



A political economy analysis of fuel smuggling between Ghana and Burkina Faso

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Overview

Fuel smuggling in the borderlands between Coastal West Africa and the Sahel is widespread. The economic and political effects of smuggling include government revenue loss and funding for illegal activities, but it remains of significant importance to cross-border trade and livelihoods. This political economy analysis (PEA) of fuel smuggling between Paga, Ghana and Pô, Burkina Faso studies the intersections between illicit and licit cross-border trade flows, and the ways in which these flows have been impacted by the expanding presence of violent extremists in the borderlands. This paper is part of a broader study on the economic, social, and political dynamics of communities in the borderlands between the Sahel and Coastal West Africa that rely on fluid cross-border trade and movement for their livelihoods. It finds that this high volume, cross-border trade has both licit and illicit aspects that are intrinsically linked to the socio-economic fabric of these remote communities in rural areas of Coastal West Africa.

Fuel smuggling from Ghana to Burkina Faso is not a fringe activity but rather a well-organised operation

that is deeply entrenched in the region's political and economic fabric.¹ The trade is predominantly controlled by a network of business and political elites, with significant involvement from government and traditional leadership.² Furthermore, fuel smuggling is intertwined with the regular fuel trade, complicating the use of counter-trafficking approaches that can negatively impact the livelihoods of vulnerable groups reliant on this trade. The research findings presented here are based on the available literature - which mostly focuses on the Sahel - and primary interviews with people involved in the trade in the two research locations: Paga, Ghana and Pô, Burkina Faso.

Key findings

- **Fuel smuggling through Ghana into Burkina Faso and the Sahel is a well-coordinated, long-established enterprise.** The illicit fuel trade is intricately linked to powerful stakeholders in Ghana, including political elites, local entrepreneurs and business owners, and government and security officials, who all benefit from the trade continuing (see Figure 1 for a map of smuggling

1 Expert interview with security analyst, Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

2 Expert interview with security analyst, Accra, Ghana, February 2024, corroborated by a general assessment of the KIs and FGDs carried out in Paga, Ghana, in December 2024.

routes).³ Many local people are directly involved, in various roles within the fuel smuggling value chain, to include transferring the fuel from trucks into canisters, and selling the fuel in water bottles on the side of the road. Local and traditional chiefs are also known to act as intermediaries between smugglers and border security officials, facilitating the trade in exchange for royalties and financial assistance.⁴

- **The fuel smuggling trade also benefits local economies indirectly, through ancillary trades that pop up alongside fuel trade routes** to supply food, lodging, and transport to those involved in smuggling. Women in particular benefit from selling food along the routes. The fuel smuggling economy, while illicit, provides livelihoods for many, making it a critical yet controversial aspect of the socio-economic landscape in Ghana. The entrenched nature of these networks poses significant challenges to any efforts aimed at curbing the illegal fuel trade, as it is closely tied to both local survival and high-level corruption.⁵
- **The extent of violent extremist involvement in Ghana's fuel smuggling trade is unclear.** Our findings indicate that violent extremist organizations (VEOs), like other actors, leverage access to illicit fuel smuggling for consumption purposes. However, there is little evidence of violent extremists' strategic engagement in or use of the trade in Ghana, beyond leveraging established smuggling networks for access and resources that support their operations. In the Sahel, however, VEOs have hijacked fuel convoys as a tool of war against Sahelian states and their security forces. These activities directly affect local and transnational fuel supply lines and the trade and livelihoods that depend on them.
- **Policy options for curbing the illicit fuel trade are limited by several factors.** The fuel smuggling economy provides livelihoods for many people, making it a critical yet controversial aspect of the socio-economic landscape in Ghana. It is currently difficult to procure fuel cheaply in northern Ghana due to the current economic downturn and Burkina Faso's restrictions on fuel exports. As a result, fuel smuggling has become an impactful livelihood for many people across rural areas in northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso

– including those who are directly or indirectly involved in the trade, as well as borderland communities that have irregular access to the formal fuel trade, therefore relying on purchasing fuel from illicit traders that set up shops on the side of roads. The illicit fuel trade is also highly profitable, and it is difficult to promote alternative trade in less lucrative commodities. High-level patronage of these activities further entrenches the trade and makes tackling it more complex.

- **The once thriving, high volume fuel smuggling trade has been declining** since 2021-2022. This is primarily due to increased insecurity linked to VEO violence in the Sahel, government crack-downs, and rising fuel prices in Ghana due to inflation, which have made cross-border trade less profitable. Although many local people are still involved, many young people in Ghana who once relied on smuggling for easy income have found themselves disenfranchised, facing an uncertain economic future, and vulnerable to the socio-economic draws towards participating in armed group activity with VEOs.



Figure 1. Fuel smuggling routes from southeastern Ghana into Burkina Faso

3 An assessment of the key informant interviews (KIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) on fuel led to the conclusion – based on comments from all respondents in the research – that the industry is backed by political and business elites who safeguard it from anti-corruption efforts that might try to undo the sector. (25 KIs and 2 FGDs carried out in Paga, Ghana, and Pô, Burkina Faso, from December 2023 to January 2024).

4 Expert interview with fuel middleman, Paga, Ghana February 2024; KII in Bolgatanga, Ghana, December 2024.

5 de Balzac H., Leggett T., Ollivier B., and Patuel F. (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Introduction

In 2016, the African Development Bank estimated that the illicit oil trade in Africa amounted to approximately US\$100 billion in revenue annually, from under-invoicing, theft, corruption, and illegal bunkering (stealing crude oil from ships or oil infrastructure such as pipelines, and then illegally refining it).⁶ In the Sahel (which for the context of this working paper includes northern regions of Ghana reflected in this report, as those regions are intrinsically tied to the cultures, people, language, religions and economies of the Sahel, vis-a-vis the close exchanges these groups have with people across the border in Burkina Faso), licit and illicit fuel consumed combined are estimated in at least \$5 billion annually, which does not even account for fuel traded across the entire West African region, underscoring how robust the trade is.⁷ It is often difficult to differentiate between illegal and legal fuel sales, as the sale of illegally traded oil is so entrenched that ordinary local people and illicit actors alike buy fuel from both formal fuel stations and roadside black market vendors, and many formal fuel stations are themselves involved in illegal trading. Many local people are also involved in fuel smuggling directly (e.g., as smugglers) and indirectly (e.g., selling food to smugglers).

