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/links-between-violent-extremism-and-illicit-activities-in-benin

10. Hostage to violent extremism: Kidnapping in northern Benin, March 7, 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hostage-to-violent-extremism-kidnapping-in-northern-benin/

11. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

12. UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY IN BORDER COMMUNITIES: The case of the Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger border.

Political

Conflict drivers, vulnerabilities	What we know	What we don't know	Gaps to fill
Political			
State presence	The decentralization process of Benin has enhanced socioeconomic conditions and administration, and empowered local authorities. Low administrative capacities of local officials leave locals disillusioned and gravitating towards customary and religious leaders.	Local relationships with chiefs and the institution of the chieftaincy, perceptions of the formal and informal authorities. Perception of government policies (on both sides) to reinforce security and rule of law. Gaps in local and national governance that exacerbate vulnerabilities. Failed state presence or state-sponsored violence. Sources of community resilience to conflict.	Identify existing community-led strategies for mitigating conflict and promoting stability. Identify opportunities and ideas for community-based sources of resilience to conflict. Assess local perceptions of the state and customary authorities and satisfaction with service provision. Understand local perceptions of safety and security and who is responsible for stability.
State-community relations	In northern Benin, local government enjoys a more prevalent role than traditional authorities.		
Local governance	In the remote areas of northern Benin, customary authorities are often more prevalent than formal state structures. Corruption is ripe and inconsistencies between the two legal systems obscure land claims, property rights, and justice provision. State security forces are often party to violent clashes and abuse and discriminate against local populations. Chieftaincy: In 2022, President Talon set up of a Commission to reform the traditional chiefdom, investigate historical kingdoms and rules of succession, and rehabilitate traditions in accordance with present-day laws.		
Land management	The so-called "farmer-herder" conflict, disputes over access to land and water between farmer and pastoralists, is rooted in mismanagement of land and intensified agriculture, not historic and ethnic grievances. The Beninese government tends to support farmers over herders.	Practical and legal avenues for collaborative land management.	Engage farmers and herders in holistic management.

ICAF: political factors

Communities' Relations with Authority

Border disputes persist between Benin and Nigeria are often sparked by domestic political agendas and power struggles, despite the low strategic value of the territory and the availability of formal dispute-resolution mechanisms.[13] In Benin, decentralization has contributed to improved socioeconomic conditions and strengthened the role of local authorities. However, President Talon's local governance reforms have fallen short of their intended objectives. Law enforcement and justice provision remains inconsistent, and corruption is widespread. State security forces are frequently implicated in violent clashes, abuse, and discrimination against local populations.[14] The limited administrative capacity of local officials has led to growing disillusionment among residents, who increasingly turn to customary and religious leaders.[15] This deterioration in state-community relations has created fertile ground for recruitment by VE groups.[16]

To revive the traditional chieftaincy in Benin, in 2022 President Talon set up a Commission to reform the traditional chiefdom, investigate historical kingdoms and rules of succession, and rehabilitate traditions in accordance with present laws. The Commission has the mission to draft the preliminary bill on the composition, attributions, organization and functioning of the traditional chieftaincy, and to prepare preliminary draft texts for implementing the law. The goal is for the traditional chieftaincy to contribute to social cohesion, help with conciliations, and support urban management.[17]

Economic

Conflict drivers, vulnerabilities	What we know	What we don't know	Gaps to fill
Economic			
Livelihoods	Northern Benin is behind the south in terms of human development, infrastructure, and economic livelihood. Subsistence agriculture is the main economic activity. Pastoralism or seasonal herding is highly adaptive, resilient, and productive. Borgou has the highest share of agricultural land. For immediate border communities, trade is the primary income. Trade impacts livelihoods well beyond the borderland as it provides goods and commodities to both national populations and businesses. Increased insecurity jeopardizes both agricultural and trade activities through squeezing markets and mobility.	Opportunities to embrace traditional livelihoods to improve human development and economic welfare.	Return to traditional farmer-herder land sharing and mutually beneficial practices. Identify existing community-led strategies for mitigating conflict and promoting stability related to land management. Identify opportunities and ideas for community-based sources of resilience to conflict related to land management.

13. THE DYNAMICS OF BORDER DISPUTES IN STATE MAKING: THE FRAGILE BORDERLANDS IN THE NORTHERN REGION BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BENIN REPUBLIC IN WEST AFRICA, Usman Farouk TARFA, 2021.

14. Mathieu Pellerin, "LISTENING TO HERDERS IN WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL: WHAT FUTURE FOR PASTORALISM IN THE FACE OF INSECURITY AND ITS IMPACTS?" July 2021, https://sahara-sahel.org/2024/10/18/listening-to-herders-in-west-africa-and-the-sahel-what-future-for-pastoralism-in-the-face-of-insecurity-and-its-impacts-reseau-billital-maroobe/

15. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin," August 2024.

