



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

Chapter 3: stability and livelihood challenges near the Hamile–Ouessa and Pô–Paga border regions between Ghana and Burkina Faso

Aneliese Bernard

August 2025

About the author

Aneliese Bernard is a Senior Consultant with Elva Community Engagement. Aneliese has a decade of expertise in counterterrorism, stabilisation, demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR), and security sector reform in North and West Africa. Previously, she was the Stabilization Advisor for the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations in Niger.

About XCEPT

This publication is issued by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government.

This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.

This report was drafted and refined in consultation with various official stakeholders through March 2025. The political, economic and security context may have evolved since then.

Suggested citation: Aneliese Bernard. "Life on the line: stability and livelihoods in Coastal West Africa: Chapter 3: stability and livelihood challenges near the Hamile–Ouessa and Pô–Paga border regions between Ghana and Burkina Faso." London: XCEPT, 2025.

Cover image: Jake Lyell / Alamy Stock Photo

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 4 |
| Methodology | 7 |
| Socio-economic dynamics of Hamile–Ouessa and Pô–Paga border regions | 8 |
| Security factors impacting cross-border livelihoods | 18 |
| Considerations for policy and programming in the Wa, Hamile, and Paga border regions | 25 |
| Bibliography | 27 |



Figure 1. Map of Area 3

Introduction

The borderland trade centres between northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso (see Figure 1) are critical centres of social, economic, and political exchange for communities that live in the periphery and are far from major industrial and cultural centres.

This chapter examines trade and livelihood dynamics in the borderland regions between the Upper West and Upper East regions of Ghana and the Centre-Sud and Sud-Ouest regions of Burkina Faso, comprising 1) the Hamile border region, focusing on the border crossing between Hamile, Ghana, and Ouessa, Burkina Faso, and the smaller Burkinabé trade centre in Hamélé, and 2) the Paga border region, which includes the highly trafficked customs checkpoint between Paga in Ghana, and Dakola in Burkina Faso, which connects to Pô.

The research also focuses on trade in Gwollu (Sissala West district, Ghana) near the fuel-trafficking centre of Tumu. This town is a prime example of an informal cross-border market town that exists parallel to formal trade centres, highlighting the prevalence of Ghana's informal economy and its links to 'regular' commercial activity. The smaller village of Gwollu is particularly interesting; since 2022, it has become a hotspot for suspicious activity by armed groups from Burkina Faso owing to its position between Tumu and the Burkinabé border, according to government officials interviewed in Gwollu and Paga. In both trade centres, most of the activity by government authorities (customs checkpoints and security) and

| Traded items | Direction of trade | Dominant demographic |
|---|--------------------------------|--|
|  Vegetables (onions, tomatoes, peppers, tubers) | Burkina Faso → Ghana | Older women (short haul) Men (long haul) |
|  Cereals (millet, soy, maize, corn, rice, gari) | Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana | Older women (short haul) Men (long haul) |
|  Household items (ataya tea, cooking oil, plastic goods, bottles & bags, utensils, soap) | Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana | Women |
|  Fabric, clothing, and sandals | Burkina Faso → Ghana | Men Women |
|  Fertiliser and pesticides | Ghana → Burkina Faso | Older men (in charge) Male youth (as workers) |
|  Fuel | Paga, Ghana → Pô, Burkina Faso | Older men (in charge) Male youth (as workers) |
|  Construction material (steel bars, plumbing material, cement, pillars, zinc) | Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana | Men |

Table 1. Trade flows in the Hamile and Paga border regions¹

trade occurs inside Ghana. However, local (short-haul) and transregional (long-haul) trade along the shared Ghana–Burkina Faso border is largely confined to these trade centres that are located within 20 kilometres of border crossings.

The short-haul trade, which is driven by local supply and demand of borderland communities, is characterised by daily or weekly cross-border movement at formal and informal crossings. It is dominated by trade in commodities such as cereals, vegetables, groundnuts, fuel, basic household provisions, and livestock (see Table 1).² This type of trade operates quite distinctly from long-haul transnational trade, which only occurs in certain border towns with established crossings, on well-paved roads, and at customs checkpoints.³

Due to the considerable distances (over 100 kilometres) between customs and security outposts in Hamile, Tumu, and Paga, all on Ghana's northern border, cross-border movement and trade from Burkina Faso is difficult for local authorities to monitor. As a result, much of it occurs informally.⁴

Similar to findings on the Wa border region (see Chapter 2), research in the Hamile and Paga border regions indicates a high level of smuggling activity that is not effectively curbed by current border management policies. Both Hamile and Navrongo (near Paga) have become hubs for the smuggling of

¹ This table was put together based on qualitative data collected for both Chapters 2 and 3. It combines evidence from all 10 FGDs and 150 KIIs conducted in Burkina Faso and Ghana between November and December 2023.

² This analysis is based on a general review of the field data that informed this chapter.

³ Interview with Ghanaian trade analyst, Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

⁴ Interviews with security providers in Gwollu and Paga, Ghana, 14 and 15 February 2024. Knowledge of these border vulnerabilities have also led to the recent influx of several multilateral and bilateral border security programmes, including the European Union's recent delivery of border patrol trucks in late 2023; France24 (2023), 'Ghana gets more EU aid for border security,' 28 October 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231028-ghana-gets-more-eu-aid-for-border-security>. Accessed April 2024.

explosive materials that armed groups in Burkina Faso purchase from intermediaries and smuggle into the Sahel.⁵ Smuggled medical products are also moved overland from seaports on the Gulf of Guinea, particularly through Ghana's Tema port, across the porous borders into the Sahel.⁶

Violent extremism in the Sahel is increasingly impacting transregional trade and affecting local producers and traders in Ghana. For example, in January 2024, Ghana's access to the regional trade in onions, a product that is critical to local cuisine, came to a halt when violent extremist organisations (VEOs) linked to the Al-Qaeda group in West Africa, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), ambushed and burned several onion trucks in eastern Burkina Faso coming from Niger.⁷

As highlighted throughout this report, global and domestic economic downturns in Ghana have also dramatically affected local economies and livelihoods in these border communities. In 2022, years of economic decline in Ghana – coupled with high fiscal deficit, public debt, and the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and global monetary tightening – led to low investor confidence in Ghana's economy, which triggered a market crisis.⁸ This quickly led to untenable inflation and currency depreciation that has eroded consumer purchasing power across the country.

In remote border towns in the north, this financial crisis has severely impacted Ghanaian traders, rendering basic farming inputs, like seeds, too expensive for locals to purchase. In northern Ghana, a fertiliser shortage⁹ – resulting from limited supply and hoarding by major resellers for higher resale in Burkina Faso – has contributed to declining local trade and soaring prices.¹⁰ Although Ghana's economy is now recovering, high prices of basic goods and inputs are still affecting livelihoods locally.¹¹

The impact of VEO conflict on agricultural production, which has caused Burkinabé farmers to abandon their land and trade,¹² has also contributed to higher fertiliser prices, as has the growing use of fertiliser in explosives by armed groups and artisanal gold miners in the Sahel.¹³

5 The Small Arms Survey (2023), 'Out of Control: The Trafficking of Improvised Explosive Device Components and Commercial Explosives in West Africa,' November 2023, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Report-2023-IED-West-Africa-EN.pdf>.

6 UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA) Sahel, 'Trafficking in Medical Products in the Sahel,' November 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_medical_2023.pdf.

7 Interviews with Burkinabé and Ghana customs officials in Dakola, Burkina Faso, 16 February 2024.

8 Medina, Leandro. "Ghana: Transforming a Crisis into a Journey Toward Prosperity." International Monetary Fund. 29 January 2024. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2024/01/29/cf-ghana-transforming-a-crisis-into-a-journey-toward-prosperity>.

9 Fertiliser is traded most frequently during the rainy (farming) season when government-subsidised fertiliser is hoarded by those with connections, and smuggled out to Burkina Faso and other neighbouring countries for sale at higher prices. This creates local shortages, pushes up prices, and promotes rent-seeking behaviour between local farmers and well-connected individuals. FGD with farmers and traders, Wechiau, Wa municipality, Upper West Region, Ghana, 26 November 2023.

10 Banyo, N., Chingono N., and Phiri, F 'African Smallholder Farmers Count the cost of Fertilizer Price Spikes,' Reuters, March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/african-smallholder-farmers-count-cost-fertilizer-price-spike-2023-03-22/>.

11 All KIIs and FGDs in Chapter 3 reported that prices remain high for basic goods.

12 Three KIIs in Paga, Ghana, and six KIIs in Dakola and Pô, Burkina Faso, said farmlands are being abandoned out of "fear" of VEO violence, December 2023.

13 Hunter, M. 'Beyond blood: Gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa,' Global Initiative, November 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Marcena-Hunter-Beyond-blood-Gold-conflict-and-criminality-in-West-Africa-GI-TOC-November-2022.pdf>. Accessed January 2024.

Ghana has responded to the security crisis in neighbouring Burkina Faso by increasing deployments of security forces to borders to clamp down on potential insecurity from the Sahel.¹⁴ These forces police and monitor unapproved movement across borders by locals and non-state armed groups. Although this limits livelihoods, movement, and access to resources for communities that rely on them,¹⁵ local border communities generally welcome the increased security in Ghana (see Chapter 1).

