



Life on the line: stability and livelihoods in Coastal West Africa

# Chapter 1: stability and livelihood challenges in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions between Ghana, Togo, and Burkina Faso

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**Figure 1.** Map showing locations under examination

## Introduction

The tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo forms a vibrant nexus of commerce, culture, and connectivity. This is particularly evident in the three key markets lining the borders of these countries: Bawku (Ghana), Bittou (Burkina Faso), and Cinkassé (Togo), as well as smaller peripheral markets. This chapter focuses on the cross-border movement of goods and people between southern Burkina Faso, northeastern Ghana, and northwestern Togo, and the disruption to these activities caused by extremist violence and state responses to it. More specifically, the research studies Ghana's border communities in the Bawku Municipal and Garu districts (Upper East Region) along the Burkina Faso and Togo borders, and the Chereponi and Bunkpurugu districts (North East Region) bordering Togo (see Figure 1).

Two cross-border trading ecosystems are particularly important in these communities: the well-established and informal trading network between Bawku, Bittou, and Cinkassé; and informal trading networks further south, between Chereponi (Ghana) and Mango (Togo).

The two areas of focus in this report are referred to as the 'Bawku border region' and the 'Chereponi border region'. Cross-border activities in these border regions are vital to the livelihoods of local agrarian communities, which sell their produce at markets and trade in everyday consumables. Goods and people regularly flow along both formal and informal routes, depending on what is most convenient at any given time.

The findings of this report show that local trade in these border areas is low in volume and profit. Armed groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), the Al-Qaeda-affiliated group in West Africa, do not appear to be involved in this trade.<sup>1</sup> JNIM's disruptive activities, including violence, along main trading routes in Burkina Faso and Togo directly impact the mobility, livelihoods, and trade of people using these routes. Some individuals have stopped moving across the borders altogether; others report a significant decrease in earnings.

Moreover, border security has been progressively strengthened by the Ghanaian, Togolese, and Burkinabé security forces since 2020. Although these security measures obstruct fluid cross-border movement and livelihoods, border communities have also indicated that they appreciate the measures, which they say make them feel safer.

Finally, protectionist policies imposed by governments – such as trade bans on cereals aimed at keeping production in Togo, Burkina Faso, and Ghana – are also disrupting cross-border access to essential goods. This is felt most acutely by people in the Chereponi district, where grain bans imposed by the Ghanaian government in 2021 have led to a reported slowdown in trade, and even market closures. Financial issues – such as skyrocketing commodity prices and difficulty sourcing fertilisers – are the main source of people's stress.

The changing environment has led people to adopt strategies to mitigate risks and maintain their livelihoods. These include adjusting trading patterns, behaviours, and new, unapproved routes – which can be dangerous. Security-focused responses to violent extremism can have the unintended effect of disrupting the intricate web of cross-border trade and community interactions in borderland regions. Fortifying or hardening borders can adversely affect local livelihoods, potentially undermining programming efforts by exacerbating grievances that are then exploited by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) and criminal organisations to gain influence.

## Methodology

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This chapter focuses specifically on dynamics in Ghana's Bawku and Chereponi border regions, and their proximity to Burkina Faso and Togo (see the annex of the summary report for more details on the methodology of the entire study). The research team applied a mixed-methods approach in this area, including both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Nine field researchers from CDD-Ghana conducted 102 key informant interviews (KIIs) between December 2023 and January 2024 with 53 Ghanaians and 49 Togolese in the Upper East and North East regions of Ghana. Random walk sampling was used to identify respondents. Village selection involved a mix of primary and secondary markets. Interviews were conducted in the primary language of each respondent. Due to regional security considerations, researchers stayed within Ghana and interviewed Togolese communities settled along the border.<sup>2</sup>

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1 The research also included a political economy analysis in the trade centres covered in Bawku and Chereponi border regions (Chapter 1) and Paga border regions (Chapter 3), which focused on items that are known to be exploited for VEO financing. This included the cattle rustling trade in the Chereponi district, Ghana, and the fuel smuggling trade in Paga, Ghana.

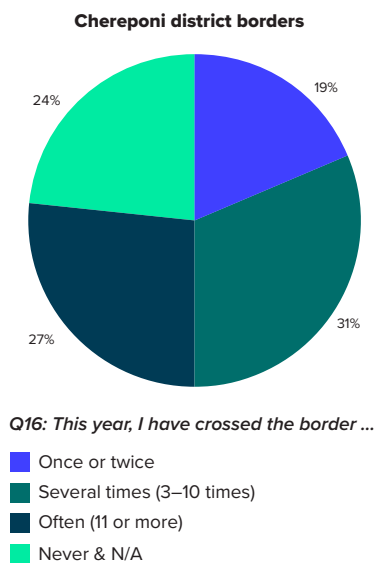
2 Locations included Bawku, Biankori, Pulmakom, and Garu (Upper East), as well as Bunkpurugu and Chereponi (North East). Within Chereponi district, enumerators went specifically to Wenchiki, where settled Togolese and Togolese traders were known to operate within the cattle markets.

Six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in January 2024, each with 10 participants. Two FGDs took place in Bawku;<sup>3</sup> two in Chereponi;<sup>4</sup> and two in Pulmakom.<sup>5</sup> The qualitative sampling approach was designed to allow for a comparative analysis of perspectives from different nationalities and genders, and from under-represented groups.

Researchers conducted a face-to-face household survey (HHS) in the Chereponi and Bunkpurugu-Nyankpanduri districts of Ghana's North East Region in February 2024. One hundred and fifty individuals were surveyed in various communities, including those of the Naduni and the Bukasu and Kpani fishing camps (all in Chereponi), as well as the Pagnatiik and Gperuk-Kunkuok (in Bunkpurugu-Nyankpanduri).<sup>6</sup>

The structured nature of the qualitative and quantitative interviews captured details about licit activities, including some probing into involvement in illicit trading and movements. More details about the data collection methodology can be found in the annex of the summary report.

## Overview of socio-economic patterns in border communities



**Figure 2.** Frequency of cross-border movement among inhabitants in the border areas of Chereponi district

This section examines the trade dynamics in the communities of the Bawku and Chereponi border regions. Research focused on the towns of Bawku, Biankori, Pulmakom, and Garu (Upper East), as well as Bunkpurugu and Chereponi (North East), and villages surrounding them. In these predominantly agrarian communities along the border, agricultural products and other everyday consumables are mostly traded across borders.

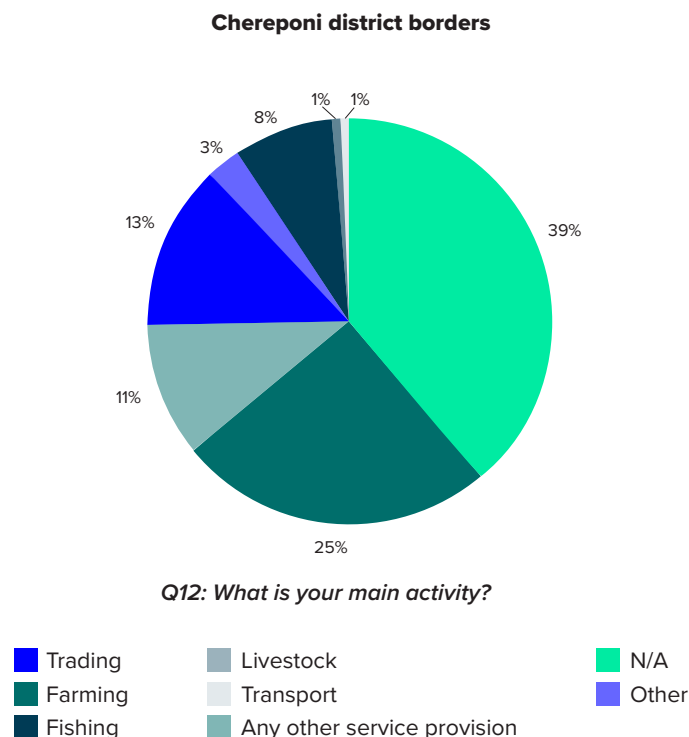
### Communities in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions

The area described in this report as the Bawku border region – where Burkina Faso, Togo, and Ghana meet – is populated by several communities that share deep-rooted cross-border connections.<sup>7</sup> The ethnic Gourmantche and Mossi communities live side by side, reflecting their

- 3 Focus groups in Bawku consisted of Ghanaian participants: one for women and under-represented groups, and a second with a range of community and social actors.
- 4 One of these was with only Togolese participants, another with only Ghanaian participants.
- 5 Both focus groups in Pulmakom consisted of Togolese participants: one with women and under-represented groups, and another with a range of community and social actors.
- 6 The same survey was also carried out, as part of the broader research, in the Paga and Navrongo districts of Ghana's Upper East. Insights from these two districts are not directly utilised in this report, unless except to provide a broader contextual understanding of dynamics across the country.
- 7 Gayibor, N.L. (ed.) *Le peuplement du Togo : état actuel des connaissances historiques* (Lomé: Presses de l'UB, 1996).

shared ancestral roots and cultural legacy.<sup>8</sup> Further south, in Ghana's Chereponi border region, the Anufor (Chokosi) dominate, living alongside Gourmantche, Konkomba, Hausa, and Dagomba ethnicities.<sup>9</sup>

Quantitative household surveys in the North East Region highlight the importance of these cross-border exchanges: over half (58 per cent) of respondents in these borderlands noted they had crossed from Ghana into Togo or Burkina Faso three times or more in the preceding six months,<sup>10</sup> and over a quarter (27 per cent) of all respondents had crossed over 11 times in the same period (see Figure 2). Farming and trading are among the primary economic activities for people in this area (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Economic activity of respondents in Chereponi border districts

- 8 This area is often called 'Mossi-Gourma country' or 'Para-Gourma country' because of the shared ethnic make-up comprising Gourmantche and Mossi communities. Traditionally, the tri-border area is the land of Gourma. Over time, the Gourma have divided into different sub-groups; in Burkina Faso, they are known as Gourmantche; in Togo they are known as Moba; in Ghana, both Gourmantche and Moba. Whereas the Gourma are generally dominant, it is significant that the heart of the tri-border area is majority-Mossi. In Togo, this group is found in the Cinkassé prefecture. These sub-divisions do have unique practices and social structures, while acknowledging the cultural and historical ties that bind them. For example, in Ghana's northern-most regions (Upper East and North East), the Mossi have local kingdoms organised in sub-groups such as Dagbamba, Nanumba, and Mamprusis, which all remain close to the Mossi in neighbouring Burkina Faso. See: Gayibor, N.L. ed. *Histoire des Togolais : 1. Des origines à 1884* (Lomé: Presses de l'UB, 1997), and Pilon M. and Pontié, G. 'Développement inégal et mobilité : le cas des Moba-Gurma du Nord-Togo', in André Quesnel and Patrice Vimard, eds., *Migration, Changements Sociaux et Développement* (Paris: Orstom, 1991), pp. 103–125.
- 9 This area is sometimes called the Anufor land. Births & Deaths Registry – Republic of Ghana, North East Region, <https://bdr.gov.gh/northern-east-region/>.
- 10 Notably, this figure is for North East only, where those in Chereponi and Bunkpurugu districts were interviewed. Q16, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

The most cited reason for residents crossing the border was visiting family and friends, followed by trade.<sup>11</sup> This finding is further supported by other academic literature on cross-border social gatherings and access to healthcare across borders in the region.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to trade, households with land straddling the border mean that daily activities often involve movement across borders. For example, some farmers living in Pulmakom (Upper East) and Bunkpurugu (North East) have land lying across the official boundaries of both Ghana and Togo.<sup>13</sup>

## Cross-border movement of goods and people

The products flowing daily across this region's borders are essential for local populations. In the Bawku and Chereponi border regions, these items mostly consist of agricultural goods and consumables, such as cereals, vegetables, and other food staples (see Tables 1 and 2 below). These goods circulate within a co-dependent ecosystem of key markets, where they move between central trade hubs (primary markets) and smaller, dependent markets (secondary markets).