Both the involvement of ordinary people and armed actors in the informal fuel economy that connects northern Ghana to the southern Sahel, as well as the engrained nature of the informal fuel economy throughout specifically northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso, links it intrinsically to other local livelihoods.⁸ This inherent link between formal and informal economies, related to the fuel trade, can be problematic because the illicit trade in goods like fuel has multiple adverse effects on economic development, depriving states of vital tax revenues, while contributing to the resourcing of criminal organisations, non-state actors, and VEOs.⁹ Substantial intersections between the illicit fuel trade and other livelihoods, as well as the involvement of political elites, deepen the trade's economic impacts and make it harder for governments to tackle the

trade, as it is closely tied to both local survival and high-level corruption.¹⁰

Elva Community Engagement conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of Ghana's fuel trade, assessing the northbound movement of fuel from the Port of Tema on Ghana's southeastern coast to the northern border with Burkina Faso. The PEA analyses the intricate fuel smuggling networks that operate between Ghana and neighbouring border communities in Burkina Faso. The research also takes a deeper look at the illicit fuel trade through Gwollu, a town that is located near the larger fuel trafficking centre of Tumu in the Sissala West District of the Upper West Region of Ghana, and is a critical cross-border market town that benefits from the broader illicit fuel trade in this borderland region. We selected Gwollu as a location for data collection due to its proximity to a town where, during the research in 2023, JNIM was interdicted by security forces, indicating a temporary known presence of the group.

Existing research highlights how an analysis of fuel smuggling dynamics can be used to map out power relations in a state, including its institutional capacities to enforce its control of the fuel trade along illicit supply chains.¹¹ Because borderlands in Africa are often areas where competing forms of authority coexist and compete with the state,¹² this PEA was designed to specifically investigate the value chains of fuel smuggling in this cross-border environment, the roles of the diverse actors involved, including armed groups, and the underlying power structures within these smuggling networks.

This working paper is intended to be read alongside 'Life on the line', the larger XCEPT study on borderland economies in coastal West Africa.

Methodology: This PEA draws on mixed-methods research, including 33 key informant interviews (KIIS) and 3 focus group discussions conducted in Ghana and Burkina Faso, a literature review, and expert interviews. For more information, see methodology section.

6 African Development Bank (2016), '[Illicit trade in natural resources in Africa](#)'. p.7.

7 de Balzac H., Leggett T., Ollivier B., and Patuel F. (2023), '[Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel](#)', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

8 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), (2021), '[Enhancing the quality of informal cross-border trade in the Economic Community of West African States](#)'. p.8.

9 Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade (TRACIT), (2019), '[Mapping the Impact of Illicit Trade on the Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs and Illicit Trade in Petroleum Products](#)'. p. 10.

10 Expert interview with fuel middleman, Paga, Ghana February 2024; KII in Bolgatanga, Ghana, December 2024.

11 Eaton T. (2021), '[Theft and smuggling of petroleum products](#)' in Gallien M. and Weigand F. (eds) (2021), *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling*, London: Routledge. p. 261.

12 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2020), '[Borderlands in Africa – Literature Review and Key Terms](#)'. p. 4 & 8.

Well-established smuggling networks mirror formal trade routes

There are two types of fuel trade in Ghana – a formal transnational enterprise and a sophisticated illicit smuggling network – with significant overlaps between them. The trade is so well organised, with high level patronage involved, that both in Ghana and the broader Sahel, powerful political and business elites have emerged within this sector, offering protection to smuggling networks from the effects of national fuel subsidies and licensing policies that might obstruct this lucrative trade.¹³ However, most importantly, ordinary local people are highly dependent on fuel smuggling: the trade employs many young men directly, and women participate indirectly in secondary income-generating activities that intersect with smuggling, such as selling food at stalls or on the side of the road to traders involved in this trade. This means that obstructing the trade can inadvertently disrupt the livelihoods of vulnerable groups, while also making it more challenging and expensive for the local population to buy fuel. These issues are a central focus of this PEA, which stresses that policies to curb illicit financing and corruption must strive to mitigate any negative impacts on vulnerable groups.

Smuggling operations between Ghana and Burkina Faso are well-organised: smugglers from both Burkina Faso and Ghana have pre-arranged agreements with tanker operators and fuel station owners.¹⁴ Political and business elites in Ghana and Burkina Faso orchestrate the fuel smuggling operations, starting from the oil refineries in Tema, where orders are placed and executed through a highly coordinated system involving various actors, including agents, transporters, and local security officials. The bosses work closely with local security officials in both Ghana and Burkina Faso, ensuring discretion

and continuity through a well-organised network of corruption.¹⁵

The high level patronage and involvement in fuel smuggling among political and business elites in Ghana enables the sector to continue without too much interruption from global shifts in fuel prices or politics that affect counter-smuggling and corruption. The relationships between smuggling agents and their ‘bosses’ or the political elites involved in this sector allow for the purchase of fuel in bulk at lower prices, and without paying taxes or fees. Different nodes in the networks – agents on both sides of the border, transporters, loading boys, and lid fixers – work for specific tanker owners, who operate under the authorisation of political and business elites.¹⁶ The trade has become somewhat ‘formalized’ from Ghana into Burkina Faso due to the low prices of smuggled fuel in Ghana, as compared to elsewhere. This is because all tankers that leave Tema (Ghana) with fuel must operate as a carrier for a specific fuel station or fuel company that operates under the patronage of these business and political elites, and is therefore sanctioned with the proper paperwork to travel across the border into Burkina Faso. Due to these conditions for transporting fuel, the actors involved in the formal transcontinental fuel trade from the Port of Tema and northward into Burkina Faso and throughout the Sahel are also sometimes the same actors that are involved in the smuggling of fuel, even when participating in the formal or ‘legal’ fuel trade.¹⁷

The starting point for Ghana’s overland fuel trade to other parts of West Africa is Tema,¹⁸ 30 kilometres from Accra, in southeastern Ghana. Fuel – the formal extraction and by proxy, the informal supply that is syphoned off from these formal supplies – is typically procured from refinery and depots in the Port of Tema and transported northward (see Figure 1).¹⁹ These tankers make stops at key depots in Buie (located in the northern Savannah region along National Route 10 – N10), and then northwards

13 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), ‘Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel’. Subsidies for fuel have decreased in Ghana, though they still distort the market according to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), ‘[Ghana Country Report](#)’, (2024).