Methodology

This chapter highlights findings from the Hamile–Ouessa and Pô–Paga border regions of Ghana and Burkina Faso, as part of the larger 'Life on the line' study. Research for this chapter was carried out by Elva Community Engagement, comprising a team of one consultant and one to two enumerators per country from November 2023 to January 2024.

The research used a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods, including a literature review and remote methods such as signals data and satellite imagery (see the summary chapter and its annex for more details). Qualitative data collection for this chapter included 22 interviews with academics, government officials, civil society, and other stakeholders. Interviews were carried out in French and English.

Researchers conducted a face-to-face household survey involving 150 respondents in Paga, Ghana, in February 2024 (see the summary report and its annex for details). The qualitative data collection for this chapter included 108 key informant interviews (KIs) and eight focus group discussions (FGDs), through a purposive sampling method. KIs were selected based on locations that were identified as being unique for the research due to their proximity to a formal or informal border crossing and borderland market. Locations for data collection within each area, including this region, were determined by the research team to support comparative analysis according to levels of insecurity and types of trade activity. The KI sample was then narrowed to review a sample that crosses borders regularly for trade.

Thirty per cent of the sample consisted of women and 25 per cent were youth. The gender imbalance in KIs is partly due to the dominance of men in the fuel trade, which was reviewed as part of a complementary political economy analysis into the fuel trade through Paga, Ghana, and Pô, Burkina Faso. The data was broken down by country as follows:

- In Ghana, 53 KIs and four FGDs were carried out in the Upper West and Upper East regions of the country. This includes 14 KIs and one FGD in Hamile (Lambussie Karni district) and 14 KIs and one FGD in Gwollu (Sissala West district), and 25 KIs and two FGDs for the political economy analysis (PEA) of fuel in Paga (Kassena–Nankana West district).
- In Burkina Faso, 55 KIs and four FGDs were carried out in the Centre-Sud and Sud-Ouest regions of the country. This included 11 KIs and one FGD in Ouessa (Ioba Province), eight KIs and one FGD in Hamélé

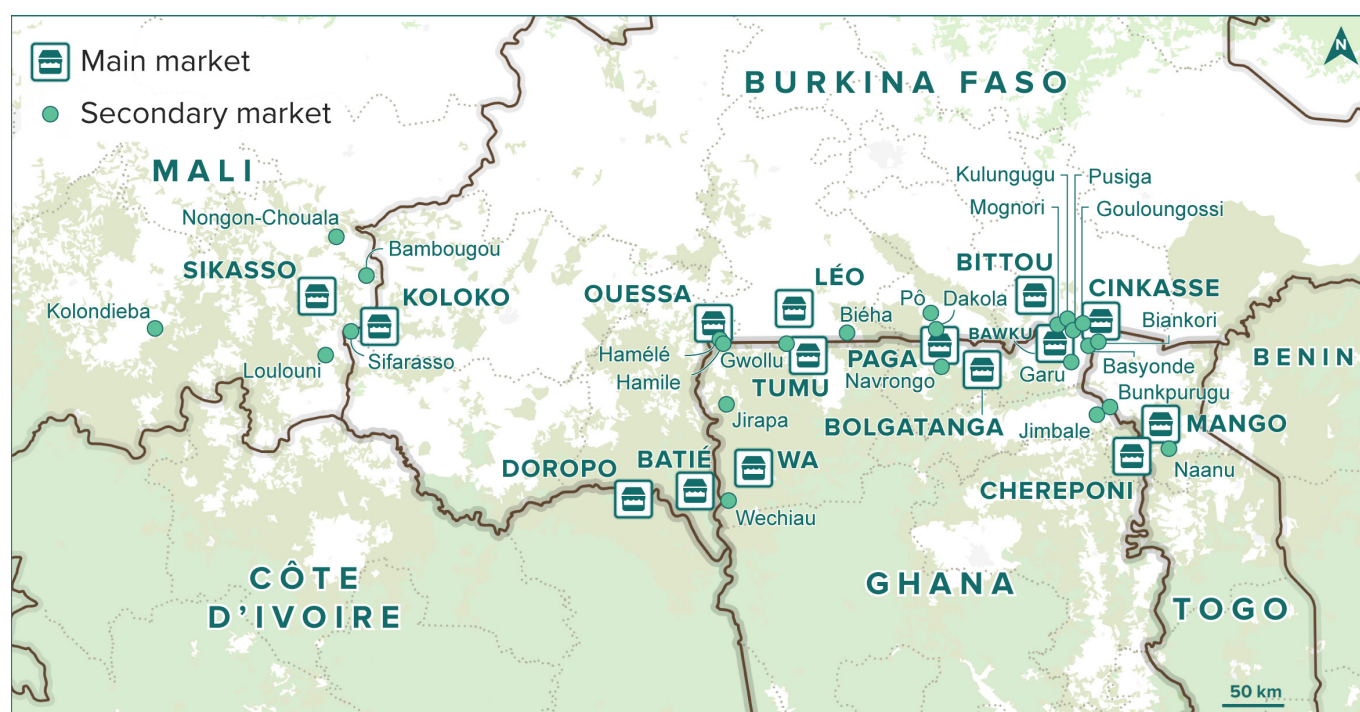
14 Details about numbers of deployments and personnel in the Ghanaian security forces that are deployed to the north were not publicly available.

15 Burkina Faso's departure from the regional economic alliance, ECOWAS, likely will have implications for both short- and long-haul trade. Ghanaian government officials explained that preserving bilateral trade was a top priority for Ghana's economy. Interviews with Director of the Ministry of National Security, and Director of the Human Security Directorate at the Ministry of National Security, in Accra, Ghana, 11 February 2024.

(Ioba Province), 17 KIIs and one FGD in Pô (Nahouri Province), 11 KIIs in Dakola (Nahouri Province), and eight KIIs and one FGD for the PEA in Pô.

Socio-economic dynamics of Hamile–Ouessa and Pô–Paga border regions

Agriculture accounts for 80 per cent of economic activity in Ghana's Upper West Region. The region is home to the ethnic Dagaaba, Wala, Birifor, Lobi, Chakali, and Sissala peoples.¹⁶ The Burkina Faso side of the border is home to a cross-border ethnic group of primarily Dagara peoples, and some Mooré (ethnic-Mossi people), who also generally participate in agricultural-based income-generating activities (IGAs).¹⁷



Source: XCEPT

XCEPT

Figure 2. Map showing Hamile–Ouessa and Pô–Paga border regions

Communities are highly connected across these borderland trade centres through trade and shared cultural and familial ties that drive regular cross-border movement, particularly around the Paga–Pô border (see Figure 2).¹⁸ For example, the Kasena population of Paga and Navrongo share the Kasem language with many people living in Dakola and Pô in neighbouring Burkina Faso. Cultural and linguistic similarities between the two cross-border communities means that local populations on either side of

16 Upper West Regional Coordinating Council – Government of Ghana, 'Annual progress report for 2019,' March 2021, https://ndpc.gov.gh/media/Upper_West_Region_APR_2020.pdf.

17 L'Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie (INSD) du Burkina Faso. 'Résultats Recensement Général 2022.'

18 Chirawurah, D. 'Institutional Constituents and Community Capacity for Ebola Prevention: A Cross-Border Study of Pô in Burkina Faso and Navrongo in Ghana,' University for Development Studies Ghana, 2016. <https://r2reports.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/institutional-constituents-and-community-capacity-for-ebola-prevention-a-cross-border-study-of-pc3b4-in-burkina-faso-and-navrongo-in-ghana-faso.pdf>.

the border often swear allegiance to the same chiefs.¹⁹ “Beyond trade, we also have friendly and family relations across the border, that markets help us to easily connect with... I am originally from Burkina Faso, but I got married here because I used to come here a lot as a child,” one female trader from Silibelle said.²⁰

Community dynamics in the Paga and Hamile border regions

Cross-border trade drives livelihoods for these major border towns and trading centres. Unobstructed movement is therefore critical to local and regional livelihoods, with 53 per cent of household survey respondents reporting they often travel across borders.²¹ As a government official from Dakola, Burkina Faso, explained, the Centre-Sud Region and the road between Paga in Ghana and Pô in Burkina Faso are currently well patrolled and secure to ensure trade and movement between these two major trading centres,²² preserving the cultural, linguistic, and economic ties that people maintain across both communities.²³ As a result, many Burkinabé who live in more rural areas near the border travel into Ghana for better and more accessible resources, including schools, trade, and medical care.²⁴

“Burkinabé also come here for healthcare and sports,” a community leader from Hamile said. “Some in Burkina Faso have health insurance from Ghana, and medications are more expensive in Burkina Faso than here, so they prefer to attend to healthcare here in Ghana.”²⁵

This fluid dynamic is particularly important given the limited capacity of Ghanaian authorities to police who is moving between the countries along the vast and porous border.²⁶ While the border was stable at time of writing, there are increasing reports from security forces and civilians living in these areas that JNIM combatants have been spotted in Gwollu, Fatchu, and Sapelliga, which they are using as places to rest and rehabilitate (see ‘Non-state actors’ below). These border communes are difficult to reach from Ghana, making them ideal locations for militant activity.