This report explores two trading ecosystems to better understand how cross-border trade functions within such networks. The first is in Bawku, Cinkassé, and Bittou, where trade activities are directly influenced by their proximity to primary markets. The second focuses on the ecosystems of Mango and Chereponi. In that system, trading patterns are less formalised and more affected by the seasonal availability of goods and travel restrictions.

Traded items	Dominant demographic
Vegetables (onions, tomatoes, peppers, tubers) and legumes (soya beans, groundnuts)	Mostly women of all ages (short haul) Men (long haul)
Cereals (incl. maize, millet, corn, rice)	Mostly women of all ages (short haul) Men (long haul)
Livestock (cattle, goats, fowls, sheep)	Always men over 30
Household items (cooking oil, sugar, drinks, utensils, soap)	Both men and women
Fabric, clothing, and sandals	Both men and women

**Table 1.** Trade flows in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions

11 The top reasons for cross-border travel among the Ghanaian sample of the HHS (in the North East and Upper East Paga and Navrongo districts). Question 17, HHS, Upper East and North East, Ghana, February 2024.

12 The well-known hospitals in the area include the Upper East Regional Hospital, the Braun Hospital in Cinkassé, and the Dapaong CHR; Alexander Doyle, 'La santé communautaire dans la région des Savanes, Togo. Une étude de cas sur les commissions santé dans les districts sanitaires de Kpendjal, Tandjouaré et Tône,' (Master Thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2013); Vukey, E., Ntow-Kummi, G., and Asibi Abuosi, A. (2023), 'Assessing the Efficiency of Regional Hospitals in Ghana: Implications for Optimal Resource Allocation for Referral Hospitals,' *Scientific African* 21, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2023.e01847>.

13 KII, security personnel, Bunkpurugu, North East, Ghana, 16 December 2023.

Traded items	Most commonly traded good (numerical ranking)		Dominant demographic
	Bawku border region	Chereponi border region	
Vegetables (onions, tomatoes, peppers, tubers) and legumes (soya beans, groundnuts)	1	2	Mostly women of all ages (short haul) Men (long haul)
Cereals (incl. maize, millet, corn, rice)	2	1	Mostly women of all ages (short haul) Men (long haul)
Livestock (cattle, goats, fowls, sheep)	4	3	Always men over 30
Household items (cooking oil, sugar, drinks, utensils, soap)	5	4	Both men and women
Fabric, clothing, and sandals	3	5	Men Women

**Table 2.** Primary goods traded between markets<sup>14</sup>

## Markets and trade patterns in the Bawku border region

There are three major commercial hubs in the Bawku border region: Bawku, Cinkassé, and Bittou. These towns host the most developed, vibrant primary markets, which drive commerce and social activity in the area. The towns are less than 45 kilometres apart and border communities travel easily between them.<sup>15</sup>

### Cinkassé, Togo

The border town of Cinkassé, Togo (see Figure 4) is known as the sub-region's 'Dubai', owing to its volume of trade and activity.<sup>16</sup> Located along the supply chain between the port city of Lomé (Togo), and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, it provides landlocked Sahelian countries with access to one of only two seaports in West Africa that do not levy import taxes, resulting in relatively cheaper imported goods.

The lower prices of goods in Cinkassé attract traders who then resell goods at higher prices in markets across Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, and even Niger.<sup>17</sup> Cinkassé also has a thriving short-haul export trade in cereals – such as corn, sorghum, and millet – to Bittou.<sup>18</sup> As one interviewee said: “We always go to Cinkassé market....Their goods are cheap, good, and there are no problems”.<sup>19</sup>

14 Information in this table comes from KIIs conducted in Upper East and North East, Ghana between December 2023 and January 2024. The household survey confirmed the findings, with beans and groundnuts emerging as the top two products exported and imported to and from Burkina Faso and Togo. Q19 and Q20, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

15 In the context of the KIIs, respondents were asked to name the most common means of transport. These were found to be commercial motorcycles 'motorkings', donkey carts, and sometimes private transport, such as bicycles and cars. More established traders may travel by cargo truck. KIIs, Upper East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

16 Kohnert, D. 'Pas de changement en vue : Le développement politique et socio-économique du Togo' (2017 - 2019), (Munich, University Library of Munich, 2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3474276>.

17 Five KII respondents explicitly referred to purchasing corn and clothing cheaply in Cinkassé and later importing them into Ghana. KIIs with businessman, cattle dealer, trader, assemblyman, and opinion leader, Bawku, Biankori, Chereponi, and Pulmakom, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024. In January 2024, during the FGDs in Bawku, Pulmakom, in Upper East, participants shared the same experience.

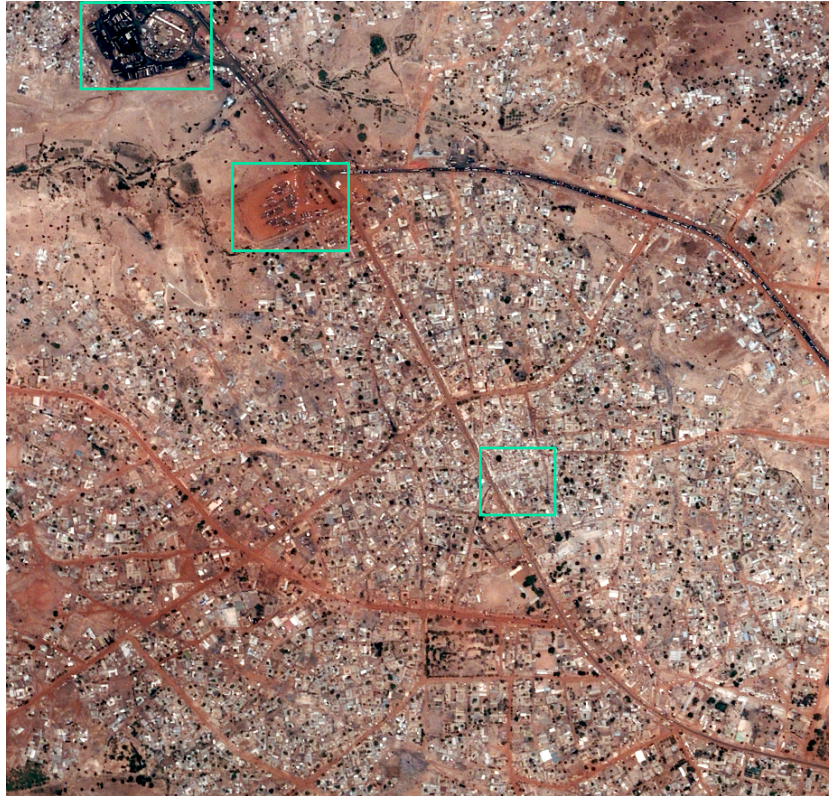
18 Bawku Municipal Assembly. 'Medium Term Development Plan' (2018–2021) (Draft), 2018, [https://www.ndpc.gov.gh/media/UE\\_Bawku\\_MTDP\\_2018-2021.pdf](https://www.ndpc.gov.gh/media/UE_Bawku_MTDP_2018-2021.pdf).

19 KII, female trader, Bunkpurugu, Upper East, Ghana, December 2023.

Burkina Faso  
border crossing

Togo border  
crossing

Cinkassé  
market



Credits: © BlackSky Technology Inc. All Rights Reserved

**Figure 4.** Cinkassé town in the Savanes Region of Togo, March 2024 (markets and border crossings highlighted)



Credits: Satellite Imagery © Planet Labs PBS

**Figure 5.** Tesingo cattle market, Bawku, Ghana, March 2024

## Bawku, Ghana

The Bawku market (see Figure 5), situated in Ghana's Upper East Region, first became important under British colonial rule when it was promoted as the central point for commercial caravans travelling to southern Ghana from the northern regions of West Africa.<sup>20</sup> The town's market activities have retained their importance owing to their connectivity with markets in Cinkassé (Togo) and Bittou (Burkina Faso). Bawku remains Cinkassé and Bittou's main supplier of niébé (black-eyed peas), oilseeds, and textiles.<sup>21</sup>

However, in recent years, several factors have hampered the market's trading environment, including increased inter-communal tensions, proximity to conflict in Burkina Faso, and worsening economic conditions.<sup>22</sup> Since 2021, renewed violent chieftaincy conflict between ethnic Mamprussi and Kusasis has intermittently closed trade through the historic market. The Kusasis have tried to establish new markets in its place, though they are smaller than that of Bawku.<sup>23</sup>



Credits: Satellite Imagery © Maxar Technologies 2024

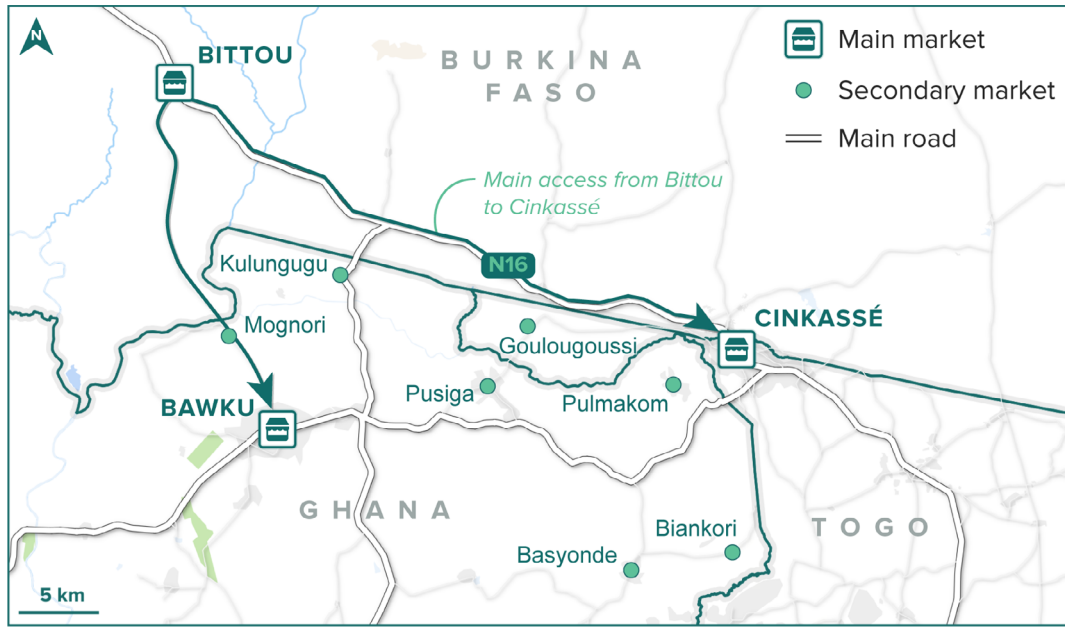
**Figure 6.** Bittou market (highlighted), Burkina Faso, March 2023

20 Benneh, G. (1974), 'Bawku, une ville marché du Ghana du Nord,' *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer* 27: 106, April/June 1974, pp. 168–182, <https://doi.org/10.3406/caoum.1974.2694>.