16. Benin–Niger border closure drives surge in migrant smuggling profits, https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-011/04-benin-niger-border-closure-drives-surge-migrant-smuggling-profits.html

17. Traditional Chieftaincy in Benin: Members of the Commission responsible for developing the legal framework take office, https://presidence.bj/actualite/comptes-rendus/242/chefferie-traditionnelle-benin-membres-commission-chargee-elaboration-cadre-juridique-entrent-fonction

Modernization	Land privatization, investments by foreign entities e.g., the World Bank, agricultural modernization and intensification have formalized land ownership and commercialized land rights to the detriment of nomadic livelihoods. These development policies that marginalized pastoralists often followed international institutions and credit obligations.		
Resource competition	The expansion of farmland has left less land for livestock grazing and exploited the soil and dryland ecosystems. Changes in the political economy of pastoralism due to population growth, urbanization, and industrialization, and changing herding patterns and routes cause disputes.		
Trade	Trade is a major livelihood provider of the borderland. A variety of markets and crossing points enable a flourishing trade economy of licit and illicit goods (fuel, soy, corn, meat, timber). Trade rests on price differentials between the countries. Informal trade with Nigeria provides 75% of Benin's GDP. On the Nigerian side, this figure is 20%, highlighting the unequal nature of the relationship. When the Nigerian president ended fuel subsidies, prices doubled, impacting this vital source of livelihood. Economic exposure to trade risks exploitation by VE. VEOs attempt not to control territories but trade routes.	The current state of trade flows, goods, and security situation on the border.	
Smuggling	Informal trade goes through well-organized networks smuggling goods (fuel, small arms, narcotics) and people. The majority of traders are women, vulnerable when travelling illegal routes. Fuel smuggling had been prominent due to subsidized prices in Nigeria, which allowed for large profits for sales in Benin. The end of fuel subsidies in 2023 jeopardized livelihoods. Unidentified armed actors crossing the border have become prevalent. Firearm smuggling increases as levels of violence and conflict grow and armed groups proliferate.	Which and what groups are operating in the area and in national parks. What kinds of ties exist between VEOs and bandits? The precise role of VEOs in criminal networks.	Identify and map armed groups and actors operating in the area. Understand bandit-extremist liaisons and VEO strategies to exploit conflict dynamics related to banditry.
Banditry	Banditry is reemerging in the Benin border area with links to Nigerian groups. Kidnappings in northern Benin went up between 2019 and 2023, likely due to VE expansion from the Sahel. VEOs use kidnapping for forced recruits, intelligence gathering, or intimidation, while bandits almost always use kidnapping for ransom. Banditry in north-west Nigeria dates back to pre-colonial times, with the dominant activities being robbery and cattle rustling.		
Crime	Violent crime has given rise to self-defense groups in Nigeria who may turn into hybrid security configurations and tap into illicit activities.		

Gold mining	Artisanal gold mining sites have been in the interest of armed groups and VEOs across the region; banditry thrives in the sector. Proceeds empower bandits financially. Women and vulnerable groups are usually present at mining sites. Diggers are involved in drug trafficking and use drugs as encouragement.	The precise role of gold mining in this geographical context.	Map artisanal mines and assess their significance to the security situation.
Access to resources	Northern Benin suffers from high unemployment, extreme poverty, a deficient education system, and inadequate infrastructure and energy supply. The employment rate in Borgou is 45%, and among the 15-25-year-old population, 48% are unemployed and out of school. While Borgou has higher rates of electrification (56.5% compared to a national average of 50.9%) and access to safe drinking water than other northern departments (76.5% compared to 59.3% and 66.7% in Alibori and Atacora respectively), there is a gap in provision between cities and rural areas. Violence is usually rooted in peri-urban areas. The quality of life on the border areas is poor; in Nigeria it decreases as cities grow.	Perceptions of safety and resource access, access to justice and perception of law enforcement. Alternative livelihood opportunities. Gendered disaggregation of data.	Assess local perceptions on livelihoods, economic opportunities, justice provision, and rule of law. Prioritize service provision to rural areas. Conduct gender and age-sensitive research.

ICAF: economic factors

Livelihoods

Subsistence agriculture is the main economic activity in northern Benin—Borgou has the highest share of agricultural land in the country. The department of Borgou also records Benin's fastest population growth rate at 4.88%, compared to the national average of 3.52%.[18]

Pastoralism—the seasonal herding of livestock—is a highly adaptive, resilient, and productive agricultural practice. Over the past decades, the narrative of "farmer-herder conflicts" has emerged to describe disputes over access to land and water between farmers and pastoralists. However, the term "farmer-herder conflict" tends to ethicize the issue, implying conflict with Fulani herders while overlooking the historically symbiotic relations and interdependent relationships that once prevailed. These disputes, which have increasingly turned violent, are primarily rooted in land mismanagement and the intensification of agriculture—not in long-standing ethnic or historical grievances.[19]

Land Mismanagement

Land privatization, foreign investments—such as those by the World Bank—and the drive for agricultural modernization and intensification have led to the formalization of land ownership and the commercialization of land rights, to the detriment of nomadic pastoralist livelihoods. Benin's climate adaptation strategy promotes resilient agriculture through investment in technology. These development policies, often shaped by international institutions and tied to credit obligations, have tended to marginalize pastoralists. As a result, the Beninese government has generally supported

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18. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin," August 2024.

19. Don't Call It Farmer-Herder Conflict, FEBRUARY 9, 2024, https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/dont-call-it-farmer-herder-conflict/

farmers over herders in its policy priorities.[20]

The expansion of farmland has reduced the availability of land for livestock grazing and has contributed to the degradation of soil and dryland ecosystems. Changes in the political economy of pastoralism—driven by population growth, urbanization, and industrialization, and evolving herding patterns and routes—have also contributed to growing disputes.[21]

In addition, a new wave of neo-pastoralism has emerged, characterized by large herd sizes and the hiring of herders. This trend is driven by the rising value of cattle, which has made livestock an attractive asset for politicians and businesspeople. In some cases, cattle are used as a means to invest or launder money acquired through corruption or other illicit activities. This new industry has contributed to the proliferation of small arms in Nigeria and has fueled increased armed clashes between these new ownership groups.[22]