Cross-border movement of goods and people

A majority of KII respondents reported that most people who access markets in these border towns generally only travel as far as the closest markets – usually within five kilometres of their hometown.²⁷

19 Interview with customary authority in Paga, Kassena Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.

20 Interview with female trader and farmer, Silibelle, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana December 2023.

21 Household survey, question 16, conducted in Paga, Ghana, and Pô, Burkina Faso, showed that 53% of the research sample “often” cross the border for work and daily activities.

22 Interview with government official, Dakola, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, February 2024.

23 Interview with government official, Paga, Kassena Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.

24 Interview with government official, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, February 2024.

25 Interview with community leader, Hamile, Lambussie district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

26 The porosity, vastness, and inaccessibility of border towns like Fatchu, Gwollu, and Tumu (the former two have experienced recent threats from VEOs from Burkina Faso) was observed during field travel in February 2024, and corroborated in interviews with a government official in Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana (February 2024), and with two immigration officials in Paga, Kassena Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.

27 Twenty KIIs conducted in the Hamile and Paga border regions in Ghana, across Hamile, Lambussie district, Upper West Region, and Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, November 2023.

Locals also sometimes travel up to 50 kilometres to attend weekly markets in bigger cities like Paga, Navrongo, and Wa in northern Ghana. Because there is only one official border crossing in this research area, the Pô–Paga crossing, household surveys indicate that nearly one-third of people in the Upper East Region rely on unapproved routes to regularly cross the border. Similarly, a quarter of respondents reported that unapproved routes are less time-consuming, presumably because of their proximity to these respondents' homes and because they circumvent time-consuming checkpoints.²⁸



Credits: Satellite imagery © Maxar Technologies 2024.

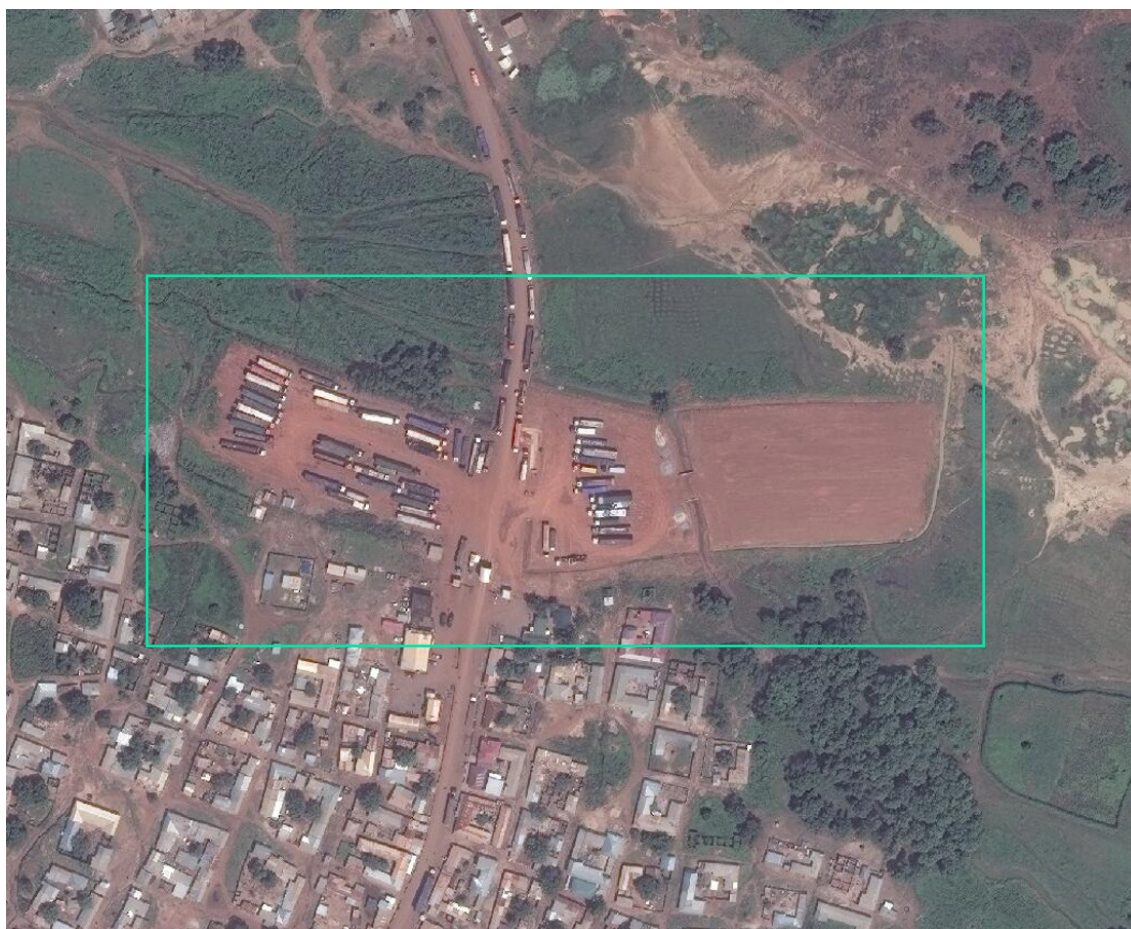
Figure 3. Hamile market, Ghana, September 2022

Ghana's vast north is home to hundreds of border towns that rely on regular cross-border movement to access markets, healthcare, and schools, among other things.²⁹ As a result, there is significant community cohesion among these borderland communities, particularly between Ouessa in Burkina Faso and Hamile in Ghana (see Hamile market and border crossing in Figures 3 and 4).³⁰ However, as with the Wa border

28 Household surveys in Paga, Ghana, and Pô, Burkina Faso.

29 The field visit to Gwollu and Paga in northern Ghana highlighted how few border demarcations exist, underscoring the ease of 'unofficial' cross-border movements.

30 Kiemdé, A., Nakoulma, G., Zoma, V., and Compaoré, G. 'Le corridor international de Ouessa: un vecteur de développement local et d'intégration régionale par le bas'. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 10: 8, pp. 155–167, <https://www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol10-issue8/1008155167.pdf>. Accessed January 2024.



Credits: Satellite imagery © Maxar Technologies 2024.

Figure 4. Hamile border crossing, Ghana, September 2022

region, VEO expansion into these trading areas and government responses to these threats on both sides of the border (see ‘Non-State Actors’ below) have impacted local trade.³¹

Ghanaians in the Paga and Hamile border regions (like the Wa border region’s population) have significantly reduced their cross-border movement into Burkina Faso since 2022. They are participating less in these trade-focused IGAs, due to insecurity, an overall slowing of trade, and new security measures that have been imposed on business transactions and movement across borders.³²

One cattle trader from Gwollu, in Ghana’s Upper West Region, said: “For those of us who trade in livestock, we have a lot of levels to deal with now, because of the cattle theft and insecurity. For example, if you’re buying a goat or cow in Burkina Faso, you’ll need a witness to witness that the buyer owns the animal. Then afterwards, you will need to go to the *kwaluwiaku* (volunteer community security group) to come and certify and issue you a receipt before you can move. We pay two cedis per goat and ten cedis per cow to the volunteer group to confirm and issue us receipts. When you have that receipt, you don’t

31 Twenty KIIs conducted in the Hamile and Paga border regions in Ghana, across Hamile, Lambussie district, Upper West Region, and Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, November 2023.

32 Ten KIIs in Hamile, Lambussie District, Upper West Region, Ghana, November 2023.

pay any charges or tolls from subsequent volunteer group members, but you still pay charges to the government security at different points.”³³

From Burkina Faso to Ghana, the most traded products are agricultural, including mahogany, shea kernels, cowpeas, sesame, mangos, onions, livestock, and animal skins. They arrive from Burkina Faso, via Mali or Niger, en route to Ghanaian ports.³⁴ Products traded from Ghana to the Sahel are chiefly agricultural and include oranges, apples, tubers, and nuts (cola or coconuts).³⁵ As described in Chapters 1 and 2, Ghana is also a hub for manufactured goods that are imported internationally and then sold in the Sahel. In recent years, the Sahelian reliance on imports of manufactured goods from Ghana has been important due to Ghana’s currency depreciation, which has given Sahelians more purchasing power. Local traders have flooded Ghana’s markets, buying goods for significantly less, causing formal and informal trade to explode in these border towns.³⁶

Burkina Faso markets, however, are less reliable due to insecurity that has hampered their regular activity, and limited local agriculture production. Government officials noted that unless traders are moving goods for sale (which requires a customs check and a value-added tax, or VAT), cross-border activity is rarely policed and people generally move freely.³⁷ Nonetheless, simple border-crossing fees are still imposed at official checkpoints. As one motorking driver from Silibelle in Ghana’s Upper West Region explained, “When crossing in the motorking,³⁸ we pay 40 cedis or more at each point. Sometimes even the individuals we carry are each charged at least five cedis per head.”