14 FGD in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.

15 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), ‘Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel’. This finding was reinforced by information shared by 12 KIIs in Paga, Ghana, in December 2024, who reported on the particularities of how the fuel smuggling trade functions in Ghana.

16 FGD and 13 KIIs conducted in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.

17 Expert interview with security officials in Accra and Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

18 Tema emerged as a city in the latter half of the 20th century, around the seaport and harbour the Port of Tema, Ghana’s biggest deep-water seaport. The city is now also a booming trade and depot city, and home to the country’s only oil refinery. Ghana Statistical Service. (2014), ‘[2010 Population & Housing Census](#)’.

19 FGD in Paga, Ghana, December 2023 – corroborated by various KIIs conducted in December 2023 and expert interview with security provider in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.



Figure 2. Map showing trade flows from northern Ghana in Burkina Faso

to Bolgatanga in the Upper East region, just south of Paga (in the Kassena Nankana West District, Upper East region).²⁰ Paga is the primary customs check-point on the Ghana-Burkina Faso border. Historically, this fuel trade route was not as important as other trafficking routes in West Africa, and smuggling was less common than within fuel trafficking routes through Nigeria and Benin into the Sahel.²¹ However, following the trade blockades and disruptions that were sanctioned against Niger by neighbouring Benin and Nigeria after Niger's 2023 July coup, fuel smuggling flows that were historically high through Niger, quickly rerouted. As a result, Ghana's Paga crossing has since become an even more important

trafficking route over the past 12 months, despite overall slowing trade through these routes, due to regional and international economic and security issues that influence regular trade.²²

Interviews with fuel smugglers, security providers, and fuel station employees in December 2023 revealed that fuel smuggling activities were largely concentrated around the numerous fuel stations along Ghana's National Route 10, from Bolgatanga to Paga, Ghana, routed toward Dakola and Pô in Burkina Faso (See Figure 2).²³ Between the major market towns in Navrongo and Paga, the roads are dotted with fuel stations every 50 metres on both

20 FGD in Paga, Ghana, December 2023 – corroborated by various KIIs conducted in December 2023 and expert interview with security provider in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

21 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel'.

22 The fuel trade between Benin and the Sahel was previously one of the largest formal and informal fuel routes in the region. Prior to 2020, 40% of Niger's fuel supply typically was illicitly smuggled from Benin, through the Malanville-Gaya border crossing. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Benin shuttered its overland borders with Burkina Faso and Niger. It has further secured them since the onset of VEO violence that has spilled over from the Sahel. These closures have disrupted formal and informal fuel trade. As a result, the smuggling pipeline from Paga, Ghana, to Pô, Burkina Faso, has become even more important, serving Sahelian demands, in the absence of other supply routes. Expert interview with security provider, Paga, Ghana 15 February 2024. See also: de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel'.

23 Murtala I. (2022), 'Smuggling of petroleum products in border communities', GBC Ghana Online, 4 November 2022. <https://www.gbcghanaonline.com/general-news/petroleum-smuggling/2022/>; and FGD and 13 KIIs conducted in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.



Credits: © Maxar Technologies, Airbus, Google Maps, 2024

Figure 3: Fuel stations along the N10 route between Navrongo and Paga, Ghana

sides of the road.²⁴ These stations ostensibly serve the formal fuel market, but their operators and the fuel truck drivers are also heavily involved in smuggling activities.²⁵ Experts interviewed for this research described these fuel stations as “ghost stations” that are completely deserted during daylight hours, rarely servicing regular people, but open at night to facilitate and sell fuel directly to smugglers (see Figure 3).²⁶

Once the tankers from Tema arrive in Paga, their journeys terminate in obscure locations off the main roads, often hidden in fields or behind bushes to avoid interdiction from law enforcement. Previously, the fuel stations dotting the road from Bolgatanga to Paga were used as smuggling

points at night, but as the government has made efforts to clamp down on smuggling, tanker drivers are now increasingly driving off road to conduct the fuel handoff with smugglers. Here, smugglers (usually Ghanaian, though increasingly Burkinabes are involved) draw the fuel from the tankers into drums or large gallons,²⁷ provided by smuggling agents across the border in Burkina Faso in accordance with the amount of fuel they have requested.²⁸ The Ghanaian smuggling agents then transport them across the border to Burkina Faso using a variety of vehicles, including trucks, pickups, motorbikes, tricycles, and cars. Here, they meet their Burkinabe counterparts who are on standby, waiting to receive the fuel they ordered.²⁹

24 Murtala I. (2022), ‘Smuggling of petroleum products in border communities’, GBC Ghana Online, 4 November 2022. <https://www.gbcghanaonline.com/general-news/petroleum-smuggling/2022/>.

25 FGD in Paga, Ghana, December 2023 – corroborated by various KIIs conducted in December 2023 and expert interview with security provider in Paga, Ghana, 15 February 2024.

26 Expert interviews with security provider and customs officer, Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

27 FGDs and KIIs in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.

28 FGDs and KIIs in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.

29 FGD in Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

The fuel is then resold to Burkinabe smugglers - who are typically known contacts of the Ghanaian smugglers - in large quantities in Burkina Faso.

Some fuel is sold in smaller containers – water bottles filled with fuel, for example – to both Ghanaian and Burkinabe residents of rural towns on the borders where there are fewer fuel stations, but this represents a minor portion of the trade and is often limited to roadside sales in nearby areas.³⁰ The primary consumers of this fuel are residents of Burkinabe border towns within 20 to 30 kilometres of the border, however Ghanaian were known to purchase smuggled fuel from Burkinabe smugglers that were close by as well, simply due to proximity and convenience. Fuel that is not sold in smuggled bottles to local border towns, is smuggled in bulk alongside the same main trade routes to Ouagadougou that the 'legal' fuel is shipped through, where it is then distributed throughout the Sahel from the Bingo depot outside the Burkinabe capital.³¹

Interestingly, the interviews with key informants and experts in both Ghana and Burkina Faso found that while some commodities are generally traded in certain directions (north versus south), **the direction of the flow shifts based on prices and circumstances.**³² Although fertiliser and fuel are generally traded from Ghana into Burkina Faso, there have been instances where the trade flows in the opposite direction, with fuel being smuggled from Burkina Faso back into Ghana, usually into informal markets in places like Gwollu, where there is a thriving informal market.³³ In other cases, border towns that are remote have become supply hubs for fuel that is sold from Paga (Ghana) to Dakola (Burkina Faso) and then moved west or east along the border back into Ghanaian towns. The smuggling is then mostly routed back through Burkina Faso, through the villages of Dakola, Kaya, and Tangassogo on the Burkina Faso side of the border. However, these occurrences are not as common and typically involve minimal quantities, localised

to border towns. These shifts are usually driven by fluctuations in prices and specific circumstances that make reverse smuggling temporarily viable.³⁴