"Land rights are precarious and contested, and population growth is expected to heighten land pressures. In this context, geographic mobility and thus transhumance corridors and pastoralists' rights to land are key to a productive livestock sector. Pastoralists strive to hang on to their historical land strips keeping their cattle alive during long dry seasons. For instance, in northern Benin, stretches of subhumid savanna that used to be dry season pastures are being converted into farmland and becoming less viable for livestock grazing. Therefore, pastoralists are forced to move further or make illegal arrangements to graze on protected areas."[23]

In Nigeria, the Kebbi State government, for example, has adopted several successful conflict resolution strategies—such as peace and reconciliation committees, compensation payments, victim resettlement, and the mobilization of traditional leaders, farmers, and Fulani associations. However, more holistic approaches are needed to ensure the sustained and effective management of intercommunal conflict in the affected Local Government Areas.[24] Land crises significantly increase the risk of food insecurity in North Central Nigeria, including Niger state, as "of all the major drivers of food insecurity in the world, conflict ranks topmost."[25]

The Beninese government has attempted to maintain a neutral role in conflict resolution. However, policies that prioritize intensive agriculture, wealthy investors, and urban elites have often come at the expense of small herders and subsistence farmers.[26] Agricultural policies that actively promote peaceful resolution and establish monitoring mechanisms could help manage and prevent conflict.[27] Land mismanagement remains a key driver of conflict—elsewhere, similar dynamics have led to cycles of retributive violence, community mobilization and armament, and the recruitment of individuals by VEOs.

20. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin," August 2024.

21. Don't Call It Farmer-Herder Conflict, FEBRUARY 9, 2024, https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/dont-call-it-farmer-herder-conflict/

22. Olayinka Ajala (2020) New drivers of conflict in Nigeria: an analysis of the clashes between farmers and pastoralists, Third World Quarterly, 41:12, 2048-2066.https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1811662

23. Brottem, "The Growing Threat of Violent Extremism."

24. Aminu Musa and Suleiman Muhammad, "ROLES OF SUB-NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN FARMERS-HERDERS CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN KEBBI STATE, 2015-2023," 2024.

25. Haaga, P., Sule, P., Idachaba, P., &Bisong, B. (2025). Farmer-Herder Conflicts and Food Security in North-central Nigeria. Advances in Law, Pedagogy, and Multidisciplinary Humanities, 3(1), 1-17. Retrieved from http://103.133.36.82/index.php/alpamet/article/view/847

26. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin," August 2024.

27. Afouda, Oluwafumikè Naomi Francine. (2023) "ANALYSIS OF HERDER-FARMER CONFLICT MANAGEMENT POLICIES IN BENIN."

Trade

Trade is a major source of livelihood in the borderland. A network of markets and crossing points supports a vibrant trade economy involving both licit and illicit goods, including fuel, soy, corn, meat, and timber. Informal trade—both legal and illegal—is the most significant cross-border activity. It occurs through large convoys or small-scale transport via bus, taxi, motorcycle, or boat across the Niger River. For communities immediately along the border, trade represents the primary source of income. Furthermore, trade has a far-reaching impact on livelihoods beyond the border, supplying goods and commodities to national populations and businesses alike. This high level of economic dependence on trade leaves communities vulnerable to exploitation by VEOs and other armed actors.[28]

Trade is driven by price differentials between Nigeria and Benin. Fuel smuggling is a crucial component of cross-border flows. Due to oil subsidies in Nigeria, traders could purchase fuel at a low price and sell it for a significantly higher rate across the border. However, when the Nigerian president ended fuel subsidies on economic grounds, fuel prices doubled, severely impacting this vital source of livelihood.[29]

Following the 2023 coup, ECOWAS countries closed their border with Niger. This closure intensified the smuggling of people and goods, increased illegal profits, and heightened local vulnerabilities to exposure from VEOs, all while damaging the livelihoods of local traders. The policy had little impact on the ability of armed groups to use transit points and traffic commodities—mainly fuel—especially by boat.

In reaction to the border closure, migrant smuggling surged in the Malanville area (Alibori, Benin), strengthening networks among various actors: traders, moto-taxi drivers, local officers, intermediaries, and violent extremists, who tap into these local structures for intelligence. In short, "[m]igrant smugglers' adaptation to heightened insecurity and border closures highlights just how resilient this trade is; indeed, heightened insecurity is a key driver of migrant flows."[30] Rising insecurity threatens both agricultural and trade-based livelihoods by restricting market access and mobility.

Organized Crime

Informal trade moves through well-organized networks that smuggle goods (fuel, small arms, narcotics) and people. Fuel smuggling had been the primary activity of organized crime networks, driven by Nigeria's subsidized prices, which enable large profit margins when resold in Benin. The termination of fuel subsidies in 2023 disrupted this dynamic, jeopardizing the livelihoods of border communities and beyond.