21 Japan International Cooperation Agency. 'The project on the corridor development for West Africa growth ring master plan,' March 2018, [https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our\\_work/social\\_environmental/id/africa/african\\_countries/c8h0vm000095a3ej.html](https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/social_environmental/id/africa/african_countries/c8h0vm000095a3ej.html).

22 Courtright, J. 'Market Wars in Ghana,' *Institute of Current World Affairs*, 12 October 2023. <https://www.icwa.org/market-wars-ghana/>.

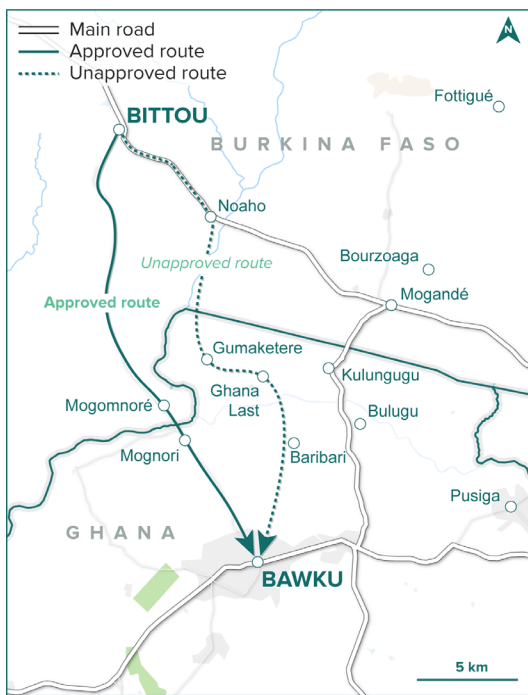
23 Ibid.



Source: XCEPT



**Figure 7.** Map of primary and secondary markets in Bawku border region



Source: XCEPT



**Figure 8.** Example of the approved and unapproved routes between Bawku–Bittou

### Bittou, Burkina Faso

Finally, the Bittou market in southern Burkina Faso (see Figure 6) is the biggest market in the Centre-Est Region and one of the largest border markets in Burkina Faso.<sup>24</sup> It operates every three days, in accordance with Gourmantche tradition, and attracts different ethnic groups. The market supplies traders with various products that have been transported from across the country.

These primary markets serve several secondary markets in the Bawku border region (see Figure 7). These include trade centres in Mognori and Kulungugu (located between Bittou and Bawku); Bolga and Goulougoussi, where goods are transported along the main highway (N16) towards Cinkassé; and Bittou, Pusiga, and Basyonde (between Cinkassé and Bawku). Communities in towns that do not have major markets often sell their goods to traders passing along these trade routes; they then bring these goods to markets in other places further inland, such as Binduri, Garu, and Kumasi.<sup>25</sup>

24 Ministère des Ressources Animales de Burkina Faso (2000), ‘Plan d’actions et programme d’investissements du secteur de l’élevage au Burkina Faso: Diagnostic, axes d’interventions et programmes prioritaires,’ July 2000, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/bkf174081.pdf>.

25 "In Pulmakom, here we don't have a market center we just have a junction where we stand and buses will bring passengers from Bawku and Kumasi then we carry them to Cinkassé," KII, male trader, Pulmakom, Upper East, Ghana, December 2023.

The main and secondary markets in this region are closely interconnected, with constant movement between them made possible by their close proximity and porous borders.

Ghana's Immigration Act (2000) established 44 approved routes to enter the country, with six places of entry located in the Upper East Region.<sup>26</sup> Yet people continue to use both approved and unapproved routes, rather than confining themselves to established paths past official checkpoints. For example, while an approved route from Bittou to Bawku runs through Mognori, people are known to bypass it by taking smaller roads through Ghana Last–Gumaketere and Noaho (see Figure 8).<sup>27</sup>

## Flow of illicit goods in the Bawku border region

The use of both approved and unapproved routes by border communities highlights a proclivity for convenience, as people seek to ensure the smooth movement of everyday goods across borders. However, in allowing commuters to bypass customs and official checkpoints, these unapproved routes present an opening for the illicit trafficking of goods. Arms, stolen motorbikes, and fuel are among the illicit goods commonly traded between Cinkassé, Bittou, and Bawku. For decades, these markets have acted as trade centres where specific trafficked items can be purchased.<sup>28</sup>

Cinkassé, for example, is known for the illicit trade of motorbikes, fuel, and medicine, and is a trade node for transferring artisanal gold from Burkina Faso to gold buyers in Lomé.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Bawku serves as a node for the illicit trade of guns from the Sahel, raising concerns about a broader pattern of arms smuggling, with people from the area acquiring and smuggling weapons to and from Burkina Faso and Togo.<sup>30</sup> However, field research for this study found no further evidence of this: no respondents referred to participating in – or knowing about – these activities.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, fuel smuggling ebbs and flows depending on contextual factors, such as subsidies in Nigeria.<sup>32</sup> Cinkassé and Bittou were the logistical

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26 These are Bawku-Missiga, Kulungugu, Mognori, Namoo, Paga, and Pulmakom. See pp.19-20 of the Ghana Immigration Act (2000).

27 Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, phone conversation, February 2024.

28 Bird, L. and Tagziria, L. (2022), 'Criminalité organisée et dynamiques d'instabilité : Cartographie des plaques tournantes illicites en Afrique de l'Ouest' (Genève: Global Initiative, 2022), [https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/assets/pdfs/illicit\\_hubs\\_methodology\\_fr.pdf](https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/assets/pdfs/illicit_hubs_methodology_fr.pdf). See also, West Africa Observatory - Global initiative, Illicit hub mapping, <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/map>.

29 Assanvo, W., Dakano, B., Thérroux-Bénoni, L., and Maïga, I. 'Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma' (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2019), <https://issafrica.org/fr/recherches/rapport-sur-lafrique-de-louest/extremisme-violent-criminalite-organisee-et-conflits-locaux-dans-le-liptako-gourma>; Berger, F. and Kane, M. *Le trafic illicite de produits médicaux en Afrique de l'Ouest - Document de recherche OCWAR-T n° 5*, (Lagos: ECOWAS Commission, 2023), <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/OCWAR-T-paper-5-FR.pdf>.

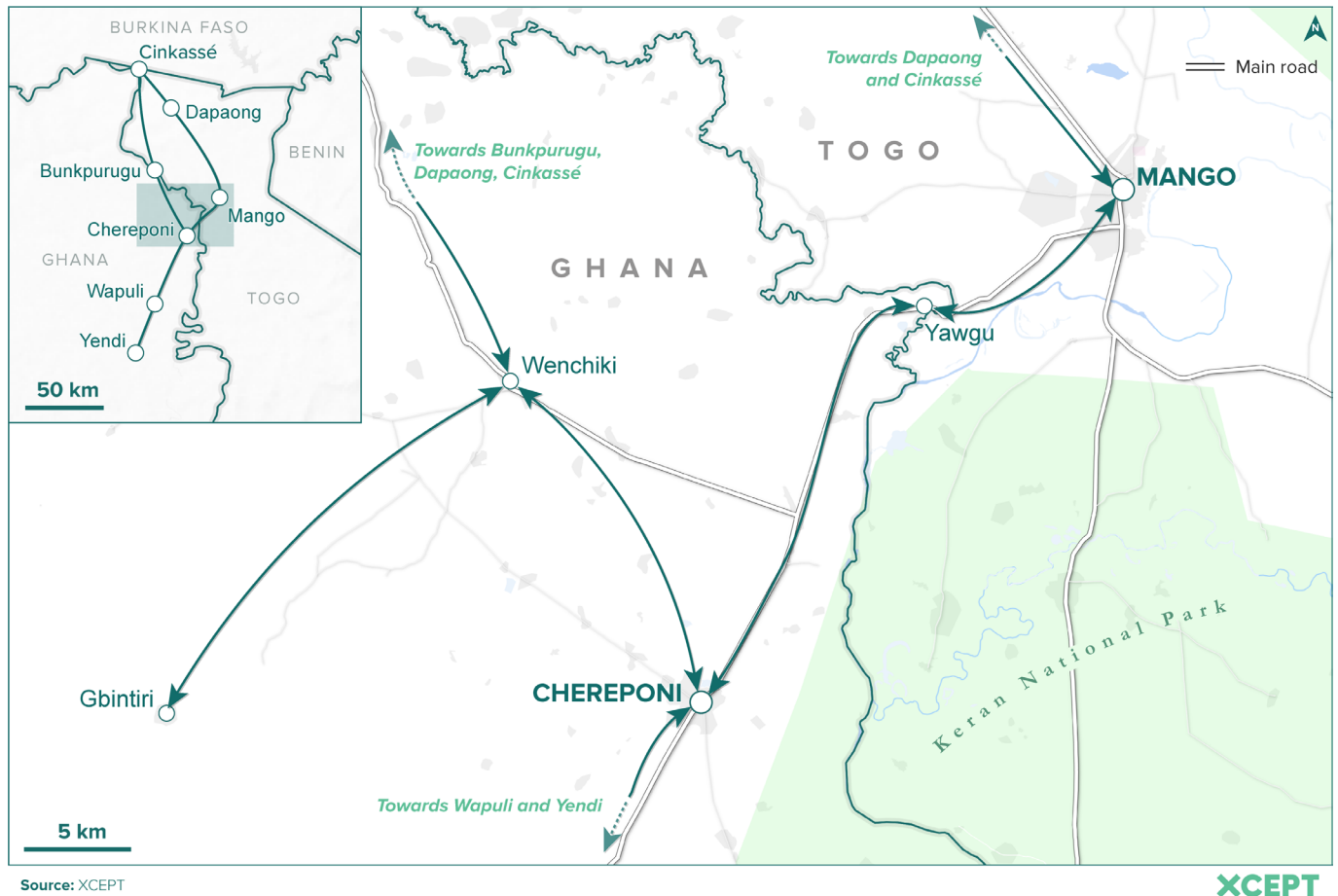
30 Global Initiative 'Trafficking of high-calibre firearms is fuelling deadly violence in Bawku, northern Ghana,' 8 August 2023, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-008/03-trafficking-of-high-calibre-firearms-is-fuelling-deadly-violence.html>.