The 'well-oiled' organisation of fuel smuggling syndicates

The smuggling networks are very well organised, with established relationships with government and security officials (see Figure 4 on page 8).³⁵

According to several KIIs and focus group participants, Ghanaian security officials reportedly play a pivotal role in facilitating these operations. They are often paid off in bribes to provide direct support to smugglers by assisting in the transfer of fuel from tankers to smaller vehicles in remote areas off the main roads towards Paga.³⁶ Chiefs, politicians, and other influential actors work with the security agencies to protect the trade. The senior security officers at the border, and those positioned nearby the smuggling hand off points in Tema and Bolgatanga, are typically paid bribes by smuggling kingpins, in return for discretion and sometimes even security.³⁷

The smuggling networks operate under a cloak of protection provided by corrupt practices at multiple levels.³⁸ Local security officials are often complicit in these networks, providing both direct and indirect support to ensure the smooth continuation of smuggling activities. For example, security officers may caution smugglers against using phones during fuel transfers under the guise of safety concerns – reasoning that overheated phones pose potential explosive risks during fuel transfer. Experts interviewed for this study explained that security officials also caution against phone use to reduce smugglers' digital traces that could be monitored. Additionally, fire department officials occasionally offer fire safety training to smugglers,

30 FGD in Paga, Ghana, and corroborated by 10 KIIs in Paga and 3 KIIs in Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

31 FGD and 13 KIIs conducted in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.

32 Three KIIs in Paga, Ghana, and FGD in Pô, Burkina Faso, December 2023 to January 2024.

33 FGD in Pô, Nahouri District, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

34 FGD in Pô, Nahouri District, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, January 2024, and corroborated by an expert interview with a security provider in Gwollu, Ghana, February 2024.

35 Expert interviews with smuggling operator and Ghanaian security official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

36 Fuel smuggling is widely known to be linked to political elites in Ghana, so although the open operations of fuel smuggling have become somewhat more discreet, the smuggling economy itself continues. 10 KIIs from Paga, Ghana and the Paga FGD reported on these dynamics in December 2023.

37 Expert interviews with smuggling operator and Ghanaian security official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

38 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel'. This finding was reinforced by information shared by 12 KIIs in Paga, Ghana, in December 2024, who reported on the particularities of how the fuel smuggling trade functions in Ghana.



Source: XCEPT, UNODC

XCEPT

Figure 4. Map of fuel trafficking flows and transit towns. Source: UNODC TOCTA Sahel

further embedding the trade within a web of official complicity.³⁹

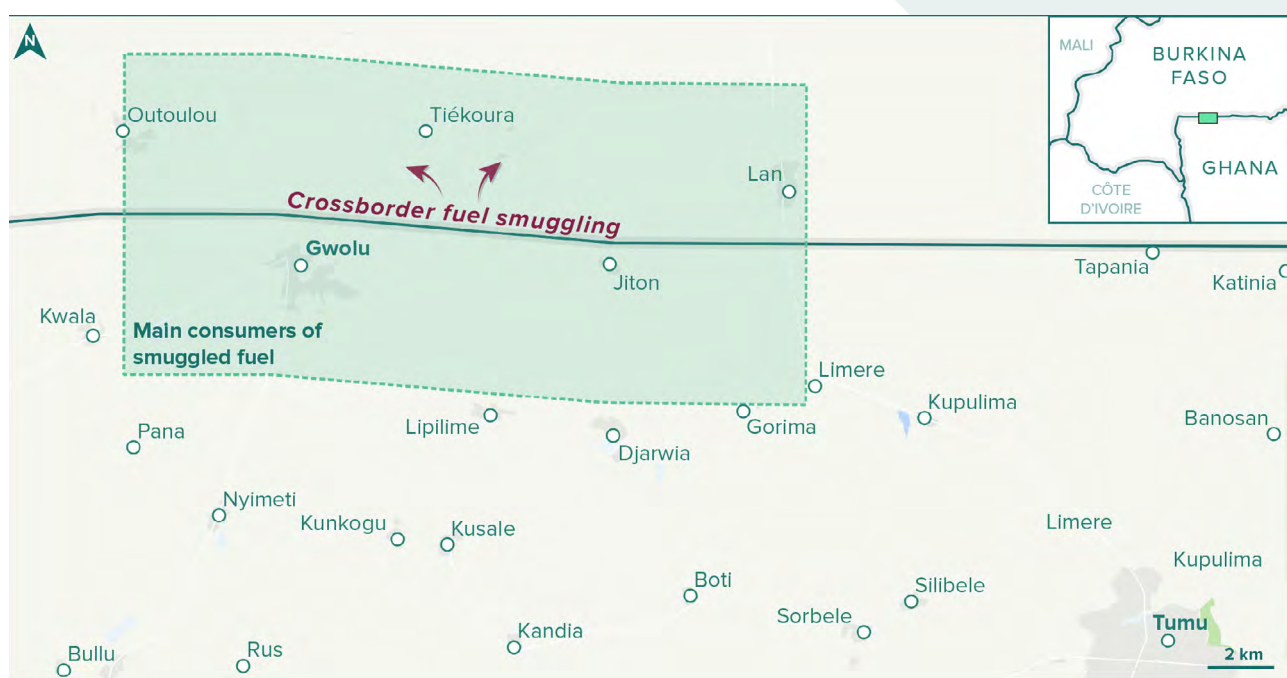
The overall fuel smuggling trade is tightly controlled by local kingpins – comprising both business and political elites – who collaborate with security officials to ensure the continued flow of smuggled fuel.⁴⁰ In order to maintain caution and discretion over the illicit fuel trade, these networks employ specific rules of the trade:

- Tankers must be declared to the security officers in Paga in advance of their arrival; all activities take place at night;
- All downstream workers (agents, transporters, loading boys, lid fixers, etc.) must operate under a known kingpin in order to cross into Burkina Faso;
- The chieftaincies, not police, are responsible for managing disputes between smuggling agents and networks;
- Phone use is prohibited during the fuel unloading process;
- Safety protocols are employed to reduce the risk of explosions and fire hazards;
- Fuel smuggling activities are suspended during public events or high profile visits;
- And all smuggled fuel must be moved through the Paga-Dakola customs point (although this rule is not always enforced).⁴¹

39 FGD, Paga, Ghana, December 2023; expert interview with security provider in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

40 Expert interviews in Navrongo and Paga, Ghana, highlight the direct and indirect support (by way of 'turning a blind eye') that the Ghanaian security officials provide to these smuggling networks. Various expert interviews with security and government officials either openly acknowledged the prevalence of the activity or simply discreetly implied in conversation that these smuggling efforts are well-known and high functioning.