The trafficking of small arms has also been on the rise, correlating with escalating levels of violence and conflict, as well as the proliferation of armed groups.[31] Bandits—defined as a subset of non-

28. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

29. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

30. Benin–Niger border closure drives surge in migrant smuggling profits, https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-011/04-benin-niger-border-closure-drives-surge-migrant-smuggling-profits.html

31. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

state armed actors who primarily target civilians to forcibly seize economic value or goods—have a historical presence in north-west Nigeria, dating back to the pre-colonial period, where they were mostly involved in robbery and cattle rustling.[32] Today, banditry presents serious implications for Nigerian national security.[33]

A concerning development is the resurgence of banditry in the Benin border area, with apparent links to Nigerian groups.[34] Between 2019 and 2023, kidnappings in northern Benin increased, likely driven by the southward expansion of VE activity from the Sahel. While bandits typically engage in kidnapping for ransom—consistent with their objectives of extortion—VEOs tend to use kidnapping for forced recruitment, intelligence gathering, or intimidation.[35]

Another point of interest to armed groups and VEOs across the region has been artisanal gold mining. Banditry already thrives in this sector, with proceeds financially empowering bandits. Within this interwoven network of crime, diggers are involved in drug trafficking and use drugs as incentives to encourage mining activities. Women and vulnerable groups are often present at these mining sites as well.[36]

The rise in violent crime and banditry has led to the emergence of self-defense groups in Nigeria, which may evolve into hybrid security configurations that tap into illicit activities, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence and insecurity.[37]

Overall, cross-border flows pose a significant risk to human security—not only threatening state integrity but also jeopardizing the safety of individuals involved in these activities or residing in the area. For instance, female relatives of wholesalers are often involved in fuel smuggling. Most traders in the border area are women, who face risks of physical abuse when travelling along illegal or informal trading routes where armed actors frequently operate.[38]

Access to Resources and Services

Northern Benin suffers from high unemployment, extreme poverty, a deficient education system, and inadequate infrastructure and energy supply. The employment rate in Borgou is 45%, and among the 15-25 year old population, 48% are unemployed and out of school. While Borgou has higher rates of electrification (56.5% compared to the national average of 50.9%) and access to safe drinking water than other northern departments (76.5% compared to 59.3% in Alibori and 66.7% in Atacora), there is a gap in provision between cities and rural areas. Violence is usually rooted in

32. Ojewale, O. (2025). Undermining Peace: Banditry, Gold, and Elite Collusion in Northwest Nigeria. Deviant Behavior, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2456074

33. Ogidigben, E. A., &Otite, A. A. (2022). ARMED BANDITRY AND NIGERIA NATIONAL SECURITY: A STUDY OF THE NORTH WEST NIGERIA. BW Academic Journal, 1(1), 13. Retrieved from https://www.bwjournal.org/index.php/bsjournal/article/view/843

34. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

35. Hostage to violent extremism: Kidnapping in northern Benin, March 7, 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hostage-to-violent-extremism-kidnapping-in-northern-benin/

36. Ojewale, O. (2025). Undermining Peace: Banditry, Gold, and Elite Collusion in Northwest Nigeria. Deviant Behavior, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2456074

37. Self-defence groups as a response to crime and conflict in West Africa, January 25, 2024, https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/self-defence-groups-as-a-response-to-crime-and-conflict-in-west-africa

38. Cantanze Blum, "CROSS-BORDER FLOWS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BENIN: What Are the Challenges for (Human) Security?" August 2014.

peri-urban areas.[39] The overall quality of life for inhabitants of border villages is reportedly poor. Provision of facilities and infrastructure could improve the quality of life of local inhabitants.[40]

Social

Conflict drivers, vulnerabilities	What we know	What we don't know	Gaps to fill
Social			
Cross-border community ties	Across the current colonial borders, the former Borgu Empire connects the two countries through social, ethnic, and religious ties with the Hausa or Fulbe living in the northern areas by the Nigerien border. The Bariba-Boo of the former Sokoto Caliphate also share an identity. Intergroup connections and intermarriages across the border are common. The Gando, a Fulbe/Bariba slave caste originally of lower social status during colonial times, eventually attained political roles.		Identify existing community-led strategies for mitigating conflict and promoting stability.
Hunters	The Boo hunting groups operate across the border, while the Dambanga hunting groups from the former Borgu Empire also cross the border and maintain allegiance to cross-border customary authorities. These groups are hostile to VEOs, which have targeted the system they defend. The Benin state officially banned these hunting groups while the Nigerian military coopted them against VEOs, resulting in discrepancies.		
Religious relations	The border area is home to two non-violent reformist Islam movements with some ideological overlaps with extremist Islamist doctrines.		
Ethnic marginalization, sociocultural prejudice	Ethnic narratives and stigmatization are on the rise. The term "farmer-herder" conflict ethicizes the issue and implies conflict with Fulani herders ignoring historically symbiotic relations and codependence. This group has suffered from marginalizing policies, structural discrimination, and stereotyping, leading to intergroup violence, victimization, and cycles of retribution. Ethnic killings expose Fulani to VEO recruitment, which has been tapping into pastoralist grievances in contexts across the Sahel (see Mali). Caught between repression and jihadists, most herders, however, are victims and not perpetrators of the insecurity in the region.		Clear out misleading narratives from policy and programming and target the root causes of conflict. Devise a vision for the future of traditional pastoralism respecting indigenous values and practices and benefitting from their resilient and enriching effects.

39. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin." August 2024.