The Paga (Ghana)–Dakola (Burkina Faso) crossing is the largest major formal border crossing in northern Ghana; it boasts multiple security operators, including customs, narcotics control, military, and immigration. Customs and immigration officials are also posted at the crossings at Hamile–Ouessa, Tumu–Léo, Kulungungu–Boulgou, and Pulmakom–Cinkassé (Togo).³⁹

Most short-haul trade typically occurs through unapproved routes, because the vast 602-kilometre border between Burkina Faso and Ghana has very few customs checkpoints. For example, the primary trade centre in the north is Paga, but market villages like Gwollu in the Sissala West district (see Figure 5) have significant unapproved cross border activity due to the proximity of smaller Burkinabé communities across the border.

Gwollu is a secondary trade centre for Tumu, Ghana, near the border with Burkina Faso; but unpaved roads and dense forest mean that Tumu is a 1.5-hour drive away and Paga an almost four-hour drive away.⁴⁰ Security officials reportedly engage in routine extortion along both sides of the border, levying arbitrary fees upon local inhabitants crossing the border to attend a market.⁴¹ For example, one male transporter in Hamile said: “There are some Burkinabé police barriers on the road that take fees of

33 Interview with male cattle trader, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

34 Kiemdé et al. (2022), ‘The international corridor of Ouessa: a vector of local development and “regional integration from the bottom”. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 10 (8). 2022. p. 155-167.

35 Ibid., p. 160.

36 Ibid., p. 164.

37 Interview with senior immigration officer, Paga, Kassena Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.

38 A three-wheeled motorcycle with a cargo bed.

39 Interview with chief of customs, Paga, Kassena Nankana West district, Upper East Region, February 2024.

40 FGD with traders, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, December 2023.

41 A senior official from the Ministry of National Security of Ghana explained that what civilians might perceive as ‘extortion’ by border security may be the security providers’ attempt to collect taxes on goods that are being unlawfully moved across borders, circumventing taxes. He highlighted confusion around border security mechanisms



Credits: Satellite imagery © Maxar Technologies 2024.

Figure 5. Gwollu Market, Ghana, April 2023

between 1,000 (£1.27) to 5,000 (£6.34) CFA.”⁴² Meanwhile, a female trader also from Hamile said: “There are three [security] stops in addition to the two [official] checkpoints or border posts. They charge fees and tolls at all these places, and the charge is 20 cedis per bag. No receipts are issued after payment.”⁴³

Formal and informal trade flows across borders

Very few border crossings featured in this chapter are formally approved crossing points. According to Ghana’s 2000 Immigration Act, the only formal crossings are located at Tumu, Hamile, and Paga.⁴⁴ However, local traders in smaller border towns often walk across the border to Burkina Faso via shorter routes (see Figure 6), rather than travel long distances to inconvenient formal posts, resulting in lost time at markets.

Where traders regularly evade formal checkpoints and customs, these informal trade centres become ripe for smuggling and trafficking activities that feed into the illicit supply chain and the region’s informal economy. Despite the presence of three major cross-border checkpoints in the area, smuggling thrives in the Upper West Region of Ghana: in Sissala West district, through the Gwollu route; Sissala East district, through the Tumu–Léo pass; and in Lambussie–Karni District, by way of Hamile.

⁴² KII with a female trader from Hamile, Lambussie district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

⁴³ KII with a female trader from Hamile, Lambussie district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

⁴⁴ Ghana Immigration Services, (2000), ‘Ghana Immigration Act 2000,’ (Act 573). <https://ir.parliament.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/1860/ACT%20573.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=3>. Accessed January 2024.



Credits: © Maxar Technologies 2024.

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

The smuggling of grains and cereals from Burkina Faso drastically increased when Burkina Faso banned exports of cereals in 2021.⁴⁵ As one Burkinabé transporter from Pô explained: “Because of the ban, we all now take the more discreet routes through the bush, bypassing the formal crossings like Paga to trade cereals in Ghana.”⁴⁶

Grains, petrol, fertiliser, clothing, cars, and motorbikes are regularly smuggled across the border and sold in these trade centres.⁴⁷ The major markets in the Sissala West and East districts include trade centres in Tumu, Gwollu, Fielmua, Jeffisi, and Zini. Aside from Paga, only the Gwollu and Fielmua markets allow for cross-border trade, due to the land pass with Burkina Faso.⁴⁸ To the west, the Hamile market is the primary commercial trade centre in Lambussie–Karni district, where it is the only market with official permanent stalls and infrastructure, although there are smaller markets in Piina, Suke, and Karne.⁴⁹

Some of the trade in commodities flows in specific directions (north or south). Trade flows shift based on prices and circumstances, such as seasonal changes and instability. Trade is informal when commodities

45 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. ‘GIEWS - Global Information and Early Warning System – Country Briefs – Burkina Faso.’ <https://www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=BFA#>; www.ipcinfo.org/%20.

46 KII with male transporter from Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, 15 December 2023.

47 Fifty-three KIIs across the Hamile and Paga border regions, in Hamile, Gwollu, and Paga, Ghana, November–December 2023.

48 Sissala West District Assembly, (2020), ‘Composite budget for 2020-2023: Programme based budget estimates for 2020’, <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/composite-budget/2020/UW/Sissala-West.pdf>.

49 Lambussie District Assembly (2021), ‘Composite budget for 2022: Programme based budget estimates for 2021’, <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/composite-budget/2022/UW/LBA.pdf>.

are traded through unapproved border crossings other than Paga–Dakola or Hamélé–Ouessa, where customs and immigration are present.⁵⁰

For example, fertiliser and fuel are primarily traded from Ghana into Burkina Faso. However, traders said fuel was sometimes traded in the opposite direction, from Burkina Faso into Ghana. However, this is rare, and both localised and minimal when it does occur.⁵¹ Similarly, although vegetables and fruits primarily trade from the Sahel into Ghana, farmers in Ghanaian border towns such as Paga and Navrongo with access to irrigation systems that allow them to farm year-round will trade small amounts of produce with communities in the Sahel during the dry season.⁵²

Additionally, cereals are generally traded from Burkina Faso to Ghana through markets in Paga, Hamile, and Wechiau. In Gwollu, cereals are traded from Ghana to Burkina Faso instead.⁵³ This is because Gwollu and its environs are home to commercial cereal farmers, and merchants find it easier to move cereals immediately across the border into Burkina Faso through an unapproved, unpaved route, instead of travelling over 100 kilometres to border customs posts in Tumu or Paga.⁵⁴

Large-scale traders, mostly from southern Ghana, who have lower operational costs due to the volumes they trade, travel to Gwollu to buy cereals in bulk to sell in the south of the country, according to focus groups in Gwollu. These bigger businesses offer lower prices than are offered in Burkina Faso, possibly explaining Gwollu residents' preference to sell across the border.⁵⁵

The primary interactions between short- and long-haul traders generally occur when truck drivers transporting long-haul traded goods buy consumable goods – like premade food or juices – from sellers located near truck stops, fuel depots, and border crossings.⁵⁶ Other interactions between these two types of traders include vegetable sales (particularly of onions and tomatoes): local traders purchase wholesale quantities of produce from long-haul truck drivers shipping the goods from the Sahel into Ghana for sale in local markets and towns along the border.⁵⁷ This type of commercial transaction only occurs in major cross-border towns that host long-haul truck traffic.

Smuggling is rampant in Paga (according to field data). The Kassena–Nankana West district has a porous border, despite the significant security and customs positions at the Paga customs checkpoint.⁵⁸ Fertiliser,

50 The research in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 found that the direction of commodity flows differs depending on the season and other circumstances, such as insecurity. Chapter 2 includes 75 KIIs in Ghana (Wa, Wechiau, Hamile, Gwollu, and Paga) and 75 KIIs in Burkina Faso (Batié, Ouessa, Hamélé, Pô, and Dakola), carried out between November–December 2023.

51 FGD with fuel traders, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, November 2023.

52 This is based on an analysis of the KIIs conducted in the Hamile and Paga Border Regions by assessing trade shifts and changes observed in each KII in both Ghana and Burkina Faso. (Fifty-three KIIs in Hamile, Gwollu, and Paga, Ghana, November–December 2023; 49 KIIs in Ouessa, Hamélé, Pô and Dakola, Burkina Faso, November–January 2024).

53 Fifty-three KIIs in Hamile, Gwollu, and Paga, Ghana, November–December 2023.

54 FGD Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

55 FGD Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

56 FGD with traders in Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, December 2023.

57 FGD with traders in Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, December 2023; three KIIs with trucker drivers, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, December 2023.

58 The research team visited the border crossing, and the customs officials showed the team how fluid and porous the border crossing is. For example, to demarcate the border with Burkina Faso, there is one stone on the ground, several yards from the border crossing, that marks where the border exists. As a result, civilians living on the Burkina Faso side of the border near Paga still consider themselves to be Ghanaian citizens, receiving mail stamped for Ghana and participating in elections and civic activities in Ghana. Interview with senior customs official, and site visit of border, Paga, Kassena Nankana district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.