41 Expert interviews with smuggling operators and Ghanaian security officials in Paga, Ghana, February 2024, and FGD in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.



Source: XCEPT

XCEPT

Figure 5. Communities within 20-30 kilometres of the border – the main consumers of smuggled fuel

The local livelihood of fuel smuggling

In addition to contributing to a thriving fuel smuggling economy, there is some local acceptance towards the trade – politically and socially – due to its intrinsic ties with the local economy and livelihoods in northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso. For many of the local traders interviewed for this research on both sides of the border, fuel smuggling is a critical component of their livelihoods.⁴² For example, many of these traders rely on business that occurs on the sidelines – such as selling food or clothing – to people who come to Dakola or Pô in Burkina Faso to buy smuggled, inexpensive fuel from Ghana (see Figure 5).

Political elites have also been known to leverage their control over the smuggling networks to

consolidate power in politics, often framing the job creation generated by these illicit activities as a platform for political campaigns during their elections to local leadership positions.⁴³ Resources generated from fuel smuggling are frequently funnelled into political financing, making the trade an integral part of the political economy in certain regions, particularly in the north.⁴⁴ This complex system of patronage and corruption not only perpetuates the smuggling trade but also sustains a cycle of dependency on the trade among primarily young men within local communities.⁴⁵

Fuel smuggling in Ghana is an entirely male trade, employing children, young men and older adults.⁴⁶ Children work as drum lid openers and fixers, and young men typically work as loaders or transport the smuggled fuel. Younger, educated men carry out the bookkeeping and money handling. The tanker

42 Primary destinations include the city of Pô and the town of Tiébélé, in Burkina Faso, but some smugglers bring smuggled fuel as far as the Nazinga Ranch in the nearby Nazinga forest, in Burkina Faso. Fuel used to be smuggled into Burkina Faso from as far away as Nigeria. However, likely due to the elimination of fuel subsidies in Nigeria in 2023, this flow has reduced. 10 KIIs in Paga, Ghana, and 7 KIIs in Pô, Burkina Faso, December 2023 to January 2024.

43 Expert interview with fuel middleman, Paga, Ghana February 2024; KII in Bolgatanga, Ghana, December 2024.

44 Expert interview with fuel middleman, Paga, Ghana February 2024; KII in Bolgatanga, Ghana, December 2024.

45 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel'.

46 An assessment of all 25 KIIs and 2 FGDs carried out in Burkina Faso and Ghana finds no evidence of women participating in this informal trade.

drivers are typically middle aged to older men who are uneducated or with a limited education.⁴⁷

As the sector becomes criminalised and increasingly scrutinised by the governments attempting to regulate it, due to the perceived role of VEOs in it, men appear to be switching trades. For the past four years, men have been flocking to the trade (including cross-border trade) of commodities like foodstuffs – vegetables and cereals, for example – to avoid participating in increasingly illicit and therefore more dangerous fuel smuggling livelihoods; the trade is becoming dangerous due to the growing presence of armed actors, namely VEOs, that are moving along the same trade routes and either participating in the fuel smuggling or are obstructing the trade through ambushes and armed blockades, as described in more detail below. Several traders who were interviewed for this research explained that due to their extensive knowledge of the terrain in Burkina Faso, and of smuggling markets, most of these men are able to access more remote communities to smuggle their goods in through unapproved routes.⁴⁸ However, as they switch trades, men are displacing women from the cross border trade in foodstuffs. Additionally, as the fuel smuggling trade shrinks, the price of fuel increases, and women – who make less money – become disproportionately hurt by the increase in prices.⁴⁹

New developments in security and trade affecting fuel smuggling

The once-thriving, high-volume fuel smuggling trade between Ghana and Burkina Faso has seen

a significant decline since 2021-2022, a point reinforced by all 25 KIIs.⁵⁰ This downturn is primarily due to increased insecurity from VEO violence in the Sahel (particularly due to threats from JNIM directed at fuel truck drivers), government crackdowns on smuggling and illegal border activity, and rising fuel prices in Ghana due to inflation, which have made the cross-border trade less profitable. As a result, experts interviewed warned that young people on the Ghanaian side of the border who once relied on the smuggling trade for easy income, could find themselves disenfranchised, facing an uncertain economic future.

These impacts on fuel smuggling and smuggled fuel consumption have been further stressed in recent months as Ghanaians have increasingly limited their travel to Burkina Faso due to border and trade restrictions and security concerns stemming from VEO threats in the Sahel. As a result, most cross-border fuel smuggling activity since the end of 2023 has involved Burkinabe traders who are involved in the organized trade networks previously described, who now enter into Ghana to buy and sell goods, including smuggled fuel. The role of Burkinabe smugglers in the fuel trade also grew recently due to the Burkinabe government banning the formal cross-border fuel trade in 2023, in place of procuring fuel exclusively through Burkina Faso's state agency, SONABHY, as part of the government's nationalization of key industries.⁵¹ As a result of this ban, Burkinabe traders are reportedly now paying bribes to Ghanaian customs officials and police to cross into Ghana to purchase cheap smuggled fuel, and resell it on the illicit market in Burkina Faso, to avoid paying the high fee for state-procured fuel.⁵² The same tankers that deliver fuel to local stations in Paga are also used to smuggle

47 FGDs in Paga, Ghana, in December 2023 and Pô, Burkina Faso, in January 2024, described the demographics of who participated in the trade.

48 4 KIIs with fuel traders in Paga, Ghana, December 2024.