31 As explained in this chapter's section on methodology, this relative silence around engagement in illicit activities presents one gap in the findings. The more formal nature of the survey and interview process among randomly selected individuals put more emphasis on licit activities, where participants were not extensively probed about their involvement in illicit trading and movements.

32 One popular fuel smuggling route is from Cinkassé down to Kpale and across the river in canoes to Chanchango. From there, the gallons are loaded onto tricycles and transported to bigger towns such as Gbintri, Chereponi, Nakpanduri, Nelerigu, and Tamale. Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, phone conversation, February 2024.

hubs for fuel in the region.<sup>33</sup> Yet at the time of research, an end to the fuel subsidy in Nigeria has disrupted these operations.<sup>34</sup> This is seen most clearly in Pulmakom in the Upper East Region of Ghana, where fluctuating fuel prices led to a reported slowdown in smuggling activity in 2023.

## Markets and trade patterns in the Chereponi border region



**Figure 9.** Map of trade routes in the Chereponi district and its surroundings

A second trading ecosystem exists further south, in the area between Mango (Savanes, Togo) and Chereponi (see Figure 9). Despite receiving less attention in the literature than its northern neighbours, the household survey reveals a high prevalence of cross-border movement, with 77 per cent of respondents reporting they had crossed the border into Burkina Faso or Togo within the previous six months.<sup>35</sup> Among this sample, 26.7 per cent had done so 11 or more times.<sup>36</sup>

33 Nsaibia, H., Beavor, E., and Berger, F. 'Non-state Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM),' (Genève: Global Initiative and ACLED, 2023), <https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JNIM-Non-state-armed-groups-and-illicit-economiesin-wWest-Africa-GI-TOC-ACLED-October-2023.pdf>.

34 This is a highly scrutinised issue. At time of publication, public pressure remained on re-instating the subsidy.

35 Q15, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

36 Q16, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

More respondents frequently crossed borders in the Chereponi region than the Bawku region, according to data collected for this report. This highlights the importance of cross-border access for this region's smaller markets and communities. As with data from the rest of Ghana, most residents of this region have family and friends that live and work on both sides of the borders; they travel mainly to visit loved ones and trade in these markets.<sup>37</sup>

In the Chereponi border region, essential commodities such as grains (maize, rice), legumes (soya, sesame, Bambara beans), and cattle flow between secondary markets like those of Mango, Chereponi, Wenchiki, and Sanguli.<sup>38</sup> Small villages supply and transport goods to the region's main towns on either side of the border on market days. Communities buy agricultural products for their daily provisions; traders also buy in bulk in secondary markets and sell then in primary markets at higher prices.<sup>39</sup>

Poor infrastructure – including underdeveloped road networks consisting of dirt tracks, and makeshift river crossings during the rainy season in Ghana's North East Region – make it challenging for many local traders to move goods from their point of origin to markets. Most move between the markets on small vehicles, such as motorbikes and tricycles (known as 'motorkings'), or by canoe when the river floods.<sup>40</sup>



Credits: Clingendael, 2024

## Figure 10. Traders crossing the Oti River from Chanchango between Ghana and Togo

37 Q17, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

38 KII respondents were asked, "What are the three major goods that are bought and sold in this trade centre?" These goods listed are the most common answers. KIIs, North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

39 Hildebrandt, N., Nyarko, Y., Romagnoli, G. and Soldani, E. (2021), 'Price Information, Inter-Village Networks, and 'Bargaining Spillovers': Experimental Evidence from Ghana', *NYU Stern School of Business Research Paper Series*, 8 January 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3694558>.

40 This finding emerged in both the qualitative and quantitative studies. Within the KIIs, half of all respondents reported that commercial motorcycles were their primary mode of travel. This was also the most common mode of transport reported by respondents of the household survey (24%), followed by walking (19.3%), then boat (16.7%). Trucks are used less frequently, but when they are, they are usually used by people travelling further distances, such as from Accra and Kumasi. Q22, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.



Credits: Satellite Image © Planet Labs PBS 2024

**Figure 11.** Chereponi forest river crossing, Ghana, March 2024

Underdevelopment does not necessarily constrain cross-border movement. Instead, people find ways to adjust: 43% of survey respondents said they rely on informal trading routes to carry out trade (see Figures 10 and 11).<sup>41</sup>

For example, the Yendi–Yawgu road in the Chereponi district is an approved crossing into Togo. However, travellers often opt for numerous unapproved routes to circumvent the checkpoint in Wanjaga.<sup>42</sup> A little further to the south, travellers can avoid the Ghana Immigration Services (GIS) in Chanchango by travelling through the Chereponi forest, which hugs the border with Togo and is less policed owing to its dense vegetation.<sup>43</sup>

41 25% of respondents answered that they chose informal rather than formal routes to cross the borders because they are shorter; 16.7% reported choosing informal routes because they are less costly. Q26b, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

42 The route goes from Chereponi–Kudani–Kpani–Wanjuga–Yawgu. Having crossed into Togo, travellers move along the RN23 to Mango and up the N1 to Cinkassé. Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, phone conversation, February 2024.

43 Another route from Ghana into Togo is from Chereponi to Naturi, on to Chanchango, and then across the Oti River to Kpale. The Ghana revenue checkpoint is located in Naturi. GIS is found a few kilometres ahead, between Naturi and Chanchango. Guards often stop motor riders and ask them whether their business is trading or farming before deciding whether to ask for money or not. Moving across the river into Kpale, all checkpoints are controlled by Togolese government forces. Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, February 2024.

Despite the popularity of trading across unapproved routes, the qualitative and quantitative data offered little information on illicit activities in this second trading ecosystem. However, expert interviews suggest that this area remains a popular route for fuel smugglers.<sup>44</sup>

## The role of communities in cross-border trade

Various segments of the population play a role in this region's broader value chain – from traders negotiating reciprocal arrangements to individuals transporting goods between markets.<sup>45</sup> There does not appear to be a monopoly by certain ethnic groups over specific goods; rather, the trading landscape is shaped by different ethnic groups.<sup>46</sup> According to one FGD participant, local community members “trade peacefully amongst themselves and are happy about the current state of unity that exists among them.”<sup>47</sup> Middlemen and brokers are crucial in this environment. Found along trade routes and market settings, they facilitate the trade of certain goods,<sup>48</sup> and negotiate favourable deals on behalf of various social groups. For example, ethnic Akan and Ga traders from Accra and Kumasi are known to leverage and broker relationships with ethnic Anufo and Konkombas to help arrange commercial transactions with other Togolese traders.<sup>49</sup> These types of middlemen often have significant influence within trade networks, can influence trade dynamics, and aid in resolving disputes with the help of relevant authorities.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, gender dynamics are at work. In both the Bawku and Chereponi border regions, women are predominantly involved in the supply, sale, and purchase of short-haul agricultural and consumable goods.<sup>51</sup> As an assemblyman from Bawku said: “You know the soy, the millet, the maize – those things are only for women.”<sup>52</sup> Women are key actors within the trading ecosystem, but have limited travel capacity given their need to return home and manage the household.<sup>53</sup> Men travel further in trade, participating in

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44 Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, February 2024.

45 Sundong, S. N. (2005), ‘Vulnerability, poverty and HIV/AIDS in Bawku east municipality of Northern Ghana’ (Masters' Thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2005).

46 In Ghana's North East Region, for example, the interaction between Togolese and Ghanaian communities in trading activities contributes to the vibrant and inclusive nature of these markets. In Chereponi, all ethnic groups are involved in cross-border trade. This includes the Anufo (Chokosi), Konkomba, Bimoaba (Moba), Hausa, and Dagomba. The same is true on the other side of the border in Togo. An exception is found in Bawku, where patronage hews ethnic lines and people choose which of the two markets to go to accordingly.

47 This is especially prevalent in the trade of cattle. FGD, Togolese women, and under-represented groups, Chereponi, North East, Ghana, January 2024.

48 Respondents in Bunkpurugu, Chereponi, and Biankori explicitly mentioned the role of the middleman in trading interactions. The advantage is that they are closely connected to local authorities, such as police, assemblymen, and immigration officers. KIIs conducted in Upper East and North East Ghana throughout December 2023.

49 KII, female trader, Chereponi, North East, December 2023.

50 These individuals are brokers and intermediaries who are dominant actors in the market. They are local residents or individuals from neighbouring communities or countries with deep, established networks in the area. They leverage their knowledge and contacts to facilitate trade between buyers and sellers. Such individuals influence pricing mechanisms at the market and have faced scrutiny recently amid a general crisis of food price hikes. See, Hildebrandt et al., ‘Experimental Evidence from Ghana’; Arhinful, E.K. ‘Food prices down; ‘middlemen’ profiteering from Ghanaians – Agric Minister laments,’ Joy News, 28 November 2023, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/food-prices-down-middlemen-profiteering-from-ghanaians-agric-minister-laments/>; Jonny-Nuekpe, W. ‘Farmers win war against middlemen,’ *Business & Financial Times*, 28 July 2023, <https://thebftonline.com/2021/07/28/farmers-win-war-against-middlemen/>.

51 KII respondents were asked which groups bring, sell, and buy specific products to the market. Women were consistently listed as those responsible for short-haul trade. Findings from both the KIIs and FGDs confirm this.

52 KII, male assemblyman, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, 14 December 2023.

53 OECD and Sahel and West Africa Club, ‘Women and Trade Networks in West Africa’ (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/7d67b61d-en>.

long-haul commerce that reaches the larger regional markets.<sup>54</sup> Men are also the primary actors involved in the motorcycle and livestock trades, which involve longer journeys and, sometimes, more violent actors, particularly due to the risk of cattle rustling.

The specificities of cattle trading lie beyond the purview of this study. However, some basic details are relevant due to their impact on local livelihoods and VEO financing. There are longstanding cattle trade networks from Mali's Sikasso Region to Nigeria through Ghana, Togo, and Benin. This includes cattle trading from Sikasso towards Cinkassé. However, this trade is under threat as these corridors intersect with areas of VEO activity around Bittou (Burkina Faso) and threat thereof (in Bawku).<sup>55</sup> More specifically, men's habitual involvement in long-haul trading may be changing. Some men report that they are now trading in agricultural products as they seek more reliable income.