40. Ojo, D.B. Transnational variation in residents' quality of life in Nigeria-benin republic border communities. GeoJournal 89, 240 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-024-11238-9

Migration	Seasonal migration follows rain patterns. Farmers increasingly migrate to cities for a better income. Mobility is linked to resources and economic alternatives. Lacking land, wealthier herders and farmers can adapt and move further south, while poorer ones cannot.	The scope, perception and implications of formal and informal population movement, the size and nature of current labor migrant and refugee influxes, gendered vulnerabilities in labor migration, insurgent infiltration of migrant flows, tensions with host communities, resource overstretch, limited border surveillance, and systemic corruption.	Conduct further granular research on cross-border migration to fill these knowledge gaps and have a holistic picture on how migration fits into the interplay of crime and VEO expansion.
Population growth	The department of Borgou has Benin's fastest population growth rate at 4.88% compared to the national average of 3.52%.		
Youth	Young people dominate cross-border trade, smuggling, and transport. Experienced youth who lose their livelihoods to insecurity over trade harbor anger towards the state and may be vulnerable.	Alternative livelihood opportunities for youth.	Assess the impact of trade disruptions and conflict on youth.
Gender	Traders are women. Gender-based discrimination in West Africa includes (1) discriminatory norms and practices including child and early marriage and lack of schooling; (2) harmful physical practices, e.g., female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C); (3) discrepancies between customary and formal land laws restricting women's ability to own, control, and inherit land; and (4) low political participation of women. Barriers to equality include (1) restrictions on mobility, employment, entrepreneurship, land ownership, reproductive health, and political participation; (2) male-dominated households and male control over female reproductive health-seeking behavior; (3) limited political will and institutional implementation and enforcement of gender policies and nondiscrimination laws; (4) persistence of harmful traditional practices such as FGM/C and early and child marriage, and (5) continuing acceptance across the region of domestic and intimate partner violence.	Gender disaggregated data on access to services, infrastructure and healthcare. We know the roles of women in armed groups and VEOs and the drivers of their affiliation in other contexts but not in this specific one. Gender-specific information that is not only focused on women but other genders and intersectionalities.	Investigate the roles and proportion of women in customary structures, local assemblies, etc., their power in decision-making at the household, community, institutional, and national levels. Investigate the involvement of women, girls, men and boys in conflict in different communities and their impact. Conduct all related research, policy, and programming with a gender-transformative understanding and intention. Assess the impact of conflict on women. Avoid equating women with gender.

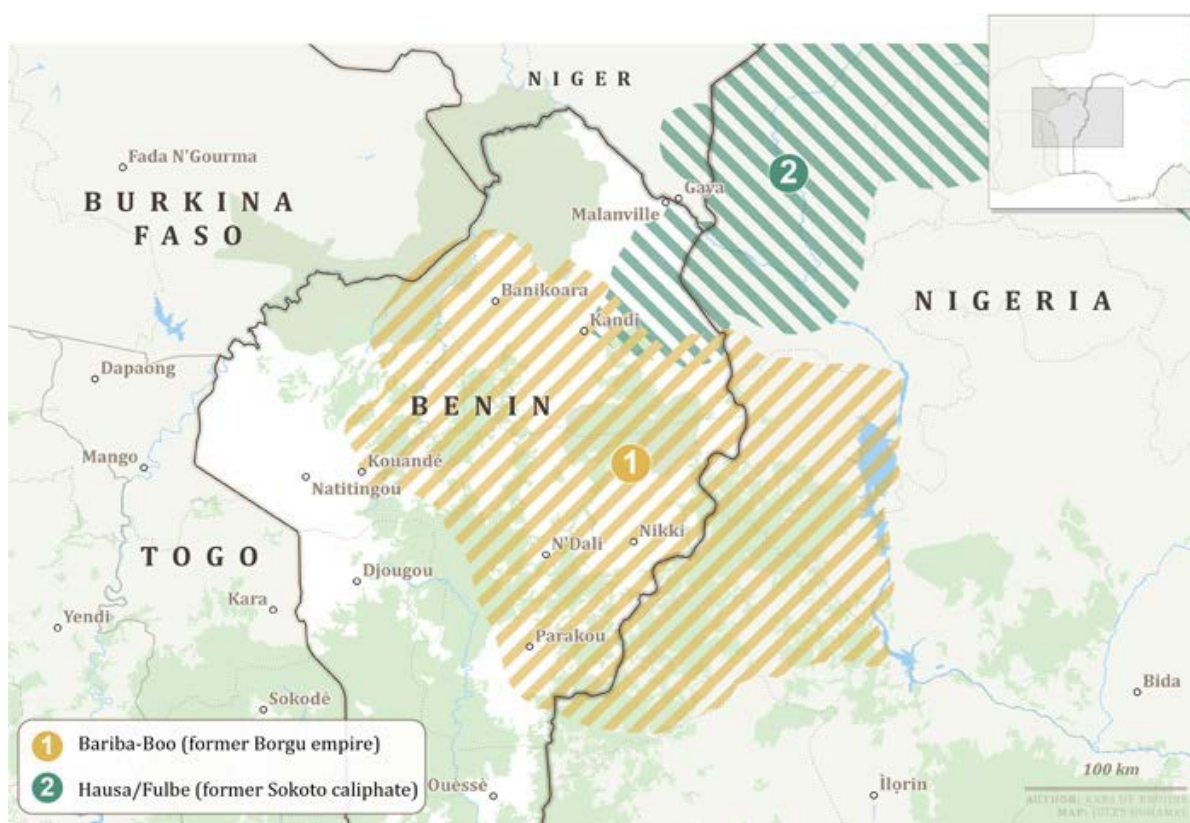ICAF: social factors

Cross-Border Community Ties

Across the current colonial borders demarcated in 1889, Benin and Nigeria share numerous communities and identities. Historical, cultural, and economic relations predate colonialism, strengthened by the belief of a shared ancestor.[41] The former Borgu Empire connects the two

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41. Shuaibu Shittu Isyaku, "A Legacy of Peaceful Coexistence: Historico-Political and Economic Perspectives of Nigeria-Benin Relations," 2017, https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ijah/article/view/152314

countries through social, ethnic, and religious ties, with the Hausa or Fulbe living in the northern areas by the Nigerien border. The Bariba-Boo of the former Sokoto Caliphate also share an identity. Hausa are traditionally long-distance traders. The Hausa language and their involvement in commerce facilitate cross-border connections; intergroup ties and intermarriages across the border are common. Ethnic Fulbe, traditionally nomadic pastoralists, are also present across the border; specifically, the Fulbe in the Beninese border region are closer to Nigerian origins than to other Fulbe in Benin (see Figure 5).[42]

According to the 2013 census in Borgou department, 37.6% of the population identified as Bariba, 33.0% as Fulani, 7.6% as Gua and Otamari, and 6.2% as Yoruba. Islam was the most practiced religion (69.8%), followed by Catholicism (15%).[43]

Map of cross-border communities. Source: Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, 2024.