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

Figure 7. Fuel stations along the N10 route between Paga and Navrongo, Ghana

building materials, guns, frozen foods, motorbikes, mined gold, and fuel are smuggled through unofficial border crossing points.⁵⁹ Additionally, counterfeit products such as pharmaceuticals, weapons, and by-products aligned with artisanal gold (e.g. cyanide and mercury) are commonly smuggled through the Hamile border region.⁶⁰ There is also evidence of significant sex and human trafficking along the Paga–Pô road.⁶¹

Ghanaian government officials said that it is likely that JNIM militants are involved in these smuggling networks, based on their significant presence across the border, and the assumption that they take refuge in Ghana.⁶² JNIM combatants and their facilitators are believed to procure basic goods, like foodstuffs, fuel, motorbike parts, medicine, weapons, weapon parts, and explosives.⁶³ Key informants also suggested that while there have been only limited sightings of JNIM combatants inside Ghana, JNIM agents and facilitators regularly frequent local border markets for basic provisions for extremists camped in the bush in Burkina Faso.⁶⁴ Several respondents alleged that local motorking drivers serve as

59 Aning K. (2023), 'Vulnerability Assessment on the Threats of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation in Northern Regions of Ghana,' United Nations Development Programme, 19 February 2023, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-06/undp_ghana_violent_extremism_assessment_in_northern_regions_of_ghana.pdf, p. 36.

60 Global Initiative (2021), 'Illicit hub mapping,' n.d.

61 International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Internal and cross-border adult sex trafficking in Ghana: a baseline report,' published online 21 September 2020, <https://publications.iom.int/books/internal-and-cross-border-adult-sex-trafficking-ghana>.

62 Interview with government officials in Accra and Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, February 2024.

63 Interview with senior government officials, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, February 2024.

64 Three KIs and FGD in Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

collaborators and interlocutors for JNIM, sourcing materials and resources for them from Ghana,⁶⁵ and that these facilitators transport JNIM combatants via clandestine routes across the border to avoid border security officials.⁶⁶

In Ghana, fuel smuggling is a critical livelihood for youth in border towns like Paga (see Figure 7).⁶⁷ In recent years, the level of smuggling near the Paga–Dakola border crossing has reduced amid governmental clampdowns on both sides of the border.⁶⁸ Curbing this illicit trade renders border residents vulnerable to exploitation, due to their lack of access to fuel (most consumers of smuggled fuel are Burkinabé civilians living within 20–30 kilometres of the border with Ghana).⁶⁹

“Some of the traders here no longer travel to Burkina Faso to trade fuel and rice. We mostly just give the orders to the truck and motorking drivers who have the contacts of those in Burkina Faso who placed the orders, then they will go and deliver the goods and bring us the money”, one female trader from Djarwia in Ghana’s Upper West Region said. “I personally no longer go to Burkina Faso unless I have to do something very important. I don’t go because it is unsafe... I mostly give it (goods to trade) to the drivers to transport on my behalf.”⁷⁰

Government efforts to control cross-border flows are reportedly creating space for non-state actors to exploit local communities, in particular youth. Underemployed youth who rely on smuggling fuel may also be pushed to engage with violent extremists and serious organised crime: there are growing reports that some young people in Paga who worked in fuel smuggling now collaborate with (and have possibly joined) VEOs.⁷¹

Increased government focus on security and curbing illicit cross-border activity also has impacted the gender dynamics of trade flows in northern Ghana. In Paga, former fuel traders said a growing number of men are leaving the fuel trade, which is increasingly illicit due to measures adopted in 2023 to curtail it.⁷² Traders said that the trade now relies more heavily on secret cross-border smuggling networks. This brings fuel traders⁷³ – who generally have extensive knowledge of the terrain in Burkina Faso and smuggling markets – into close interaction with armed actors, possibly including VEOs.⁷⁴ Many Ghanaian fuel traders reportedly now trade vegetables, cereals, and medicine – traditionally the role of women – across the border into Dakola, Burkina Faso, due to the insecurity.⁷⁵

65 Three KIIs in Gwollu (Sissala West district, Upper West Region) and five KIIs with fuel traders in Paga (Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region) Ghana, December 2023.

66 FGD with fuel traders in Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, December 2023.

67 Ibid.

68 Interview with fuel depot owner, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.

69 FGD with fuel traders in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

70 Interview with female trader, Djarwia, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, November 2023.

71 Interview with fuel depot owner, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024, and 2 KIIs with fuel traders, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, December 2023.

72 Five KIIs with fuel traders, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, December 2023.

73 Three KIIs with fuel traders in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

74 FGD with fuel traders in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

75 FGD with fuel traders in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, December 2023, and corroborated by interview with fuel depot owner, Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, February 2024.

Security factors impacting cross-border livelihoods

This section discusses the impact of various security-related factors on local livelihoods and trade dynamics in the Hamile and Paga border regions. Similar trends are found in the nearby Wa border region. Where relevant, the report references dynamics elsewhere, particularly the government's approach to containing violent extremism in the Sahel by hardening borders and deploying security to under-governed space.

VEO and armed group activity

For several years, Burkinabé security forces and the government's civilian-led vigilante forces – the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie, VDP) – managed to repel JNIM in the Centre-Sud Region.⁷⁶ However, by early 2024, reports began to circulate of JNIM cells and individuals moving with impunity in the area north of Léo.⁷⁷

The road between Paga and Pô is well policed due to the Sankara military base in Pô (Burkina Faso), which was reinforced after a military campaign in mid-2023 that dismantled a small JNIM cell in Gomboussougou (50 kilometres north of Pô).⁷⁸ The Paga and Hamile border regions have so far been mostly spared of VEO violence, although there are anecdotal reports of armed group incursions into border communities (mentioned above).⁷⁹

In mid-2023, the Burkinabé government restored some stability to the Centre-Sud Region, bordering northern Ghana, by increasing deployments of military (Forces Armées du Burkina Faso, FAB) and the VDP, which operates as an auxiliary force to augment conventional security operations. This allowed for trade and regular activities to resume, despite minor intercommunal clashes reported near Pô and Guiaro. However, in May 2023, the village of Bofian near Ousessa was the site of clashes between VDP and JNIM, which had emerged from the forests around Boura (roughly ten kilometres south).⁸⁰

76 Assessment based on 12 months of Elva monthly regional security reporting, covering the Sahel and Coastal West Africa, January–December 2023.

77 Interview with Burkinabé security officer in Léo, Burkina Faso, February 2024.

78 Interview with Dakola customs chief, Dakola, Burkina Faso, February 2024.

79 Six KIs in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, 7 December 2023.

80 Drawn from a May 2023 Elva security monitoring report based on KIs and ACLED data. Several Burkinabé respondents explained how the local population continues to work closely with the VDP, which they believe has allowed the government to interdict individual violent extremists that operate by and through Léo, Boura, and Silly. However, it remains unclear how reliable this cooperation is. The VDP in the region are overseen by local authorities, and, in the absence of extensive command chains, face little accountability for abuses against civilians under the guise of 'counterterrorism efforts.' Respondents expressed worry over sharing information about suspicious persons and activities due to concern over how the information will be used against them and their communities. As a result, trust between locals and the government is breaking down. (FGD with female traders in Hamélé, Ioba Province, Sud-Ouest Region, Burkina Faso, January 2024). However, the research also found that locals believe that due to the VDP's better public reputation, JNIM fighters have impersonated VDP personnel during recent attacks to erode local trust in them by acting indiscriminately and violently (FGD, with male traders in Ousessa, Ioba Province, Sud-Ouest Region, Burkina Faso, January 2024).

From June to August 2023, violence intensified in the Centre-Ouest and Centre-Sud regions in Burkina Faso. In Centre-Ouest, small towns like Vara, Mao Néssira, and Tô, which are located within 50 kilometres of the city of Léo, saw clashes between VDP and armed groups that appear to be part of JNIM.⁸¹ Interviewees in Burkina Faso said it was likely that JNIM still has a significant intelligence network, raising suspicion in local communities about the presence of collaborators.⁸²

VEO-linked violence was reported in Dangué, Vara, Kala, Boufian, Bouyague, and Boura. However, the security situation stabilised quickly in Boura and Bieha owing to the regular presence of police and VDP, which improved mobility and restored daily activities, like markets.⁸³ Since then, instability in this border area has been primarily linked to intercommunal tensions, resulting from the forced repatriation of Burkinabé, who were expelled from Ghana in July 2023,⁸⁴ and occasional farmer–herder violence due to competition for resources in the rainy season, as in Guairo in the Centre-Sud throughout the dry season from October to March in 2023.⁸⁵

In September and October 2023, reports of armed individuals in the Silly area (75 kilometres northwest of Léo on the R16) rocked the Centre-Ouest Region. Sightings of JNIM spies in the area prompted fears in the community about using the road linking Vara, Tô, and Mao Nessira, north of Léo.⁸⁶ Increased security deployments around Léo, Bieha, Boura, Tiébélé, and Pô, helped to stabilise the border in Centre-Sud, Burkina Faso. However, by November, suspicions that JNIM was active in the area intensified when the population located around Niabouri,⁸⁷ 30 kilometres north of Boura and the Ghanaian border, was displaced.⁸⁸

Reporting indicates that JNIM may be expanding its covert presence in Ghana's borderland regions. As JNIM sightings increased in Burkina Faso in September 2023, Ghanaian authorities interdicted presumed JNIM militants who had crossed the border into Fatchu (west of Gwollu), in the Sissala West district.⁸⁹ Fatchu is a small market town that drives informal and less high-revenue trade.⁹⁰ The town is accessible

81 June–August 2023, Elva security monitoring report based on KIs and ACLED data. 2024.

82 Twelve KIs in Ouessa, Hamélé, Dakola, and Pô, Burkina Faso, December–January 2024.

83 June–August 2023, Elva security monitoring report based on KIs and ACLED data.

84 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 'Press release on the expulsion of Burkinabé refugees and asylum seekers by Ghana'. 22 July 2023, <https://achpr.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2023-07-22/press-release-expulsion-burkinabe-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-ghana#>.