## Factors impacting cross-border livelihoods

People in the border regions of Bawku and Chereponi face numerous economic and mobility challenges that are forcing them to adjust their previous ways of operating. As one KII in Bawku said: "The businesses have [recoiled] and things are not moving....It's hard to feed [one's] family and those kind of things."<sup>56</sup>

Three key factors, in particular, present mounting challenges to livelihoods explored in this subsection:

1. The evolving security situation amid disruptions caused by VEOs
2. Security responses that impact people's mobility and earning capabilities
3. The impact of regional and global economic trends, which are being exacerbated by various governmental decisions aimed at addressing broader, system-level crises

### Factor 1: Disruption caused by VEOs

The disruption caused by VEOs is felt in the Bawku border region trading centre due to its proximity to established areas of VEO activity in both Burkina Faso and Togo. VEO activity here is driven by a regional katiba (a military brigade) of JNIM. While Ghana has, at time of writing, been spared VEO-linked violence and attacks, this report's area of focus is adjacent to areas of significant activity attributed to JNIM's local

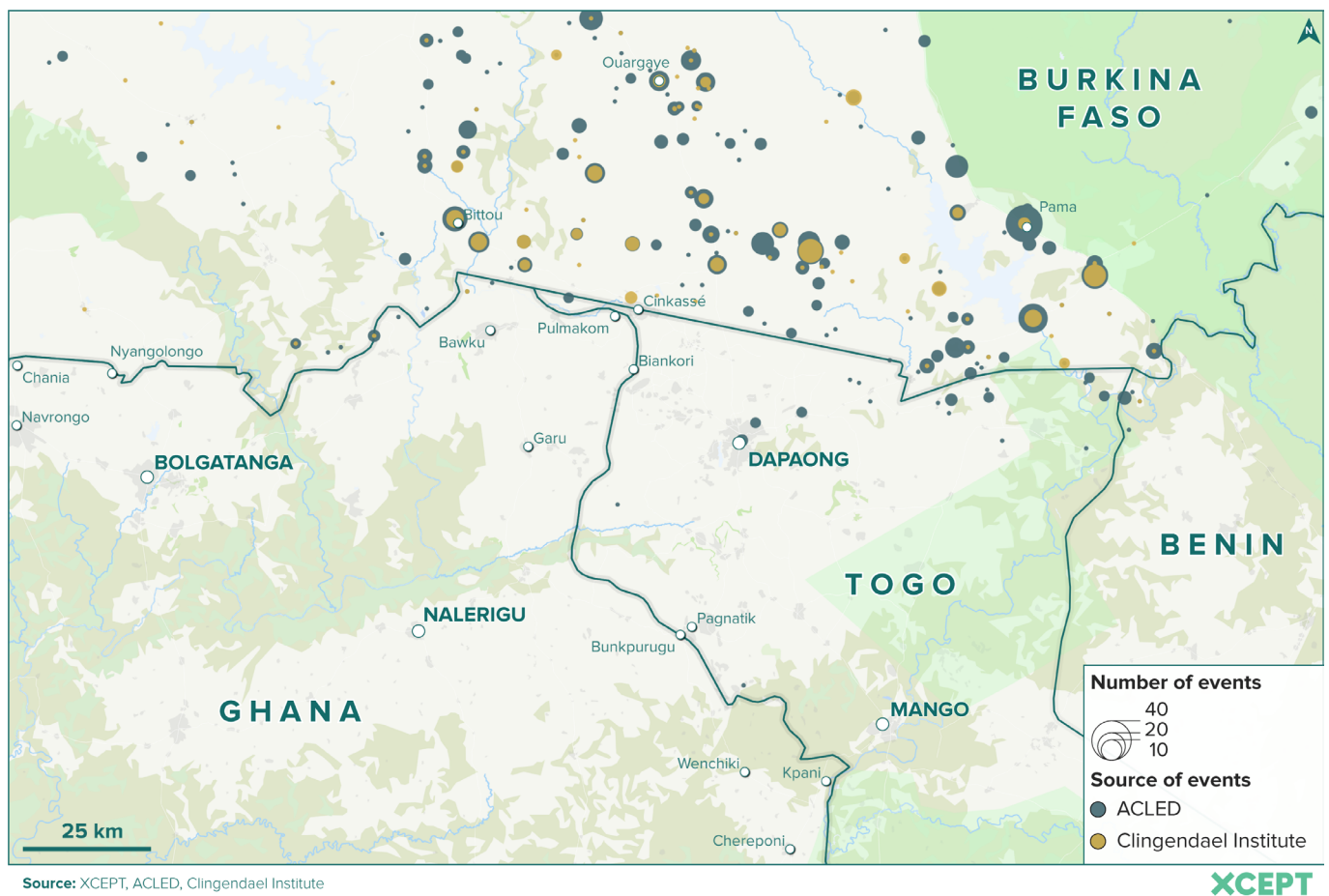
54 This was confirmed in the KIIs. In the FGDs, participants explained that men buy from women, often in bulk, in smaller markets and carry the goods to the bigger markets further away. FGDs, Upper East and North East, January 2024.

55 A number of studies point to JNIM's engagement in cattle rustling to fund their operations. See, Berger, F., (2023), 'Locked Horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy' (Genève: Global Initiative, March 2023), <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Flore-Berger-Locked-horns-Cattle-rustling-and-Malis-war-economy-March-2023.pdf> and Ani, N.C., (2023), Economic warfare in southern Mali: intersections between illicit economies and violent extremism (Dakar, Institute for Security Studies, December 2023), <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/economic-warfare-in-southern-mali-intersections-between-illicit-economies-and-violent-extremism>.

56 KII, Ghanaian opinion leader, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, 16 December 2023.

cells. The group is primarily based around Komienga in the Est Region of Burkina Faso, but its area of operation expands into the Atacora department in northwest Benin, Togo's Savanes Region, primarily around the Kpendjal and Tône prefectures, and the Centre-Est Region of Burkina Faso.<sup>57</sup>

There is a JNIM markaz (a sub-regional civil-military unit) in southern Burkina Faso with a base camp close to Kangamore with operational reach into the Bittou municipal area.<sup>58</sup> This markaz also operates in the Cinkassé and Tône prefectures of the Savanes Region of Togo. There are early indications of another cell emerging in the Oti prefecture of Togo, as indicated by reports of local recruitment since mid-2022, along with some violent incidents throughout 2023 and 2024.<sup>59</sup>



**Figure 12.** VEO activity in this chapter's area of focus (2022-2024)

- 57 In 2019, a cell was established in the Centre-Sud Region, based in the Nazinga forest. The cell was dismantled in 2020/2021 by pro-state militias (combined traditional hunters and self-defence groups) and army operations. Interview with security analyst, phone conversation, October 2023.
- 58 The markaz consists of several hundred fighters and is responsible for most of JNIM's activity in the Centre-Est Region. There are indications that a small sub-unit operates more discreetly in the Centre-Sud region (from Bagre to Goyenga). A second group is a more or less defunct cell that had some open activity around September 2022 in the Kabore Tambi complex – a forest reserve – in Burkina Faso. The group faced serious logistical issues, and it was reported that some members had died of starvation; one individual was apprehended by the Burkinabé security forces. Interview with security analyst, phone conversation, October 2023.
- 59 Tanko, E. 'Residents of border communities in Togo flee to North East Region after terrorist attack,' *Joy News*, 6 March 2024, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/residents-of-border-communities-in-togo-flee-to-north-east-region-after-terrorist-attack/>.

This research study found evidence of JNIM's capacity to reach into Ghana, through its previous establishment of rear bases on the border and deeper inside the country (see Chapter 2 and 3 for more details on JNIM activity in the Wa, Hamile, and Paga border regions).

Militants have been sighted in towns hugging Ghana's northern border with Burkina Faso, including Pusiga, Sapelliga, Widana, Ghana Last, Pulmakom, and Kulungugu (see Figure 12).<sup>60</sup> Additionally, in January 2024, JNIM blocked the road between Cinkassé and Bittou (often referred to as 'road cutting'), but operated the attack out of Ghana Last in Ghana.<sup>61</sup> This highlights the group's capacity to penetrate Ghana. The nearby presence of JNIM in Burkina Faso has focused attention on Bawku. Here, volatile divisions between ethnic groups, competition for resources, and an ongoing chieftaincy conflict between ethnic Mamprusi and Kusasi heightened tensions in the city,<sup>62</sup> providing ample fault lines for JNIM to exploit and recruit locally.<sup>63</sup> Violence between warring parties and general insecurity have become so severe that some avoid travelling to Bawku all together.

## The involvement of violent extremists in cross-border trade

However, the extent to which actors such as JNIM could exacerbate tensions by offering incentives to harness support locally and expand their influence remains unclear. When asked about recruitment, no respondents had evidence of ongoing local recruitment.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, other research has demonstrated that, to date, there is no clear indication of infiltration in Bawku.<sup>65</sup>

JNIM has a significant presence around Bittou (Burkina Faso). This has directly influenced the direction of trading routes and the way people navigate them.<sup>66</sup> As one key informant wrote: "Trading across these three borders has been profitable over the years, but the activities of the jihadists have destroyed all of this".<sup>67</sup>

This study sought to understand the extent to which VEOs are directly impacting the movement of goods and people across borders to finance their activities through the same trade networks. However, there was no evidence of this dynamic in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions based on the qualitative data, and no clear linkage between VEOs and these value chains. Moreover, 63 key informants

60 Some ACLED examples point to this. For example, in June 2022, around 100 suspected militants were spotted near Pulmakom (Puisga, Upper East). On 13 August 2023, militants were seen in Bador (Pusiga, Upper East). See ACLED database.

61 Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, phone conversation, February 2024.

62 Courtright, J. (2023), 'A Small Town in Ghana Erupted in Violence. Were Jihadists Fueling the Fight?', *New Lines Magazine*, 25 January 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/a-small-town-in-ghana-erupted-in-violence-were-jihadists-fueling-the-fight/>.

63 In his 2024 address to the nation, Ghanaian President Akufo-Addo described the town as an "alluring magnet to mischief makers and extremists operating a few kilometres across from the border," Ghana News Agency, 'Full text: President Akufo-Addo's 2024 State of the Nation Address,' 27 February 2024, <https://gna.org.gh/2024/02/full-text-president-akufo-addos-2024-state-of-the-nation-address/>.

64 KIs and FGDs, Upper East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

65 Courtright, J. (2023), 'A Small Town in Ghana Erupted in Violence. Jihadists Fueling the Fight?'

66 Beevor, E. 'Le JNIM au Faso: Un acteur stratégique de la criminalité,' (Genève: Global Initiative, 2022), [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Burkina-Faso-JNIM\\_NEW-web.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Burkina-Faso-JNIM_NEW-web.pdf).

67 FGD, Togolese women, and under-represented groups, Chereponi. Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.

interviewed in the region denied any involvement with illicit actors and VEOs.<sup>68</sup> Only five of the 70 respondents described suspicious persons as violent extremists (as opposed to bandits or communal militias).<sup>69</sup> In fact, it was clear from qualitative interviews that most reports about VEO presence and activities are based largely on unconfirmed rumours.<sup>70</sup> Data offer only isolated anecdotes that suggest VEOs are deliberately disrupting trade flows (as also indicated across the other three research areas in this study). However, VEOs were not reported to have imposed any structural control over checkpoints, although armed groups occasionally ambush the N16 road that connects Cinkassé to Bittou.

VEOs have not attempted to monopolise or claim trading routes in the areas focused on in this study, according to interviews.<sup>71</sup> The targeting of traders or looting of goods occurs spontaneously, rather than as orchestrated, strategic disruption by highly organised networks.