49 This assessment was based on data collected for the primary research study, which found that when men participate in jobs commonly held by women, this can replace women in these trades and create livelihood vulnerabilities for them. In Navrongo and Bolgatanga, Ghana, KIIs with women revealed how the recent penetration of VEOs in southern Burkina Faso has discouraged men from travelling further into Burkina Faso, beyond towns close to the border, as they are scared of interdiction by armed groups. As a result, these men are now taking some of the jobs that women typically do – such as selling vegetables and fruits in markets that are located in Dakola or other small market towns that are within walking distance of Ghana's border. This puts women's livelihoods at risk – men can often carry more cargo with them and can remain in the markets longer (as they are not required to tend to children at home). This finding comes from 12 KIIs with women in Navrongo and Bolgatanga and 1 focus group with women in Wa, Ghana, in February 2024.

50 All 25 KIIs in Ghana and Burkina Faso reinforced that the smuggling trade is facing a downturn.

51 According to expert interviews with Ghanaian customs and security officials in Paga, Ghana, in February 2024, Burkina Faso's nationalisation of their fuel trade had two aims: to bolster government fuel sales in support of the economy and thus enrich the government, by nationalizing major industries during austere times; and to monitor the sale of fuel to VEOs. See also: de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel'.

52 2 KIIs and the FGD in Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

fuel through these established networks into and throughout Burkina Faso.⁵³ Although many of the fuel stations in Paga have been abandoned since the crackdown on smuggling in both countries, the smuggling networks remain active, with Burkinabe traders continuing to pay off border officials to bring Ghanaian fuel into Burkina Faso.⁵⁴

Additionally, impacts on the fuel smuggling trade have been introduced by the Ghanaian government, as officials are keen to implement measures to clamp down on smuggling in general, with a particular focus on smuggled fuel. Ghana's National Petroleum Authority (NPA) was established in 2005 to regulate the petroleum downstream economy in Ghana, which includes wholesale and retail distribution of fuel in both formal and informal contexts.⁵⁵ In July 2023, the NPA notified the local population in northern Ghana about the need to report illicit fuel smuggling activities and illegal fuel stations and depots, in an effort to expand its counter-smuggling mandate and include a local reporting mechanism.⁵⁶ The NPA leverages security entities across the government at the national and regional level, such as Ghana's Immigration Service (GIS),⁵⁷ to activate anti-smuggling mandates and secure the borders at both approved and unapproved crossings. These initiatives recently led to a significant interdiction of smuggled fuel in Aflao, Ghana, on the maritime border with Togo in September 2024.⁵⁸ Although the presence of porous borders has allowed for smuggling to thrive in the north, the government has taken strides to develop efforts at the national and civil society level to curb illicit activity. Nonetheless, smuggling of all goods - including fuel - continues to thrive in certain areas

that are remote and absent permanent and robust security presence.⁵⁹

Furthermore, during the February 2024 research visit to Ghana, the research team found that Ghanaian officials were not prioritising counter-smuggling, possibly because of their involvement in it, and because it supports corrupt networks at senior levels and because of the risk of disrupting local livelihoods, and potentially limiting what kickbacks they might get from clamping down on the thriving trade.⁶⁰ Yet, these officials still seem to understand how these illicit supply chains intertwine with VEO activity. Ghanaian intelligence and security are tracking VEO developments in the north – including by keeping close tabs on who is involved in fuel smuggling and listening to the Ministry of National Security's 'see-something-say-something' campaign⁶¹ and community policing reporting pipelines that were introduced in 2022.⁶² However, it seems for now that as long as JNIM's actions in Ghana remain non-violent and non-disruptive, the government will continue to prioritise intelligence collection over overt action, in order to avoid reprisal violence from JNIM.⁶³

JNIM's involvement in the illicit fuel trade

JNIM's involvement in the fuel trade through northern Ghana, extending onward to Pô and Léo respectively, is limited; JNIM agents (or 'facilitators') are reportedly involved in the fuel smuggling trade only insofar as they procure fuel from smugglers in bigger towns, on behalf of JNIM combatants hiding

53 2 KIs and the FGD in Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024, and corroborated by expert interview with fuel middleman, Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

54 Expert interview with fuel middleman, Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

55 National Petroleum Authority, Republic of Ghana, (2024), 'Who We Are'.

56 National Petroleum Authority, (2023), 'Report cheating fuel stations to NPA', (2023, July 24).

57 Ghana Immigration Service (GIS), 'Border Management'.

58 'Aflao GIS intercepts 45 gallons of fuel being smuggled into Togo', GhanaWeb, 6 September 2024.

59 'Life on the line: Stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa', Chapters 2 and 3, XCEPT, February 2025.

60 For more details, see private XCEPT policy note from March 2024, titled 'Growing instability on Ghana's borders destabilised local markets'. This assessment is also based on expert interviews with two security officials in northern Ghana, and one security official in Accra who all acknowledge that efforts to clamp down on informal trade could have negative impacts on civilians that cross borders informally for trade.

61 The Ghanaian government instituted a reporting mechanism across the departments, whereby civilians can report to a centralized structure, suspicious information, so that authorities can respond. See GhanaWeb, 'National Security educates Western North residents on 'see something, say something' campaign' 6 March 2024.

62 Global Organized Crime Index. "Ghana".

63 Multiple expert interviews with Ghanaian intelligence, security and former security officials in February 2024, in Accra, Paga, and Gwollu, Ghana.

in remote areas.⁶⁴ As one young male street vendor in Pô (Burkina Faso) explained, “there are young people who return to Ghana to buy gasoline and explosives, which they bring back to the conflict in Burkina Faso.”⁶⁵ However, there is sufficient evidence that JNIM is involved in other illicit smuggling activities that pull the group’s members into markets in Ghana frequently, to include arms and explosive trafficking through Mole National Park, and the arms market that exists near Jirapa, in western Ghana.⁶⁶ JNIM’s trade activities inside Ghana are evidenced by leftover goods members have abandoned when they flee their resting locations in border towns like Fatchu (near Gwollu) and Sapellega, Ghana.⁶⁷