The Bariba today continue historical interactions and leadership structures of the three kingdoms of the former Borgu Empire (Illo, Nikki, Bussa). Borgu emirs and kings operate between Nigeria and Benin, adding to the strong ethnic, linguistic, and agricultural cross-border ties of the Bariba.

The Gando, a Fulbe/Bariba slave caste originally of lower social status in colonial times, attained political roles during the colonial period. The Fulbe also achieved elevated social status through education. This distinct social standing of the Fulbe may contribute to negative perceptions and ethnic tensions.

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42. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, 2024.

43. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin," August 2024.

Furthermore, the Boo hunting groups operate across the border. Dambanga hunting groups in the former Borgu Empire cross the border and pay allegiance to cross-border customary authorities; they are antagonistic to VEOs who target the system they defend. The Benin state officially banned these hunting groups, while the Nigerian military co-opted them against VEOs, resulting in discrepancies.

Regarding religion, the border area is home to two non-violent reformist Islam movements with some ideological overlaps with extremist Islamist doctrines.[44]

Ethnic Marginalization and Socio-Cultural Prejudice

Ethnic narratives and stigmatization are on the rise, especially against Fulani communities. Borgou has seen dramatically increasing violence targeting the Fulani, pitting them against the Bariba, Dendi, and Boo communities.[45] This group has suffered from marginalizing policies, structural discrimination, and stereotyping, leading to intergroup violence, victimization, and cycles of retribution. Ethnic killings expose Fulani to VEO recruitment, as these groups have tapped into pastoralist grievances in contexts across the Sahel (see Mali). Caught between repression and jihadists, most herders, however, are victims and not perpetrators of insecurity in the region.[46]

Migration

Seasonal migration and transhumance usually follow rain patterns. Farmers increasingly migrate to cities seeking better income. Mobility is linked to resources and economic alternatives. Lacking land, wealthier herders and farmers can adapt and move further south, while poorer ones cannot.[47] ECOWAS allows for largely free movement, so when Burkina, Niger, and Mali announced their intention to leave the block, it raised concerns about serious impacts on mobility.[48]

Youth and Women

Young people dominate cross-border trade, smuggling, and transport. Experienced youth who lose their livelihoods due to insecurity over trade harbor anger towards the state and may be vulnerable. Facing high unemployment and lack of economic opportunities, many young people offer their skills to criminal networks or armed groups.[49]

In general, gender-based discrimination in West Africa includes (1) discriminatory norms and practices such as child and early marriage and lack of schooling; (2) harmful physical practices, e.g.,

44. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, 2024.

45. Mercy Corps, "An analysis of conflict dynamics, drivers and triggers in Borgou, Benin," August 2024.

46. Mathieu Pellerin, "LISTENING TO HERDERS IN WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL: WHAT FUTURE FOR PASTORALISM IN THE FACE OF INSECURITY AND ITS IMPACTS?" July 2021, https://sahara-sahel.org/2024/10/18/listening-to-herders-in-west-africa-and-the-sahel-what-future-for-pastoralism-in-the-face-of-insecurity-and-its-impacts-reseau-billital-maroobe/

47. Mercy Corps, "UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY IN BORDER COMMUNITIES: The case of the Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger border," April 2024

48. Mercy Corps, "UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY IN BORDER COMMUNITIES: The case of the Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger border," April 2024

49. Ojewale, O. (2025). Undermining Peace: Banditry, Gold, and Elite Collusion in Northwest Nigeria. Deviant Behavior, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2025.2456074

female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C); (3) discrepancies between customary and formal land laws restricting women's ability to own, control, and inherit land; and (4) low political participation of women. Barriers to equality include (1) restrictions on mobility, employment, entrepreneurship, land ownership, reproductive health, and political participation; (2) male-dominated households and male control over female reproductive health-seeking behavior; (3) limited political will and institutional implementation and enforcement of gender policies and nondiscrimination laws; (4) persistence of harmful traditional practices like FGM/C, and early and child marriage, and (5) continuing acceptance across the region of domestic and intimate partner violence.[50]

Generally, access to and control over capital and resources is unequal among genders. Men have control over productive household resources (agricultural equipment, land, and labor). As women gain access to these resources after men, they plant their fields late and cannot harvest their crops until the rainy season, becoming more exposed to crop failure from drought. The central government is implementing legal reforms to protect women's land rights, backed by legal literacy programs to help women and communities understand their property rights.[51]

In the borderland, women are deeply involved in cross-border flows. Female relatives of wholesalers are often involved in fuel smuggling. Most traders in the border area are women, and they face heightened risk of physical abuse when travelling illegal or informal trading routes where armed actors are usually operational.[52] Women are also involved in the informal economy through artisanal gold mines, sieving and washing extracted sand.[53]

The trafficking of young men and women is a common occurrence in the border area. Benin is a main transit country of human trafficking with the primary destination being Nigeria. However, for trafficking of women, Nigeria is rather a country of departure.[54]

VEOs kidnap young girls for forced marriage and boys for forced labor. Women may report abductions of their children or family members to the community but not to the police, because they fear accusations of involvement with VEOs. This results in under-reporting of kidnappings.[55]

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50. USAID WEST AFRICA REGION GENDER ANALYSIS, 2020.