## Mobility restricted and safety threatened by disruption along trade routes

Although data do not confirm the direct impact of VEOs on trade, the activities of VEOs along main trading routes endanger people and restrict their mobility. Traders and market-goers in Bawku emphasised the disruption that VEOs cause near markets in Boulgou Province, Burkina Faso. They described their fears of travelling to markets like Bittou, and of encountering dead bodies – victims of VEO violence – on the road during market days. They also spoke of witnessing explosions, ambushes, and other violent incidents that force businesses and markets to close.<sup>72</sup>

VEOs have often been seen travelling along the N16, looting and ambushing individual traders on the road. For example, on 28 January 2024, eight people were killed on the highway when militants ambushed trucks and civilian vehicles in Noaho.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, VEOs appear to treat traders differently based on gender. Women in one focus group reported that some militants targeted men, restricting their ability to do business in Burkina Faso. “The jihadists hate the sight of men and so it is we women who are still able to go and trade in these places,” one woman said.<sup>74</sup> JNIM has been known to avoid violence against women, especially in the early days of an insurgency, to avoid clashing with the local population directly over cultural and social norms.<sup>75</sup>

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68 Low reporting of VEO presence and activity could be due to people’s fear of reprisal when they cross into Burkina Faso, potentially leading them to downplay the threat. However, the significant number of individuals expressing the same view corroborates the notion that VEOs do not have a well-established involvement in this domain. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

69 The common term used by respondents was “jihadist.” See KII, Ghanaian cattle trader, Chereponi, North East, December 2023. These respondents were in Bawku, Chereponi, and Pulmakom. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

70 When referring to any VEO, militant, or extremist, respondents framed them as exogenous entities operating only across the border. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

71 A security officer in Bawku confirmed that he had never seen VEOs involved in trading activities. KII, Ghanaian security officer, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, 5 February 2024.

72 Insights come from discussions during two FGDs conducted in Bawku, Upper East. First, an FGD with Ghanaian social and community actors, and a second with Ghanaian women and under-represented groups, both in Bawku Upper East, Ghana, 4 and 5 January 2024.

73 Also, on 6 August 2023, presumed JNIM militants carried out attacks against two minibuses (DINA) and vehicles on the national road N16, in the village of Noaho (Bittou, Boulgou). Twenty-five civilians were killed, and one was injured. See ACLED.

74 FGD, Togolese women, and under-represented groups, Chereponi, North East, Ghana, 5 January 2024.

75 Abatan, J.E. (2023), ‘Women at the heart of Boko Haram and katiba Macina,’ *Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa*, 13 April 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/women-at-the-heart-of-boko-haram-and-katiba-macina>.

Increased VEO-linked violence in the Sahel has also impacted the supply of goods from the Sahel into markets. For example, Bawku, once a prominent trading hub, has declined in popularity due to ongoing violence in neighbouring areas, prompting traders to explore alternative markets, such as those in Pusiga (Upper East) and Chereponi (North East).<sup>76</sup> In Mognori, which has a secondary market served by both Bawku and Bittou (see Figure 8, page 12), spiralling violence has brought trading flows to a standstill, causing Burkinabé and other Sahelians to restrict travel outside their communities.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, VEO-linked violence along the Bawku–Pulmakom–Bolgatanga road is leading truck drivers who participate in long-haul trade between the Sahel and Tamale (Ghana) to reportedly drive, instead, along the eastern corridor (through Barikosi and Mango along the R9 and N2).<sup>78</sup> According to focus group participants, some VEOs in Burkina Faso are reportedly inspecting documentation, and permitting those with Ghanaian ID cards to proceed without disturbance. People are increasingly inclined to carry or obtain Ghanaian ID cards as a safety measure, although more research is needed into this behaviour; more detail on this dynamic is provided in Chapter 3.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, only 10 per cent of interviewees in this area expressed fear about activities of VEOs and concerns about encountering them on the road.<sup>80</sup> However, the shrinking supply of market goods is one indicator that related disruptions are affecting people’s ability to trade and earn a living. A second indicator is that people are modifying their trading patterns, including Ghanaian traders who are deliberately choosing to travel in smaller numbers to avoid unwanted attention from armed groups.<sup>81</sup> These adjustments may mitigate risk, but they also negatively impact traders’ ability to earn money.<sup>82</sup> Some have simply abandoned their cross-border movements, and report struggling to make ends meet as a result.<sup>83</sup>

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- 76 This was a key finding from the KIIs shared by Ghanaian and Togolese traders and marketgoers alike in Upper East. In addition, FGD participants in Bawku confirmed that the town receives fewer cross-border traders these days. FGD, community and social actors, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, 4 January 2024.
- 77 Insights come from discussions during two FGDs conducted in Bawku, Upper East. First, an FGD with Ghanaian social and community actors, and a second with Ghanaian women and under-represented groups, both in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.
- 78 Elsewhere, the ongoing blockade in Djibo (Burkina Faso) has prompted onion traders to explore longer routes that circumvent VEO hotspots, such as the Yammy ‘Niamey’ route through Nigeria. Insights come from discussions during two FGDs conducted in Bawku, Upper East: first, an FGD with Ghanaian social and community actors, and a second with Ghanaian women and under-represented groups, both in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.
- 79 FGD participants noted that community members seek or carry Ghanaian ID cards to reduce the risk of harassment by VEOs in Burkina Faso, even though this behaviour was not mentioned by KII respondents. Participants in three FGDs discussed the practice, including Bawku community and social actors, Bawku women and under-represented groups, and Pulmakom women and under-represented groups. FGDs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024. It was also a point raised in the expert interviews, September 2023 and February 2024.
- 80 Fear of VEO activities and the risk of encountering them while travelling was expressed primarily by traders, as well as a tricycle driver, an okada driver, and a farmer interviewed in Bawku, Biankori, Bunkpurugu, and Chereponi in Upper East and North East Ghana (December 2023). Similar views were also shared in FGDs: one with Ghanaian social and community actors and another with women and under-represented groups, both conducted in Pulmakom, Upper East, Ghana (January 2024).
- 81 As one Ghanaian shared during an FGD, “In case one vehicle is attacked, the others can survive.” Similar insights emerged during the FGDs. FGD discussions with Ghanaian social and community actors and Ghanaian women and under-represented groups in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.
- 82 Respondents in all areas noted that business was harder at present than in the previous year. KIIs and FGDs conducted across Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.
- 83 As highlighted earlier, trade in Mognori has slowed because of trading flows being re-routed between Bittou to Bawku. Focus group respondents complained about the impacts on their livelihoods as a result (FGDs with Ghanaian social and community actors, and Ghanaian women and under-represented groups, both in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024).

## VEO encroachment in the Chereponi border region?

There are nascent signs of VEO activity in the area between Ghana's northeastern districts and Togo's western prefectures. The research was particularly alarming with regards to the Chereponi district, given VEO activity in Togo and concerns that violence will spill into Ghana.

Qualitative interviews revealed that both Ghanaian and Togolese communities are cautious about travelling within Togo following recent attacks in the area, and are changing their trade routes to bypass areas deemed too risky.<sup>84</sup> An attack on 5 March 2024 in Nagudi (Togo) by unknown assailants underlines the volatility.<sup>85</sup>

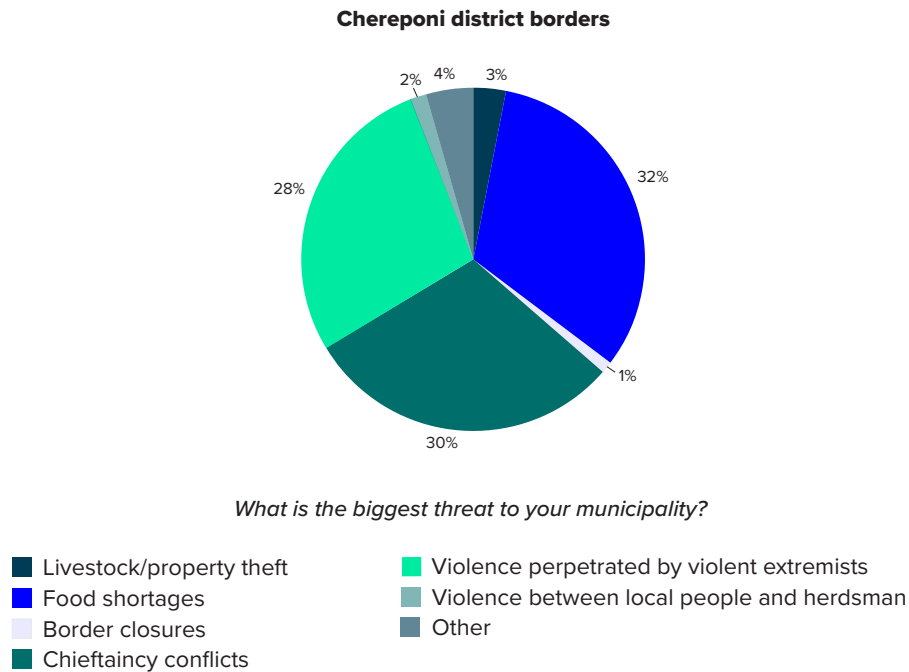
The threat is not limited to Togo. Expert interviews indicate that the eastern corridor where Chereponi district is located is also at risk of violent extremist encroachment.<sup>86</sup> Various arrests of suspected militants have been made in the past year. For example, in February 2024, security forces arrested two suspects close to the banks of the Oti River near Kpani.<sup>87</sup>

Most people (60 per cent) living in communities in the Chereponi border region feel unsafe or very unsafe due to the increasing threat of armed groups, according to the household survey.<sup>88</sup> Interviewees also spoke of bandits that target traders near settlements on the outskirts of town, such as along the road from Gusheigu.<sup>89</sup> There are indications that these bandits originate from Togo and Burkina Faso and had links with a JNIM recruiter who was operating in the area in July 2022.

Over one-quarter (28 per cent) of respondents cited VEO violence as one of the biggest threats to their municipality (see Figure 13), more significant than chieftaincy conflicts and food shortages.<sup>90</sup>

There are persistent rumours related to a suspicious group along the Yendi-Yawku road that engages in banditry aimed at road users, wealthy merchants, and fuel. This group may have links to VEOs elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> If so, it would be a significant and worrying indication of VEO activity, which could lead to broader destabilisation.

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- 84 This emerged across the KII and FGD sample in the North East Region, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024. The respondents were asked how trade centres are connected with communities on the other side of the border, how life has changed in the past year, in terms of being able to travel over the border and buy and sell goods, and what difficulties in trade and cross-border movement they had experienced in the past year.
- 85 Osei, Leticia. 'Over 200 people flee suspected attack in Togolese town, seek refuge in North East Region'. Citi Newsroom. 7 March 2024.
- 86 Key expert interviews with security analysts and development experts in Accra and Tamale in November and December 2023.
- 87 Report by security specialist, February 2024.
- 88 Insights from household study, conducted between February–March 2024.
- 89 KII respondents, including traders and farmers in Pulmakom and Chereponi, referred to this when asked whether the presence of armed groups or security activity has impacted work and regular activities. KII, North East, Ghana, December 2023. This finding was also reported by a security specialist in February 2024.
- 90 Insights from household study, conducted between February–March 2024.
- 91 Within the interview setting, not all respondents made the distinction between different armed group categories (VEOs, bandits, militias). It should be noted that low reporting of presence and activities in data may be because traders are fearful of any reprisal when they cross into Burkina Faso. It is therefore possible that they downplay the threat.