However, elsewhere in the Sahel, JNIM has had a more direct impact on the fuel trade, leveraging diverted fuel supplies for their own use and sales. This has led the Burkinabe government to deploy efforts to counter smuggling of fuel to thwart the group’s operations.⁶⁸ In the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso and northern Mali, where JNIM has greater capacity to control roads and territory, the group has set up roadblocks to tax fuel traders.⁶⁹ A security provider in Paga, Ghana, reported on a story from a fuel smuggler that the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) had shared in September 2024, about how JNIM interdicted entire fuel tankers travelling from the Bingo fuel depot outside Ouagadougou, towards the Tillabéri region in Niger, and destroyed them to disrupt regional fuel trading and the government’s counterterrorism efforts in eastern Burkina Faso.⁷⁰ JNIM has held tanker drivers hostage at times, leveraging them and their fuel supplies as bargaining chips with states in the central Sahel.⁷¹ As a result, by late 2023, fuel truck drivers

began convening in secured caravans accompanied by Burkinabe military near Ouagadougou, before travelling as large groups to Niger or Mali, in order to reduce the security risks they face from JNIM on the roads outside the larger cities.⁷²

Despite the low presence of VEOs inside Ghana, JNIM is still presumed to be active in border towns where smuggling – particularly of fuel – is prevalent, according to security officials interviewed in an expert capacity for this study.⁷³ Gwollu is a prime example of an informal market town that straddles the border with Burkina Faso but that exhibits no formal cross-border entry point – meaning that all trade and movement through this town is considered ‘informal’ or unapproved, and therefore commerce can be categorised as smuggling or illicit trade. Gwollu’s proximity to the fuel trade hub in Tumu, coupled with its secluded nature, has allowed this town to become a booming illicit fuel market. Gwollu and neighbouring Fatchu are largely ungoverned and offer unobstructed access to Ghana due to the absence of a town on the Burkinabe side of the border (see Figure 6 on page 13). They are also isolated from the rest of Ghana due to limited road penetration in the border region (which limits security forces’ response capacity).⁷⁴

Due to this isolation, JNIM previously established a small presence in Fatchu, which was dismantled in September 2023 by Ghanaian security forces.⁷⁵ In February, Ghanaian authorities reported that the town remains a hotspot for trade activity linked to JNIM, due its easy access from and to Burkina Faso: the group can easily flee into Burkina Faso, where security forces are largely absent, aside from some

64 Expert interviews with a security official in Paga, Ghana, and the customs official in Dakola, Burkina Faso, February 2024.

65 It’s not clear if the reference from this Burkinabe key informant was to Ghanaian foreign terrorist fighters that have joined JNIM, and cross the border frequently to purchase fuel, or if the reference was to Burkinabe fighters. KII with a street vendor in Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

66 ‘Life on the line: Stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa’, Chapter 3: ‘Stability and Livelihood Challenges Near the Hamile-Ouessa and Po- Paga Border Regions Between Ghana and Burkina Faso’, XCEPT, February 2025.

67 ‘Life on the line: Stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa’, Chapter 3: ‘Stability and Livelihood Challenges Near the Hamile-Ouessa and Po- Paga Border Regions Between Ghana and Burkina Faso’, XCEPT, February 2025.

68 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), ‘Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel’.

69 de Balzac, Leggett, Ollivier, Patuel (2023), ‘Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel’, p. 17.

70 Expert interviews with security and customs officials in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

71 Expert interviews with security and customs officials in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

72 Expert interview with customs official, Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

73 Expert interviews with security officials in Gwollu and Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

74 For more details, see: ‘Life on the line: Stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa’, Chapter 3: ‘Stability and Livelihood Challenges Near the Hamile-Ouessa and Po- Paga Border Regions Between Ghana and Burkina Faso’, XCEPT, February 2025.

75 Expert interview with security official, Gwollu, Ghana, February 2024.



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Figure 6. Informal cross-border trade routes in Gwollu, Ghana, October 2023

limited patrols by the vigilante force known as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP).⁷⁶ Security officials in Ghana, and experts watching this space, believe that JNIM is likely involved in these smuggling networks. This is because there is now growing evidence that the group has established a presence inside Ghana that require access to illicit financing and resources like fuel to support their activities in Burkina Faso.⁷⁷

JNIM's direct engagement with the fuel trade is generally limited to ordering and purchasing fuel

directly from the smuggling networks that operate through the Paga-Dakola pass, or by diverting fuel trucks inside Burkina Faso for their own use. Ghanaian smugglers believe that some of the Burkinabe smuggling agents they frequently sell fuel to were purchasing fuel on behalf of JNIM operators.⁷⁸ These agents explained that the drums used to smuggle the fuel were later found in VEO

camps in Burkina Faso during clearing operations carried out by the Burkinabe security forces. The drums are identifiable because they are often labelled according to agents and kingpins based in Burkina Faso.⁷⁹ As a result, a number of Burkinabe smugglers were arrested in 2023 on suspicion of supplying fuel to JNIM cells and operators in Burkina Faso, according to several key informants in Burkina Faso who spoke about this incident to explain why smuggling networks have recently begun to operate with more discretion.⁸⁰ Ghanaian fuel smugglers are sometimes intercepted by Burkinabe security forces on the suspicion that their fuel is supporting JNIM activities in the eastern regions as well.⁸¹ This suspicion is reinforced by the significant profits smugglers make from selling cheap fuel in Burkina Faso, despite the adverse economic conditions affecting most Burkinabe citizens, who have limited means to purchase fuel.⁸²

⁷⁶ Expert interview with security official, Gwollu, Ghana, February 2024; expert interview with security official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

⁷⁷ Expert interview with security official, Gwollu, Ghana, February 2024; expert interview with security official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024. See also: Maclean, R. (2024), 'U.S. Confronts Failures as Terrorism Spreads in West Africa', The New York Times, June 7 2024

⁷⁸ 5 KIs with Ghanaian fuel smugglers, Paga, Ghana December 2023.

⁷⁹ 5 KIs with Ghanaian fuel smugglers, Paga, Ghana December 2023; and FGD in Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

⁸⁰ 4 KIs, Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

⁸¹ 4 KIs, Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

⁸² Expert interview with Burkinabe security officer, Dakola, Burkina Faso, February 2024.

Because the fuel smuggling networks have long been so well organised, operating with high levels of political impunity through Ghana and Burkina Faso, fuel shipments could move across borders without being policed, as long as they operated under the name of the sponsoring kingpin. By 2022, security providers reported that JNIM, based on this knowledge, would pay smugglers to move ammunition and weapons inside the fuel drums from Ghana – where there is a thriving illicit arms trade⁸³ – into Burkina Faso.