85 Assessment from all Elva monthly regional security reports, January–December 2023.

86 September–December 2023, Elva security monitoring report based on KIs and ACLED data.

87 As of the end of 2023, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), a data project with the Norwegian Refugee Council, registered 2.1 million IDPs in Burkina Faso, with 1.1 million people displaced during 2022 and 2023. However, this figure is considered an underestimate by IDMC, as it only accounts for IDPs registered with the government. Many more people are either unable to register with the government or choose not to. This number likely increased in 2024 due to worsening violence. Moreover, statistics for small towns like those referenced in this report are often underreported or not reported at all. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/burkina-faso/#displacement-data>.

88 Interview with government officials, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, February 2024.

89 Interview with terrorism analyst in Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

90 Ghanaian government officials confirmed that these communities are sometimes used as spaces for JNIM combattants to hide and rest. Interviews with three officials, Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

from Ghana by unpaved routes, allowing licit and illicit trade to occur beyond the view of security.⁹¹ The militants had fled by the time the government responded to reports about JNIM in Fatchu.⁹²

The Fatchu incident underscores the extent to which JNIM already has a significant presence inside Ghana, and how it anchors its presence in the country around strategically located hard-to-access towns that lack nearby security forces. Furthermore, JNIM could anchor itself in Fatchu due to the culture, language, and ethnicity the town's community members share with towns across the border in Burkina Faso.⁹³ JNIM does not appear to operate only on the fringes of Ghana, along the border. Instead, it seems likely that the group has deeper ties in the cities and town centres located further south in the country. In September 2023, security forces found bicycles and backpacks left by suspected VEOs near Jirapa, in the Upper West Region.⁹⁴ Jirapa is a municipal capital that serves as a significant trade and hospitality centre, connecting Wa to Hamile and key entry and exit points on the border with Burkina Faso, including via several informal routes. The remote nature of Fatchu and other border towns enables JNIM members to rest and easily flee security on either side of the border.

Ghanaian interviewees also described VEOs confronting them during their trips into Burkina Faso. However, several respondents said they were allowed to pass freely when they showed their Ghanaian identity cards (see Chapter 1 on Chereponi and Bawku border regions for similar anecdotes),⁹⁵ highlighting how JNIM appears to be avoiding targeting Ghanaians – for now.⁹⁶

“I have come cross them three times – once last year and twice this year,” a female trader from Hamile in Ghana’s Upper West Region, said. “They dress in long cloths, with some [draped] around their neck and head. You only see their eyes, and they are heavily armed on motorbikes. Twice, they stopped us and took our money and checked our Ghana cards to be sure we were not from Burkina Faso, after which they let us go.”⁹⁷

Additionally, data highlight how Ghanaians are aware of local community members who have joined JNIM in the northern Sahel.⁹⁸ Security patrols since the September 2023 Fatchu incident have restored some sense of security to local communities.⁹⁹ Government officials also suggested that JNIM has deliberately relocated families inside Ghana, where access to medical care, education, and other resources remains uninterrupted by conflict.¹⁰⁰

91 This border community in the Upper West Region used to have a lively hunting population with significant cross-border movement, as hunters travelled to parks in both countries for livelihoods. However, VEO threats in Burkina Faso have shuttered the hunting industry there. Ghanaians increasingly assume that because hunters are no longer active, anyone carrying a gun and crossing the border is likely a violent extremist. Based on interviews with terrorism analysts and officials, and through an assessment completed after travelling to the region during data collection.

92 Interview with government official, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, February 2024.

93 Similarly, JNIM has since engaged with small border towns like Sapelliga (see Chapter 1).

94 Interview with government official, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, February 2024.

95 Five KILs, Gwollu, Sissala West district, and Hamile, Lambussie–Karni district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

96 It is unclear why JNIM is giving a free pass to Ghanaians who present their ID during these exchanges. It is presumably in JNIM's interest not to disrupt relations with Ghanaians, as this could lead to an increased security response. When JNIM first advanced southward into Benin in 2018, there were similar reports of combatants allowing Beninese to move freely, which was assessed to foster positive relations with these communities before beginning an insurgency and recruiting locally. It can therefore be assumed that JNIM combatants are attempting to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of locals before engaging more directly in Ghana, while also preserving their ability to access border areas in Ghana.

97 Interview with female trader, Hamile, Lambussie district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

98 Three KILs Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

99 FGDs in Gwollu (Sissala West district) and Hamile (Lambussie–Karni district), Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

100 Expert interview with government officials in Gwollu and Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

Impact of non-state actors on local trade

Non-state armed groups operate with impunity, patrolling roads in the Paga–Dakola–Pô region, according to around 30 per cent of the households surveyed.¹⁰¹ Security concerns related to cross-border trade and travel have powerfully impacted local trade.

For example, Tangassogo in Burkina Faso used to be an important wholesale vegetable market for Ghanaian traders supplying produce to local markets inside Ghana. However, Ghanaian interviewees said they now travel less into Burkina Faso to supply their stands due to mounting concerns about VEO activity. Burkinabé have stepped into the void left by Ghanaian buyers and are travelling more into Ghana to sell these products. Respondents said the vegetable trade continues, despite pressure from security forces to avoid the areas (coupled with growing fears of violent extremism). However, it is more limited and increasingly informal, requiring hefty extortion fees paid to security forces to travel through the bush and smuggle vegetables out of town.¹⁰²

“Some of the traders here no longer travel to Burkina Faso to transact business for [cooking] oil and rice,” said a female trader from Jawia in Gwollu.¹⁰³ We mostly just give the orders to the truck and motorking drivers with contracts of those in Burkina Faso who placed the orders, then they will deliver and bring us the money. I personally no longer go there unless I have to do something very important. I don’t go because it is unsafe. So, though I still do my business across the border, I mostly give it to the drivers to transport on my behalf.”

Some Ghanaian traders also said that VEO attacks on larger vegetable farming communities in Burkina Faso have led farmers to abandon their farms for fear of losing their investments.¹⁰⁴

Impact of security responses

According to senior officials in the Ministry of National Security, Ghana is developing an action plan to address insecurity for long-haul truck drivers.¹⁰⁵ However, officials in border towns explained that security provided by the government can only support trade inside Ghana, given that Burkina Faso's withdrawal from ECOWAS in 2024.¹⁰⁶

As a result, many Ghanaian truck drivers now end their routes at the border in Paga, avoiding the trans-Saharan trade and contact with VEOs. Since the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) was established between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in September 2023, Nigerien and Burkinabé

¹⁰¹ Household surveys in the Upper East Region, Ghana, question 31.

¹⁰² FGD in Ouessa, Ioba Province, Sud-Ouest Region, Burkina Faso, January 2023.

¹⁰³ KII with a female trader from Jawia, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2024.

¹⁰⁴ FGD, Gwollu, Sissala West district, Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with the Ministry of National Security, Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Ghanaian government officials in Accra and in the north shared concerns in February 2024 about the impact on local and transnational trade if the ECOWAS regional trade bloc becomes ineffective because of the Sahel states' exit. In late February 2024, for example, Côte d'Ivoire repatriated over 100 Malian and Burkinabé labour migrants, in response to the AES pulling out of ECOWAS. This move was widely seen as the first step towards ending the economic community's freedom of movement and labour conditions.

JNIM involvement in fuel smuggling through Paga

JNIM's involvement in the fuel trade through Paga, Gwollu, and Tumu, onward to Pô and Léo respectively, is believed to be limited to their agents' capacity to procure fuel from smugglers. As one young male street vendor in Pô explained: "There are young people who return to Ghana to buy gasoline and explosives that they bring back to the conflict in Burkina Faso". In other parts of the Sahel, such as in the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso, where JNIM has more capacity to control roads and clash directly with the security forces, JNIM members have diverted the fuel trade, and tax and resell fuel. The group has also seized and destroyed entire convoys of fuel tankers in Burkina Faso to further disrupt the regional fuel trade and the regional political situation.

In general, JNIM's direct engagement with the fuel trade is limited to basic consumption. JNIM's agents reportedly buy smuggled fuel directly from the smuggling networks in the Paga–Dakola pass. Ghanaian fuel smugglers are sometimes interdicted by Burkinabé security forces due to the presumption that their fuel was supporting JNIM activities in the eastern regions, a suspicion based on the large profits smugglers make selling cheap fuel in Burkina Faso.