**Figure 13.** Respondent perceptions of the biggest threats to the municipality

## Factor 2: Disruption caused by state security response

While attention is often focused on non-state armed groups and their impact on communities, this study finds that the response of state security forces to the threat of border violence can have consequences that are just as damaging. Since 2022, a much higher number of state security personnel have been deployed to the Bawku border region in greater numbers (see summary report).<sup>92</sup> Whilst there, they engage in activities that are intended to enhance security and protect communities, including conducting frequent patrols, and both establishing and reinforcing checkpoints, which are regularly staffed with immigration and army units at border crossings.<sup>93</sup> These measures may foster a sense of safety and legitimacy among local communities: 64 per cent of household survey respondents said they trusted the army “a lot” or “completely,” comparing them to local customary figures such as village chiefs and community elders.<sup>94</sup> Qualitative data corroborate this finding, with respondents expressing appreciation

92 Ministry of the Interior - Republic of Ghana, ‘Government Taking Measures To Strengthen Border Management – Interior Chief Director,’ 30 August 2023, <https://www.mint.gov.gh/government-taking-measures-to-dtrenchen-border-management-interior-chief-director/>.

93 For example, following the death of an immigration officer in April 2023, 1,000 security officers were deployed to Upper East. Rumours circulated that the death was connected to Bawku’s ongoing chieftaincy conflict and that the gunmen allegedly came from Burkina Faso; Mensah, K. (2023). ‘A decades-long ethnic conflict in Ghana is at risk of escalation from foreign fighters,’ *Semafor Africa*, 18 February 2023, <https://www.semafor.com/article/02/17/2023/ghana-fears-burkina-faso-jihadists-crossing-border-to-join-old-ethnic-conflict>.

94 Data were collected in Ghana, but the questions asked were broadly of security forces, not only of those from Ghanaian establishments. In their answers, key informants were not asked to specify which national body they were referring to, so insights cannot be extrapolated about differences in perceptions held around Ghanaian, Togolese, or Burkinabé security forces operating in these areas. Only 26.3% of respondents reported not trusting the army “at all” or only trusting them “a little bit”, while 68% of respondents reported trusting the village chief “completely” or “a lot”. The figure was at 66.4% for community elders. Q38, HHS, Upper East and North East, Ghana, February 2024.

for security operations aimed at offering protection locally.<sup>95</sup> As a Ghanaian tricycle driver in Bawku explained: “With the presence of the security, when we sleep, we can sleep soundly”.<sup>96</sup>

People overwhelmingly turn to security forces first to report concerns, indicating high levels of trust and confidence, according to the household surveys and qualitative data.<sup>97</sup> Security forces enjoy high levels of legitimacy.<sup>98</sup> There was broad consensus among survey respondents about the importance of state security forces – the police, the military, and customs agents – in improving border security.<sup>99</sup>

However, these positive perceptions of security and government officials wane when their actions directly affect people’s mobility and economic opportunities. Customs and immigration officers face criticism for their conduct at border crossings and checkpoints along the road, especially when they are corrupt. Survey respondents criticised customs and immigration officers the most for impeding their livelihoods by obstructing or slowing their cross-border movement.<sup>100</sup>

In Ghana's North East Region, respondents said these officials hinder cross-border activities more than they help them.<sup>101</sup> 71 per cent of respondents said they had been asked to make an informal payment, such as a bribe, when crossing the border;<sup>102</sup> 65 per cent of respondents identified customs and immigration officers as the officials requesting the payments.<sup>103</sup> This was reported in both the Bawku and the Chereponi border regions. While a standard charge or duty is levied on cross-border trade depending on the bulk of the item, many traders reported being forced to pay bribes or unexplained charges to security forces without receiving a receipt or evidence of a formal fee.<sup>104</sup> Instead, the fees appear to be predictable and arbitrary, ranging from 10–50 Ghanaian Cedi (GHS) (£0.5–3).<sup>105</sup> As one trader in Bawku

95 Twenty-five KII respondents shared that the presence of security forces helped them to feel safe, when asked whether the presence of security outfits had impacted their work and regular activities. Eight referred explicitly to their role ensuring peace. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024. Male traders and businesswoman participating in focus groups in Bawku and female traders participating in focus groups in Pulmakom shared similar sentiments

96 KII, Ghanaian tricycle driver, Bawku, Upper East, December 2023.

97 Trust in the security forces has emerged as a theme during FGD discussions with Ghanaian social and community actors and Ghanaian women and under-represented groups in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.

98 Twenty-five KII respondents shared that the presence of security forces helps them to feel safe, when asked whether the presence of security outfits had impacted their work and regular activities. This speaks to the acceptance of their role in security provision (see earlier footnote).

99 Respondents in the household survey selected customs/immigration officers, police, and military personnel as having a role to play in improving security at the border. Q32, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

100 As noted in footnote 90, the nature of the data collection means that insight cannot be extrapolated about different perceptions held concerning Ghanaian, Togolese, or Burkinabé security forces. 65.3% of the respondents in Chereponi and Bunkpurugu districts identified customs and immigration officers as the officials asking for payments. Q29, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

101 46% of respondents reported that customs and immigration officers hinder cross-border activities either “a little” or “a lot”. This is compared with 28% reporting that they help “a little” or “a lot”. Q31, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

102 Q28, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

103 By contrast, only 4% of respondents cited police and military personnel as responsible. Q29, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

104 Over half of the KII respondents in Pulmakom and Bunkpurugu said they faced issues at the border. FGD participants confirmed that these charges fluctuate (FGD, women and under-represented groups, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, 5 January 2024). Participants in the Bawku FGD referred to immigration officers charging for traders to pass into Bawku (FGD, women, and under-represented groups, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024).

105 The answers of KII respondents in Upper East and North East varied. Most cited paying around 20–30 GHS (US\$1.20–1.90), although some people report having to pay more than 100 GHS (a little over US\$6). KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

said: “We all buy our goods from neighbouring countries, and I can tell you that now, it is not easy. It used to not be so in the previous years, but now, the charges on the routes are too much”.<sup>106</sup>

Traders also reported facing more checkpoints and being asked for more documentation than in previous years during their daily travels.<sup>107</sup> The price shock can be substantial for those involved in short-haul (local and often small-level) trading. Women in particular are reportedly forced to pay bribes more than men when crossing the border,<sup>108</sup> further limiting their livelihoods.<sup>109</sup> Some fees are so high that people decide to return home and miss the market because they cannot afford to pay the bribes.<sup>110</sup> Bribes imposed by officials are particularly responsible for people using unapproved routes to bypass them, according to the research.<sup>111</sup> The presence of these checkpoints has therefore inadvertently fuelled informal trade economies at a time when authorities are trying to control illicit activity more tightly. “Due to the many bribes that traders have to pay before passing through barriers, many have resorted to using unapproved routes,” said an FGD participant.<sup>112</sup>

### Factor 3: Disruption caused by economic turmoil

Violence and corruption greatly impact people’s lives and livelihoods. However, the most disruptive factor is economic stress due to regional and global economic issues that impact currency, trade, and the broader economy.

#### Stressors of ongoing economic crisis

Since 2022, economic conditions across West Africa have worsened. In 2024, inflation in Ghana was over 50 per cent (rising from 40.3 per cent and 31.5 per cent in 2023 and 2022 respectively), its debt stock had risen more than 7,000 per cent since 2006, and its real growth numbers shrunk since 2022.<sup>113</sup>

The depreciation of the Ghanaian Cedi affects border communities because it diminishes their purchasing power and disrupts their ability to operate and earn (see Figure 14, where the percentage of

106 KII, female Ghanaian trader, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, December 2023.

107 This emerged across the KII sample when respondents were asked what difficulties they had experienced in the past year. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

108 In the HHS, both male and female respondents reported that extortion of money when crossing the border is the main challenge that women face. In North East, in particular, 45.3% of respondents cited this as the main challenge. The second most common challenge is experiencing verbal abuse; 20% of respondents gave this answer in North East. Q30, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

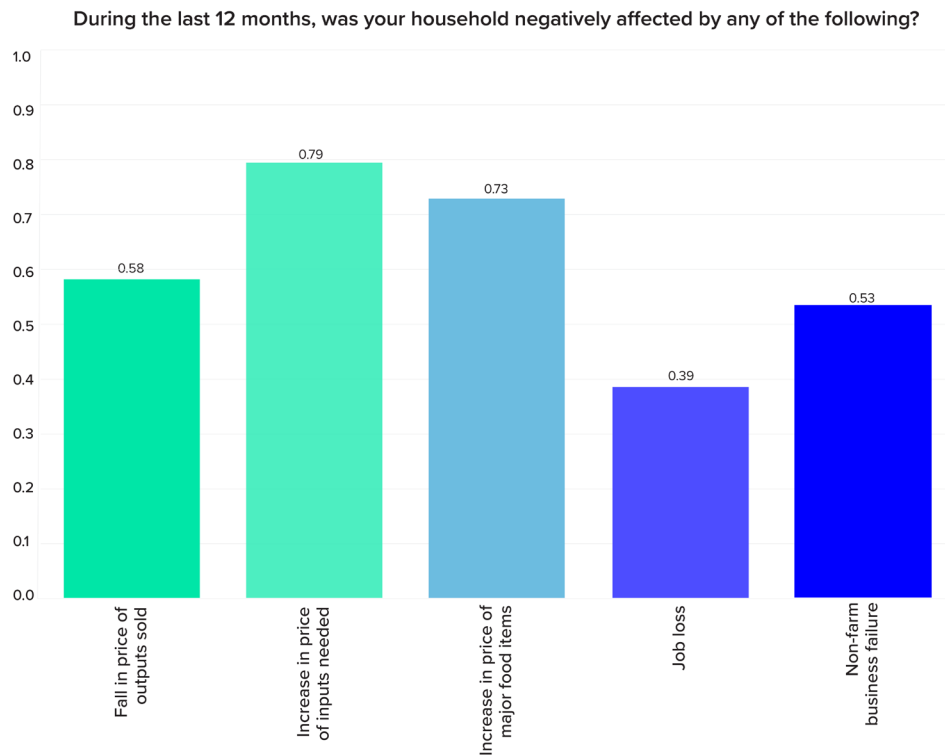
109 Several women in the FGDs in Bawku and Chereponi shared this. FGDs, Ghanaian and Togolese women and under-represented groups, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

110 KII respondents, including traders and farmers in Pulmakom and Chereponi, referred to being unable to continue with their journey due to issues with payment. KII, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023. This finding was confirmed in a focus group with women in Bawku. FGD, women and under-represented groups, Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.

111 Within the FGDs in Pulmakom and Chereponi, participants conceded that traders and drivers resort to using unapproved routes when bribes are too high. FGDs, community and social actors, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December and January 2024.

112 FGD, community and social actors, Pulmakom, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.

113 Naadi, T. (2023), ‘How Ghana’s central bank lost \$5bn in one year,’ BBC News (Accra), 6 October 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-66947202>.