As Burkinabe security forces have intensified their crackdown on the fuel smuggling networks, JNIM appears to be looking for fuel elsewhere, particularly by targeting the agricultural supply chain. This includes diverting and stealing essential products from farmers and wholesalers like fertiliser and diesel, which farms use to power generators, pesticide sprayers, and water pumps. In southern Burkina Faso, where vegetable farms rely heavily on diesel-powered water pumps, there have been reports of VEOs or armed actors attacking farmers to steal the fuel needed for these machines.⁸⁴ There are also reports that knapsack fertiliser and pesticide spraying machines are being used by armed actors to smuggle ammunition across the border near these farming communities, to help armed groups smuggle ammunition more discreetly.⁸⁵

Overall, it's noteworthy that despite JNIM's keen interest in smuggled fuel, experts believe that JNIM is not reselling fuel to finance their activities but instead is procuring it for their own use.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The research clearly highlights how the fuel trade serves two needs. Firstly, it generates complex and deeply entrenched smuggling networks that benefit and finance political elites and local communities, contributing to corruption at the highest and lowest levels. Secondly, fuel is a lifeline. Without it, trade and many local livelihoods would cease and daily life would be severely affected – which, in the often fragile economies of northern Ghana and southern

Burkina Faso, could quickly devolve into a humanitarian and development crisis. Many local people depend directly and indirectly on fuel smuggling and its ancillary trades. Curbing fuel trafficking could therefore negatively impact the livelihoods of other groups that rely on these networks and trade-based economies. Instead, governments should design more holistic, multipronged approaches to curbing fuel smuggling that mitigate impacts on local livelihoods and avoid exposing people to economic vulnerability, that reflect the following policy considerations:

Policy considerations

1. **A measured, holistic approach to curbing smuggled cheap fuel would help mitigate impacts on local livelihoods.** Given the deep linkages between smuggled fuel and the local economy of border regions, Ghana needs to take a more thoughtful approach to countering fuel trafficking, by assessing how curbing this activity will impact local livelihoods. The Burkinabe government's blockade on fuel smuggling has had severe impacts on local communities that are stranded in VEO hotspots like eastern Burkina Faso.⁸⁷ In order to avoid negatively impacting local trade and livelihoods, efforts to curb fuel smuggling require an approach that does not affect price fluctuations in fuel supplies, otherwise it will not incentivize people to stop their illegal 'cheap' fuel consumption. If the price of fuel is affected, smuggling will always continue.
2. **Facilitating better internal trade practices of fuel within northern Ghana can mitigate disruptions to livelihoods resulting from reduced cross-border trade, thereby reducing potential socio-economic grievances that VEOs could seek to exploit.** On the Ghana-Burkina Faso border, the fuel smuggling economy – which is a critical livelihood for many young people in border towns like Paga – has been severely affected by Ghana's heightened security and militarised responses to VEO activities

83 Abderrahmane, A. (2023), 'Ghana's sophisticated artisanal firearms trade needs regulating', ISS Africa, 6 November 2023.

84 The data collection in Burkina Faso highlighted several reports by farmers about these types of violent encounters with JNIM in remote areas outside farms near Leo. 10 KIIs, Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

85 The data collection in Burkina Faso highlighted several reports by farmers about these types of violent encounters with JNIM in remote areas outside farms near Leo. 10 KIIs, Pô, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

86 Expert interviews with security analyst in Accra, and two security providers in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

87 Nsaibia, H., Beevor, E., and Berger F. (2023), 'Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime & ACLED, October 2023.

since 2022. As indicated, many young men are underemployed now, as the trade has been affected by anti-smuggling and border security efforts intended to curtail VEO penetration. Policies intended to promote formal fuel trade should include processes to safely and ethically involve these underemployed people. (This corroborates similar findings from the larger XCEPT study about how increasing security on borders in Coastal West Africa can negatively impact local livelihoods that rely on being able to easily cross borders for trade).⁸⁸

As violence increases, more people will likely find their livelihoods affected by their inability to travel across borders. Prioritising development and infrastructure within northern Ghanaian communities can support the restoration of trade linkages for border towns whose livelihoods are at risk because travel to Burkina Faso is constrained by rising violence. By prioritising road and market infrastructure development, this approach would allow these communities to trade in Ghanaian towns instead. For example, the road to Gwollu from Navrongo is unpaved, making it easier for Ghanaians from Gwollu to trade in Burkina Faso. A better internal road would promote local trade within Ghana and improve locals' access to services. The government could prioritise infrastructure development projects in isolated areas that are often cut off from trade and other socio-economic resources. This would also reduce influence and penetration from VEOs, that are known to operate in these isolated areas where government services are limited or absent.

3. **Support youth with alternative livelihood pathways to mitigate the pull of VEOs.** Curb-ing the fuel smuggling trade could potentially have unintended impacts on local livelihoods and even local economies more broadly. In Paga, Ghana, anti-corruption and smuggling campaigns can inadvertently render young people and other border residents vulnerable and susceptible to radicalisation, as Ghana's crackdown on fuel smuggling in recent years, took away many local jobs. We found anecdotal evidence from key informant and expert

interviews that some young people in northern Ghana have joined VEOs in Burkina Faso since losing their livelihoods in the fuel smuggling trade.⁸⁹

Youth employment and training opportunities could address this gap and reduce the push towards VEOs, since underemployment is frequently listed as a significant driver towards violent extremism.⁹⁰ However, piloting alternative livelihoods might not have the same appeal to youth that participate in fuel smuggling – which is a highly lucrative trade compared to other livelihood opportunities available in northern Ghana. As a result, some of those programmes involved in establishing alternative livelihoods should be prepared for a subgroup of the population that is not interested in shifting from a lucrative livelihood to one that might not lead to great profits.

Methodology

This PEA was compiled from an analysis of 25 key informant interviews (KIs) and 2 focus group discussions (FGDs) carried out in Paga, Kassena-Nankana West district, in the Upper East region of Ghana; and 8 KIs and 1 FGD carried out in Pô, Nahouri Province, in the Centre-Sud region of Burkina Faso. The objective for the data collection was to conduct a narrow PEA of fuel trade dynamics in this highly trafficked corridor between Paga and Pô. The analysis also includes a literature review, and expert interviews with security and government officials and other key experts in Accra, Gwollu and Paga, Ghana. Research was conducted from December 2023 to February 2024.

88 For more details, see: 'Life on the line: Stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa,' XCEPT, February 2025.

89 KIs with three young men involved in the fuel smuggling trade in Bolgatanga and Paga, Ghana, December 2023; corroborated by expert interview with security official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

90 UNDP, '[Journey to Extremism in Africa](#)', 8 February 2023,

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