51. USAID WEST AFRICA REGION GENDER ANALYSIS, 2020.

52. Cantanze Blum, "CROSS-BORDER FLOWS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BENIN: What Are the Challenges for (Human) Security?" August 2014.

53. Jeannine Ella A Abatan and William Assanvo, "Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin," Institute for Security Studies, June 2023, https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/links-between-violent-extremism-and-illicit-activities-in-benin

54. Cantanze Blum, "CROSS-BORDER FLOWS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND BENIN: What Are the Challenges for (Human) Security?" August 2014.

55. Hostage to violent extremism: Kidnapping in northern Benin, March 7, 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hostage-to-violent-extremism-kidnapping-in-northern-benin/

Technological

Conflict drivers, vulnerabilities	What we know	What we don't know	Gaps to fill
Technological			
Transportation	Cross-border trade methods include large convoys or small-scale movement with bus, taxi, motorcycle, or boat on the Niger river.	Other potential technological factors	Map other potential technological factors

ICAF: technological factors

Legal

Conflict drivers, vulnerabilities	What we know	What we don't know	Gaps to fill
Legal			
State/national level policies and legislation	Nigerian and Beninese security policies are a reaction to border insecurity. Benin's strict laws prohibit farming on livestock corridors. Benin's climate adaptation strategy pushes resilient agriculture investing in technology. The Beninese government has intended to play a neutral role in conflict resolution, but policies prioritizing intensive agriculture have come at the expense of small herders and subsistence farmers. The Federal Government of Nigeria declared bandits as terrorists in November 2021, days after a federal high court order in Abuja.	The governments' official position on the threat of VE in the border area The precise role of VEOs in criminal networks.	Assess the approach of the national government to the borderland. Assess local perceptions of national and regional policies. Implement free transhumance movement. Strategic assessment of policy implications.
ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance	This regional regulatory framework for cross-border transhumance based on the principle of free movement recognizes five transhumance routes into Benin from Burkina and Niger. Benin fails to implement the protocol, imposing levies on animals and limiting their numbers. Local communities ignore transhumant conflict management provisions. Border closures during the pandemic blocked cattle and herders in border areas. Burkina, Niger, and Mali announced their intention to leave ECOWAS, which would seriously impact mobility.		
Land reforms	Frequent changes to land policy and the coexisting state and customary structures obscured ownership and succession rights and generated competing claims. Benin Rural Land Law in 2007 and amendments in 2013 and 2017.	A coherent overview of the legal framework of land management.	Assess historical land reforms and identify regulatory bottlenecks.

Sedentarization policy	To modernize traditional livelihoods, Benin's Office of the High Commissioner for the Sedentarization of Livestock Breeders began implementing a policy to offer alternatives to transhumance and formalize state land tenures for breeders, operating in eleven departments until 2026. The Fulani communities largely embraced Talon's sedentarization agenda. Sedentary groups still perceive sedentarized pastoralists as nomadic and unlawfully possessing land.	Statistics on the sedentarization of Fulani and the perception of (formerly) nomadic and sedentary groups of the policy.	Discuss sedentarization policy with local communities—its effects, successes, and failures, unintended consequences.
Border closures	In 2019, Nigeria closed its border with Benin to decrease smuggling and illegal cross-border activities. After the 2023 coup, ECOWAS countries closed their border with Niger. The border closure intensified smuggling of people and goods, increasing illegal profits and vulnerabilities to VEO exposure and damaging the livelihoods of local traders.	The precise role of VEOs in criminal networks.	Strategic assessment of policy implications.
Gender policies in Benin	Gender Policy: 2008. Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women: ratified. Protocol on the Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women: signed. Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol): ratified.	The level of implementation and its impact in practice.	Assess the aforementioned policies and their impact on the ground.

ICAF: legal factors

Land Management

There are discrepancies between the legal frameworks governing land management and the realities on the ground. Frequent changes to land policy, alongside the coexistence of state and customary land tenure systems, have obscured ownership and succession rights, generating competing claims. The ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance is a regional framework regulating cross-border transhumance based on the principle of free movement, recognizing five transhumance routes into Benin from Burkina Faso and Niger. Nevertheless, Benin has failed to fully implement the protocol, imposing levies on animals and limiting their numbers. Border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic further trapped cattle and herders in border areas. Local communities also often ignore transhumance conflict management provisions.[56] In theory, Benin's strict laws prohibit farming on livestock corridors, but farmers usually disregard these regulations.[57]

Sedentarization and Free Movement

To modernize traditional livelihoods, Benin's Office of the High Commissioner for the Sedentarization of Livestock Breeders has been implementing a policy to offer alternatives to transhumance and to

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56. Regional Policies and Response to Manage Pastoral Movements within the ECOWAS Region, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_ecowas_pastoralism.pdf