**Figure 14.** Households negatively affected by numerous economic challenges

households responding affirmatively to the question is represented as a decimal value).<sup>114</sup> Over 80 per cent of respondents to the household survey reported increases in the price of food, agriculture, and household products in the previous 12 months.<sup>115</sup> These price hikes affect agricultural yields and business opportunities.<sup>116</sup> Illustrating the dependency on the market for survival, one female trader in Chereponi said that her “life in the last year wasn’t good because there was no good market”.<sup>117</sup> The consequence of this is two-fold. First, markets have fewer products (as exports are more profitable) and what is available is more expensive (as imports are more expensive).<sup>118</sup> Second, people’s living standards are dropping, and border communities are struggling as a result.

<sup>114</sup> Nine respondents across the KIIs (in Chereponi, Garu, and Pulmakom), referred to the issues with the Ghanaian Cedi. As conveyed by a Togolese cattle dealer, converting cedris to CFA to access markets in Togo is like going “into debt” because the cedi has such little value. A Ghanaian cattle dealer in Garu and Togolese traders in Pulmakom conveyed the same message. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023.

<sup>115</sup> 79.3% of respondents reported an increase in the price of inputs needed by household farm or non-farm enterprise. 72.7% of respondents reported food price hikes. Q34, HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

<sup>116</sup> Six KII respondents explicitly referred to business slowing down. The 47 KII respondents citing financial difficulties as their main source of stress all referred to price hikes, limited availability of products, and fluctuating trading opportunities. This experience is shared across the sample – both Ghanaian and Togolese respondents, ranging from traders, cattle dealers, transport drivers, farmers, and assembly men. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023.

<sup>117</sup> KII, female trader, Chereponi, North East, Ghana, December 2023.

<sup>118</sup> In the KIIs, cattle dealers, farmers, and traders all referred in some way or another to the variability of products at the market and the cost increase. This is a finding across the sample. KIIs, Upper East, North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

Unable to buy and sell as they did before, local traders are forced to adjust accordingly and try to reduce their spending to survive.<sup>119</sup> Providing for families is becoming harder, including the ability to afford school fees.<sup>120</sup> Ensuring one's livelihood dominates the decisions and actions of residents in these regions.<sup>121</sup>

## Navigating constraints due to trade bans

Since 2021, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo – like many other West African countries – have implemented protectionist policies on food staples and agricultural products aimed at building long-term domestic sufficiency in agricultural production and enhancing food security.<sup>122</sup> This has involved restrictions on cereals and fertilisers.<sup>123</sup> The success of these policies is variable: On the one hand, the goal of all three countries is to build long-term domestic sufficiency in agricultural production, and thus enhance food security. On the other hand, bans limit trading opportunities.<sup>124</sup> In what one Togolese trader described as a “killer decision,” bans are often followed by an immediate hike in food prices, which most severely impacts those dependent on these goods for their livelihoods.<sup>125</sup> In the context of this study, the border communities are disproportionately affected by these bans. Ghanaian and Togolese KIIs said they had endured hardship due to the grain bans, preventing them from trading across the border.<sup>126</sup> This has been felt most acutely in the Chereponi border region, where market activities have diminished as a result.<sup>127</sup> Some interviewees have begun to trade in more particular goods like sesame, instead of grains, but have

119 Six KII respondents in Bawku, Chereponi, and Garu explicitly cited the inability to pay school fees as a result of their economic challenges. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023.

120 Ibid.

121 This was particularly pronounced in Bawku, Pulmakom, and Chereponi, where people referred to doing whatever they could to continue to earn. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

122 In September 2021, Ghana introduced an export ban on cereals, including rice and maize. It was extended a year later, following disruption to global food supply chains in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war; Mugabi, I. (2022), ‘Ghana extends ban on grain exports,’ *Deutsche Welle*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ghana-extends-ban-on-grainexports/a-61955785>. While national figures concede that domestic harvesting is essential to the country's economy, the ban has been silently lifted due to the difficulties authorities faced in enforcing it; interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, phone conversation, 5 February 2024. In June 2021, Togo announced restrictions on the import of cereals and root vegetables. Authorisation from the Ministry of Commerce is required to legitimately trade these goods. Dossavi, A.R. ‘Togo : nouveau tour de vis sur les exportations des produits de grande consommation,’ *Togo First*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.togofirst.com/fr/gouvernance-economique/1905-9989-togo-nouveau-tour-de-vis-sur-les-exportations-des-produits-de-grande-consommation>.

123 See, for example: Mugabi, I. (2022), ‘Ghana extends ban on grain exports.’

124 Of those interviewed for this study, respondents in Bunkpurugu, Chereponi, and Wenchiki were most critical of the bans. KIIs, North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

125 FGD, Togolese women and under-represented groups, Chereponi, North East, Ghana, January 2024.

126 One KII respondent shared that they had to sell to those from within the country, such as traders from Kumasi and Accra, rather than in Mango (Togo). KII, Togolese female trader, Wenchiki, North East, Ghana, December 2023. One female trader noted that she had been stopped when travelling between Bunkpurugu to Chereponi (within Ghana), under suspicion that she was seeking to later move onwards to Togo. At the time of collecting data, however, trucks were seen in the area travelling to and from Togo carrying grain. Interview with undisclosed Ghanaian security analyst, phone conversation, February 2024.

127 Four KII respondents in Chereponi referred to the market closing. These were farmers, traders, and cattle dealers. KIIs, North East, Ghana, December 2023.

seen prices skyrocket in this trade as well.<sup>128</sup> Others pointed to the difficulty in sourcing fertiliser, which is affecting their farming outputs and reducing market traffic and flows.<sup>129</sup>

As a result, Ghanaians now feel trapped with fewer business opportunities. Since the cedi depreciated, they have relied on sourcing cereals cheaply in Ghana to sell at a higher price in the West African currency, the CFA, across the border.<sup>130</sup> Such findings speak to the direct impact of cereal restrictions on livelihoods, as any limitation on the movement of goods will disrupt trade, access to essential commodities, and earning potential.

Border communities are vulnerable to economic shocks, particularly due to their limited capacity to recover from financial setbacks. The qualitative study reveals that many individuals have seen worsening conditions year-on-year.<sup>131</sup> Previously, these communities might have been able to implement safeguards ahead of economic downturns and save profits during one season to help through a lean season. However, prolonged economic uncertainty and continued disruptions to cross-border trade make these local coping mechanisms more difficult to sustain, compromising local livelihoods.<sup>132</sup> To cope with these austerity measures, survey respondents explained that they often turn to friends and family for support.<sup>133</sup> Interviewees called on the government for support through this turmoil.<sup>134</sup>

## Considerations for policy and programming

The depth of the economic challenges in these regions highlights the urgent need for more targeted interventions to mitigate the impact of both exogenous and endogenous shocks on livelihoods. The following section reviews programmatic responses to cross-border dynamics and reflects on what is needed in the future.

128 Six KII respondents, all in Chereponi or Bunkpurugu district, referred to changing trade patterns in sesame due to the ban. KIIs, North East, Ghana, December 2023.

129 Notably, five KII respondents in Biankori, Bunkpurugu, and Chereponi referenced the difficulty in procuring enough fertiliser. One assembly leader shared that they are now only able to get five bags when they need double. KII, Ghanaian assembly leader, Biankori, Upper East, Ghana, 15 December 2023; Ghanaian assembly leader, Bunkpurugu, North East, December 2023. A female trader called on the government for support in facilitating their access to supplies. Togolese female trader, Biankoro, Upper East, Ghana, December 2023.

130 KII, Togolese cattler dealer, Chereponi, North East, Ghana, December 2023.

131 As previously indicated, 47 KII respondent complained of financial woes, business downturns, and difficulty sustaining their families. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

132 Less ability to safeguard or buffer against future shocks was implied by KII respondents across the sample when referring to their economic hardship. Four Ghanaian KII respondents (in Bawku, Chereponi, and Garu) and two Togolese respondents (in Pulmakom and Wenchiki) – all traders and cattle dealers – explicitly referred to having less capital to draw on, and the current context making it more difficult to cope. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

133 In Chereponi and Bunkpurugu districts, 63.7% of respondents said that their family and friends help with cross border trade. HHS, North East, Ghana, February 2024.

134 This sentiment cut across the sample. Ghanaian and Togolese traders, farmers, and transport drivers; all called for some kind of support. KIIs, Upper East and North East, December 2023–January 2024.

Several programmes operate concurrently in this region to enhance border security and promote development and cross-border cooperation. The efficacy of border management strategies relies not only on the presence of security forces, but also on the nature of civil-military engagement with local communities. In the Bawku and Chereponi border regions, border management has had negative effects on the local population's lives and livelihoods, and more could be done to offset these.

The research found that border communities appreciate state security personnel for their role in ensuring safety, but tensions arise when their actions impede mobility and economic opportunities. Encouraging activities that leverage existing trust and visibly demonstrate the state's commitment to nurturing safe and prosperous cross-border trade can help in this regard. For example, security forces could provide protection at markets during trading days and along key trade routes, thereby facilitating trade rather than hindering it. Striking a delicate balance between robust security measures and positive community interactions is crucial for the success of future border management programming.

Over one-quarter (26.3 per cent) of respondents in the household study reported that NGOs neither help nor hinder cross-border trade.<sup>135</sup> Among the KIIs and FGDs, most respondents could not name a specific cross-border programme implemented around them.<sup>136</sup> Individuals may be aware of agricultural initiatives or programmes related to youth empowerment, but emphasise their reliance on personal resources (savings or support from their networks) for business.<sup>137</sup> Some KIIs in Ghana compared the aid they receive to the financial support and low-interest loans available in Togo and Burkina Faso and called for something similar to be made available in Ghana.<sup>138</sup> Among the FGDs, participants called for reduced food prices and sustainable job creation.<sup>139</sup>

This reinforces the point that cross-border communities face restrictions along national lines, as access to opportunities and financial assistance is typically granted based on one's country of residence. It also demonstrates that economic woes are at the forefront of people's minds.

Future programming should consciously pursue social resilience and economic recovery strategies that empower local communities (see recommendations in the summary report). Ensuring open, safe, and facilitated channels for economic interactions across borders will encourage economic recovery and social cohesion.

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135 An additional 37% gave no answer at all. Q31, HHS, Upper East and North East, Ghana, February–March 2024.

136 Among the KIIs, 13 respondents couldn't name any ongoing programming. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

137 Programmes identified in the KIIs largely referred to food assistance and agricultural programmes implemented at the community level. SOCO and NCCE were mentioned by three respondents for their training and awareness raising workshops. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

138 This was noted among the Togolese respondents in the KIIs. Many called for governmental and non-governmental support in the form of loans, and referred to what was available in Togo. KIIs, Togolese respondents, Chereponi, other location, North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

139 FGD, women and under-represented groups, Pulmakom, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024. KII respondents in Pulmakom, Chereponi, and Biankori all called for more employment opportunities. KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

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**XCEPT**

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
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