As Burkinabé security forces cracked down on the fuel trade, several Burkinabé KILs reported that JNIM has started stealing fertiliser, diesel, pesticides, and water machinery from farmers in rural areas outside of Léo and Pô. Vegetable farms in southern Burkina Faso rely on water pumping machines that require large quantities of diesel, and VEOs have reportedly attacked farmers to steal the fuel used to run the machinery. Respondents also reported that armed groups are smuggling ammunition across the border by concealing it in fertiliser and pesticide-spraying equipment.

security forces have intermittently conducted joint security convoys¹⁰⁷ in areas where JNIM has significant territorial control. Nonetheless, reports of insecurity persist.¹⁰⁸

Ghana's reorganisation of its northern borders in 2018 was aimed at diversifying governance authorities and creating more localised capacity for municipalities to deploy security and governance resources to remote areas.¹⁰⁹ The north was split into five regions, and Ghana's security apparatus redeployed and configured.¹¹⁰ Since 2020, the newly established battalions for the Upper East and Upper West regions have been equipped with reinforcements to cover the borders with Togo and Burkina Faso.¹¹¹ Under Ghana's Operation Conquered Fist – an inter-ministerial approach to addressing the VEO threats from the Sahel – security in the north is currently coordinated by several security-focused ministries, including intelligence, military, police, and immigration.

In practice, the border towns in this chapter have experienced a mostly intelligence-led effort to reduce JNIM presence in the north, focused on tackling insecurity in porous remote areas like Sapellega and

107 Abdul Zanya Salifu, '#Sahel #Security Hundreds of trucks under heavy security escort from Kaya heading north to Dori and eventually to Niger,' X (formerly Twitter), 20 February 2024, <https://twitter.com/AbdulRZanya/status/1760028443226374627?s=20>.

108 Interview with a government official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

109 Interviews with Ministry of National Security officials, Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

110 Interviews with municipal authorities in Tamale and Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

111 Interviews with senior intelligence and border security officers in Gwollu and Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

Fatchu.¹¹² This could create challenges for the Ghanaian government in collecting intelligence in border communities, given that most officials deployed to the area do not speak French. Additionally, Ghanaians appear to rely heavily on intelligence from Burkinabé security officials, who often lack a strong grasp of movements in their interior, according to security officials interviewed for this research. Recent political tensions between Sahel and ECOWAS states could also weaken this information pipeline.¹¹³

BORSEC (shorthand for ‘border security’) refers to Ghana’s holistic community-driven border security mechanism, like an early-warning/early-response network. However, underfunding and under-resourcing has rendered the instrument largely inefficient.¹¹⁴ This limitation casts doubt on authorities’ capacity to effectively buttress borders from violent non-state actors in the Sahel, especially since JNIM activity in Ghana remains discreet and functions via complex illicit networks deeply entrenched in the local population. Undoing deeply embedded insurgencies requires a more robust, proactive, and coordinated counterterrorism approach, which Ghana has not yet deployed. One security official in northern Ghana said, “Unlike Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire, we have not been attacked. So, something must be working in our counterterrorism strategy.”

In Burkina Faso, traders reported observing fewer security forces along the border and at fewer checkpoints further inland, as the Burkinabé government has prioritised security deployments to respond to active conflicts with violent extremists.¹¹⁵ Instead, truck drivers and traders said they regularly encounter more VDP checkpoints and security forces conducting mobile patrols.¹¹⁶ Burkinabé security forces have apparently become more mobile to avoid attacks by VEOs on static locations, like bases, leaving the VDP to govern and secure areas in the government’s absence.

Insecurity in southern regions is also likely drawing human resources away from securing the border with Ghana. But extortion has increased on the borders, in both Ghana and Burkina Faso, according to all respondents. They said fees to pass through checkpoints range between CFA 1,000 and 5,000, or £1.30 and £6.50, and are levied on individuals, cattle, produce, and/or vehicles. The VDP reportedly extort lower fees, sometimes as little as £0.30. Failure to present a proper identity card can result in detention or fines upwards of CFA 10,000 (or £13).¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, research found an increased security presence on the Ghanaian side of the border, with more checkpoints on both formal and informal routes.¹¹⁸ Borders are hardening under counterterrorism and counter-trafficking efforts that aim to curb the illicit trade that feeds the finances and activities of armed groups in the Sahel.

112 Multiple interviews conducted in Accra, Gwollu, and Paga indicate that Operation Conquered Fist requires more resources to address VEO threats on the border.

113 Interviews with government official in Paga and Gwollu in February 2024 highlighted how much Ghana relies on cross-border exchanges for its insights into what is occurring in Burkina Faso with regards to security. However, officials also acknowledged that there is currently no process to mitigate fallout from the Sahel exit from ECOWAS, and how this will impact cross-border exchanges and diplomatic relations.

114 Interviews with municipal authorities in Tamale and Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

115 FGD with traders in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

116 Ibid.

117 This was an aggregate of fees cited by KIIs in Pô and Dakola (Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region) and Ouessa and Hamélé (Ioba Province, Centre-Ouest Region), Burkina Faso, December–January 2024.

118 Almost every KII in the Hamile and Paga border regions in Ghana cited the increased security force presence during their interviews; Hamile (Lambussie–Karni district), Gwollu (Sissala West district), and Paga (Kassena–Nankana West district), December 2023.

Ghana's government has clamped down on longstanding, informal cross-border movement with checks at points of exit and entry, as well as increased patrols by the immigration services, military, and police (under Operation Conquered Fist). This limits livelihoods and access to resources for communities that rely on these activities, and restricts movement that allows them to obtain these goods. These border security mechanisms also reduce profits by exposing traders to security officials who extort money before allowing onward movement.¹¹⁹

According to one female vendor who regularly travels to markets in Ouessa, Burkina Faso, from Hamile, Ghana, to sell her goods, "Today is a market day and the day is almost over. I haven't made sales even up to a 100 cedis (or £4.76), the whole day. In the past, I would have sold more than 1,000 cedis (or £47.57), at the very least by this time."

The growing security presence and the hardening of borders due to counterterrorism measures has resulted in less roadside banditry in Ghana, according to traders.¹²⁰ At the same time, the expanded presence of security forces raises perceptions of insecurity among local inhabitants, despite their successes in curbing attacks. Traders in Paga said that community members remain afraid of seeing armed military personnel in their towns, which they view as indicators of insecurity.¹²¹ They also complain that security forces concentrate in towns and along major roads, rather than policing more remote locations where VEOs are known to operate.¹²²

The household survey of local residents yielded different results than KIIs among traders along the border. Local residents generally viewed the Ghanaian security presence positively. Less than 20 per cent of household survey respondents said they felt that general security at the border – including customs agents, national guard officers, and army personnel – hinders trade "a little" or "a lot". A similar percentage said they felt that the increased security presence had eased cross-border trade.¹²³

The field data showed some variation in the views of local residents toward different security actors deployed along the border in the Hamile and Pô regions. For example, interviewees in Pô and Léo in Burkina Faso were relatively pro-VDP and overwhelmingly supported the state's counterterrorism operations.¹²⁴ "The presence of security forces (police, VDP) has a positive impact on our travels," a female trader from Pô in the Centre-Sud Region of Burkina Faso said. "They are the ones who help us get through when an area is said to be dangerous – we just have to call them, tell them the day of the trip, and they come and escort us."¹²⁵

This view is likely influenced by relative stability in the areas of research (Centre-Sud and Centre-Ouest, bordering Ghana) where JNIM is less violent. There is a heavy VDP presence in these regions, with

119 Interview with former intelligence officer, Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

120 Twelve KIIs in Hamile (Lambussie–Karni district) and Gwollu (Sissala West district), Upper West Region, Ghana, December 2023.

121 FGD with traders in Paga, Kassena–Nankana West district, Upper East Region, Ghana, December 2023.

122 Ibid.

123 Household surveys in the Upper East Region, Ghana, question 31.

124 Burkina Faso has, since 2016, been waging a war on terrorism that first began in the north, near the border with Mali, but has since expanded to every region of the country. Because the Centre-Sud and Centre-Ouest regions remain the least impacted by VEO- and counterterrorism-linked violence, the government has prioritised sending security forces to other areas of the country that are hotspots, leaving the VDP to maintain the peace. International Crisis Group (2023), 'Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?'. Africa Report N°313 (Brussels: ICG, 15 December 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/burkina-faso/313-armer-les-civils-au-prix-de-la-cohesion-sociale>.

125 Interview with female trader, Pô, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, November 2023.

security forces deployed to less stable areas.¹²⁶ Perceptions about the VDP are therefore complicated, as one trader from Hamélé, Burkina Faso, explained: “The presence of the VDPs has a double impact: a positive impact for the security of our locality, but also, the VDPs take themselves for customs officers – they arrest the population, search their luggage, and force them to pay fines.”