57. Don't Call It Farmer-Herder Conflict, FEBRUARY 9, 2024, https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/dont-call-it-farmer-herder-conflict/

formalize state land tenures for breeders, operating in eleven departments until 2026.[58] However, these attempts have negatively impacted traditional herding practices and reduced pastoralists' autonomy. The policy primarily benefits southern herders who collaborate with large-scale livestock producers and continues to marginalize smaller herders, who are more vulnerable to climate variations.[59]

Fulani communities largely embraced President Talon's sedentarization agenda. However, sedentary groups continue to perceive sedentarized pastoralists as nomadic and unlawfully occupying land. Additionally, sedentary livestock farming places increased pressure on village resources. As a result, sedentarization has, in many cases, exacerbated conflicts between crop farmers and livestock producers.[60]

Border Closures

The pragmatic security policies of both Benin and Nigeria are primarily reactive to evolving security threats. However, inadequate funding, administrative inefficiency, and questionable law enforcement practices have created openings for criminal operations, highlighting the need for better harmonization and cooperation between the two countries.[61] Nigerian studies express concerns about the threats of cross-border migration and crime to Nigeria's national security and call for enhanced border policing.[62]

Illegal cross-border transactions are viewed as a serious threat to Nigeria's security and economy, which led the Nigerian federal government to close the border in August 2019. The border closure yielded some positive effects for Nigeria, including a reduction in smuggling and other cross-border crimes, a 60% increase in domestic rice consumption, a 30% decrease in domestic fuel consumption, a 56% increase in daily income for the Nigeria Customs Service, and significant seizure of contraband goods. On the downside, the closure restricted people's movement, caused price increases in consumer goods, and contributed to rising inflation.[63]

58. Don't Call It Farmer-Herder Conflict, FEBRUARY 9, 2024, https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/dont-call-it-farmer-herder-conflict/

59. Mercy Corps, "UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY IN BORDER COMMUNITIES: The case of the Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger border," April 2024.

60. Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover, June 2021, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/northern-benin-and-risk-violent-extremist-spillover

61. Adenipekun, L. O. (2022). National Security Policies of Nigeria and Benin Republic as Strategies for Curbing Cross-border Crimes. African Journal of Stability and Development (AJSD), 14(1&2), 37–72. https://doi.org/10.53982/ajsd.2022.1401_2.02-j

62. Odey Rosemary Anya; Mohammed Bello Baban', Umma Ph.D; & Ruth Caleb Luka Ph.D. (June 2024). Nigeria-Benin Border Migration and its Implication for Nigeria's Security. https://ojs.ibbujournals.com.ng/index.php/lijad/article/view/1348

63. Abegunde, Olayinka Oluwatosin and Rebecca Fabiyi. "Nigeria-Benin Border Closure: Implications for Economic Development in Nigeria." (2020).

Environmental

Conflict drivers, vulnerabilities	What we know	What we don't know	Gaps to fill
Environmental			
Land, soil	Soil depletion, receding plant cover, reduced soil fertility, land pressures, water pollution, and desertification has decreased the farmer population.	How many years of cultivation the region has left based on soil health? Community-led climate resilience strategies.	Prioritize agroecological farming practices that feed the soil, regreen desertified areas, enhance soil fertility, and serve as climate mitigation and adaptation mechanisms. Devise locally appropriate, context specific, community-led climate resilience strategies independent of international investors.
Climate crisis	The climate crisis is accelerating desertification and causes severe droughts, inducing migration and transforming seasonal migration. Climate change functions as a threat multiplier.		
Conservation	Conservation has offered alternative livelihoods and resilience to climate change. With increased violence, tourism tanked. VEOs often find a hideout in national parks and forests, provoking conflict with park rangers, smugglers, and other armed groups crossing these areas under the radar.		

ICAF: environmental factors

Regarding biophysical realities and the carrying capacity of the land, soil depletion, receding plant cover, reduced soil fertility, land pressures, water pollution, and desertification have contributed to a decrease in the farmer population. The climate crisis is accelerating desertification and causing severe droughts, leading to increased migration and altering traditional patterns of seasonal migration. Climate-induced migration is becoming increasingly frequent in the region as a key adaptation strategy for local populations. In this way, climate change functions as a threat multiplier, increasing vulnerabilities. Conservation has provided alternative livelihoods and resilience to climate change; however, with increased violence, tourism has declined sharply.[64]

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64. Mercy Corps, "UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY IN BORDER COMMUNITIES: The case of the Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger border," April 2024.

CONCLUSION

The conflict and political economy analyses reveal that the stability of northern Benin and western Nigeria depends on a complex interplay of factors. The economies of both regions rely heavily on the cross-border mobility of goods and people, which also reinforces social cohesion among borderland communities. However, critical knowledge gaps remain and must be addressed.

One of the most significant underlying issues and security risks is the mismanagement of land assets by both formal and informal governance structures. Economic scarcity and precariousness drive competition for resources and opportunities, while imbalanced governance disenfranchises specific ethnic and economic groups, fostering long-term resentment. The greatest current security threat arises from VEOs exploiting these grievances within local communities to control cross-border movements of goods and people.

Recent investigations reveal troubling alliances between violent extremist outlets and bandit networks in the Benin-Nigeria border area. Banditry is rising within VEO operational zones and shows links to Nigeria. VEO presence in national parks and remote, hard-to-monitor areas is increasingly common. The strong, deep connections across borderland communities facilitate violent extremists' infiltration. VEOs often seek refuge in national parks and forests, causing conflict with park rangers, smugglers, and other armed groups who operate covertly in these areas.[65]

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65. Dangerous Liaisons, Clingendael, June 2024, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2024/dangerous-liaisons/executive-summary/.

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ABOUT
THE POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.
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