Most respondents also viewed the military positively, but regarded police, immigration, and customs less favourably – most likely because they more frequently charge bribes.¹²⁷

Considerations for policy and programming in the Wa, Hamile, and Paga border regions

It is crucial that measures are instituted to reduce insecurity along regional routes used by large segments of the population in Burkina Faso and Ghana. This research indicates that the perceived negative impacts on livelihoods of border security and counterterrorism efforts in borderland regions can outweigh the positive security effects for many local residents. Ghana's Operation Conquered Fist made notable gains in improved security at border crossings. But the overall approach has limitations. First, the small number of personnel that are deployed to hotspot areas means that responses run the risk of being more reactive than proactive, as a limited number of personnel will cover large swaths of territory. This can be more problematic for the local population if these security interventions shutter daily life and market activity. Second, language and access constraints, and over-reliance on Burkina Faso, mean that Ghana's intelligence apparatus is failing to adequately address insecurity due to armed groups in the Sahel, just across the border.

Deteriorating bilateral relations because of Sahel and ECOWAS politics make it increasingly likely that bilateral intelligence-sharing agreements could be weakened as relations are impacted by shifting regional frameworks and alliances, forcing Ghana to depend more heavily on containment and border policing. This will impact borderland communities and their livelihoods and trades. In November 2023, Ghana instituted a ‘See Something, Say Something’ campaign through its Ministry of National Security (which no longer exists) that encouraged civilians to report suspicious activities to security and government authorities. It appears that security responses to the VEO incidents in Sapellega and Fatchu in the fall of 2023 were in part due to local information resulting from these civilian sensitisation campaigns, although it is unclear how effective this approach is across all rural areas where JNIM might be active.

Policymakers should focus on tangible wins inside Ghana and Burkina Faso to help preserve local trade and life. Due to longstanding development and resource inequality in northern Ghana, the region is much less developed, with far fewer functional roads and infrastructure than the south. As a result, economic development has been much slower in the north than the south. Infrastructure and road development will help support emerging markets, while bolstering the number of border crossings will help develop,

¹²⁶ ICG (2023), ‘Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?’.

¹²⁷ KIs in Burkina Faso overwhelmingly favoured the Burkinabé Security Forces; Ouessa, Hamélé (Ilobi Province, Centre-Ouest Region), and Pô and Dakola (Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region), Burkina Faso, December–January 2024.

resource, and formalise these markets in borderland communities. This includes instituting reforms and anti-corruption efforts within Ghana's Customs Excise and Preventative Service (CEPS), which almost all respondents identified as subject to corruption in the north.

More robust border patrolling and regulation of customs management may prove more effective in the long term than efforts to 'harden' borders. Minimising potential disruption from border management policies could encourage support from local communities for their implementation. In Burkina Faso, cross-border management will have to rely heavily on Ghana working closely with the VDP, which is augmenting Burkinabé security while formal security forces deploy to hotspots in the country's north and east. VDP intelligence networks can be leveraged to work alongside security actors in areas where Ghanaian services are limited. However, the strategy is not without risk: legitimising non-state armed groups, and even pro-state militias, can lead to more indiscriminate violence against civilians. This has happened in Mali, where these non-state armed groups have carried out extrajudicial violence against groups they do not like.¹²⁸

The VDP has a history of instrumentalising and weaponising its interpretation of law enforcement and justice against groups it does not like.¹²⁹ Any effort to legitimise armed groups like this therefore requires vetting, and actions must be subject to oversight. This is unlikely to occur in Ghana, where there is a long history of political patronage supporting indiscriminate violence by vigilante groups.¹³⁰

The research found that many Burkinabé in these borderland regions rely on access to healthcare and education in Ghana. This indicates that Ghana's Immigration Services should make further adjustments to allow Burkinabé to cross the border, including approving more visas and *laissez passer* cards for people with family and jobs in Ghana.

Overall, the policy considerations and recommendations for the Hamile and Pô regions parallel those issued for other areas studied in this project: limit restrictions on cross-border movement in favour of supporting thriving borderland commercial activity and local livelihoods. The focus should be on clear wins, such as economic development, and restoring governance and security to hard-to-reach areas that might be inclined to seek security and governance from non-state actors due to longstanding isolation.

128 United States Department of State. '2019 Mali Human Rights Report'. 2019 Mali Human Rights Report - U.S. Embassy in Mali (usembassy.gov).

129 United States Department of State. '2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Burkina Faso.' <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/burkina-faso/>.

130 University of Cape Coast and Elva Community Engagement. 'Political Party Youth "Vigilante" Groups in Ghana.' June 2024. <https://elva.org/wp-content/uploads/Rebranded-But-Business-As-Usual-Ghanas-Political-Party-Vigilante-Groups.pdf>.

Bibliography

ACLED, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Database, <https://acledata.com/> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Burkina Faso Crisis Continues to Spiral,' 29 August 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/burkina-faso-crisis-continues-to-spiral/>.

Aning, K. (2023), 'Vulnerability Assessment on the Threats of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation in Northern Regions of Ghana,' United Nations Development Programme, 19 February 2023, https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-06/undp_ghana_violent_extremism_assessment_in_northern_regions_of_ghana.pdf p. 36.

Bernard, A. (2021), 'Tracking Violent Extremism Spillover from the Sahel to Coastal West Africa,' Analytical Report funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021.

Chirawurah, D. (2016), 'Institutional Constituents and Community Capacity for Ebola Prevention: A Cross-Border Study of Pô in Burkina Faso and Navrongo in Ghana,' University for Development Studies Ghana, 2016, <https://r2rreports.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/institutional-constituents-and-community-capacity-for-ebola-prevention-a-cross-border-study-of-pc3b4-in-burkina-faso-and-navrongo-in-ghana-faso.pdf>.

Food and Agriculture Organization (2022), 'Burkina Faso bans exports of millet, maize and sorghum flours, complementing a ban on exports of cereal grains,' 29 March 2022, <https://www.fao.org/giews/food-prices/food-policies/detail/en/c/1492066/>.

France24 (2023), 'Ghana gets more EU aid for border security,' 28 October 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231028-ghana-gets-more-eu-aid-for-border-security>.

Hunter, M. (2022), 'Beyond blood: Gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa,' Global Initiative, November 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Marcena-Hunter-Beyond-blood-Gold-conflict-and-criminality-in-West-Africa-GI-TOC-November-2022.pdf>.

Institut national de la statistique et de la Démographie (2022), 'Résultats Cinquième Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitation,' December 2022, <https://www.insd.bf/sites/default/files/2023-02/MONOGRAPHIE%20DU%20SUD%20OUEST%205E%20RGPH.pdf>.

International Crisis Group (2023), 'Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?,' Africa Report N°313 (Brussels: ICG, 15 December 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/burkina-faso/313-armer-les-civils-au-prix-de-la-cohesion-sociale>.

International Organization for Migration (2020), 'Internal and cross-border adult sex trafficking in Ghana: a baseline report,' 21 September 2020, <https://publications.iom.int/books/internal-and-cross-border-adult-sex-trafficking-ghana>.

Kiemdé, A., Nakoulma, G., Zoma, V., and Georges Compaoré, G. (2022) 'Le corridor international de Ouessa: un vecteur de développement local et d'intégration régionale par le bas', Quest Journals, Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science 10: 8, pp. 155–167, <https://www.questjournals.org/jrhss/papers/vol10-issue8/1008155167.pdf>.

Lambussie District Assembly, 'Composite Budget for 2022: Programme based budget estimates for 2021,' <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/composite-budget/2022/UW/LBA.pdf>.

Banya, N., Chingono, N., and Phiri, F. (2023), 'African Smallholder Farmers count the cost of fertilizer price spike,' Reuters, 22 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/african-smallholder-farmers-count-cost-fertilizer-price-spike-2023-03-22/>.

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

Salifu, A. Z., '#Sahel #Security Hundreds of trucks under heavy security escort from Kaya heading north to Dori and eventually to Niger,' X (formerly Twitter), 20 February 2024, <https://twitter.com/AbdulRZanya/status/1760028443226374627?s=20>.

Sissala West District Assembly, 'Composite Budget for 2020-2023: Programme based budget estimates for 2020,' <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/composite-budget/2020/UW/Sissala-West.pdf>.

Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (2020), 'Smuggling, Hoarding, Major Challenges of Fertiliser Subsidy Program 2020,' <https://peasantfarmers.com/2021/06/15/smuggling-hoarding-major-challenges-of-fertiliser-subsidy-programme/>.

The Small Arms Survey, 'Out of Control: The Trafficking of Improvised Explosive Device Components and Commercial Explosives in West Africa,' November 2023, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Report-2023-IED-West-Africa-EN.pdf>.

UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA) Sahel (2022), 'Trafficking in Medical Products in the Sahel,' November 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_medical_2023.pdf.

UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA) Sahel (2023), 'Fuel Trafficking in the Sahel,' 27 February 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_fuel_2023.pdf.

Upper West Regional Coordinating Council – Government of Ghana, Annual progress report for 2019, March 2021, https://ndpc.gov.gh/media/Upper_West_Region_APR_2020.pdf.

West Africa Observatory - Global initiative (DATE), 'Illicit hub mapping,' <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illegal-hub-mapping/map>.



XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS