



# Life on the line: stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa

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# Executive summary

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The lives of people in the communities of the borderlands of Coastal West Africa are not bound by formal lines on a map. Rather, they create and depend on complex cross-border socio-economic activities and networks, which are increasingly threatened by violent extremist organisations (VEOs), as well as efforts to counter those groups. These efforts, if not managed properly, could engender further expansion of violent extremists.

This research project aims to inform more holistic, conflict-sensitive programming that facilitates integrated security, development, and diplomatic responses to fragility risks. It investigates how people conduct trade in Coastal West Africa's borderlands and how instability at the border impacts cross-border trade and livelihoods. The report draws on mixed-methods research, combining qualitative and quantitative field research with analysis of satellite imagery and mobility data. The research focuses on the borderland regions of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, and Togo, with field research conducted in Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Research findings were validated with officials in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana in November 2024 and January and March 2025.

## Key findings

Four key findings emerge from this research:

### 1. Maintaining cross-border trade and markets is critical to the livelihoods of border communities.

Market days are moments when populations cross the border for economic (trade), socio-cultural (events, sports, weddings, funerals, gatherings), and political (speeches, announcements) activities. Border communities in Ghana, Togo, Mali, and Burkina Faso – linked by tribal, ethnic, and social ties, as well as economic ones – procure daily household necessities and foodstuffs within a system of mutually dependent markets. Hundreds of thousands of people are involved in cross-border value chains such as producing, trading, buying, selling, and transportation.

### 2. The livelihoods of people in these borderlands are under stress.

Three key factors put livelihoods under stress throughout Coastal West African borderlands: economic pressures, insecurity, and the effects of border programming. First, economic pressures, including cost of living ripple effects from the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, an export and import ban of cereals in Ghana, Togo, and Burkina Faso, and the depreciation of the Ghanaian currency (the cedi) are central challenges for these communities. Second, these communities must contend with increasing insecurity, often fuelled by VEOs. Finally, border programming, specifically the increased presence of security forces in border regions, is having unintended adverse consequences.

### 3. Violent extremist insecurity has a clear impact on livelihoods, but is not the biggest stressor.

Insecurity disrupts cross-border trade systems, market activity, and transit along key trade routes, affecting the livelihoods of most people in the region. A significant VEO presence (and communal conflict) around the Bawku border regions (Ghana–Burkina Faso–Togo) has disrupted trade patterns and affected livelihoods, while an emerging VEO presence in the Chereponi (Ghana–Togo) and Sikasso border regions

(Mali-Burkina Faso) similarly disrupts trade. Even in areas with little VEO presence (e.g. the Wa border region in Ghana and Burkina Faso), people report that they have limited their movements as a precaution.

The study's methodology was designed to measure the effects of violent extremism and security deployments on livelihoods and the risk of violent extremism expansion. However, data collection uncovered a third stressor that emerged as more important than the others: economic challenges to livelihoods in border communities. These economic stressors amplify the violent extremism and policy response stressors to livelihoods.

#### **4. Security forces are an important new stressor on livelihoods.**

The presence and activity of military, national security, and local police forces have increased in response to violent extremism, damaging local trade and livelihoods by hardening previously open borders and levying unofficial crossing fees on commuters. In some areas, over 50 per cent of interviewees said that daily trade and cross-border movement have become less profitable due to the presence of security forces and more opportunities for these forces to command 'fees': in some regions, up to 75 per cent of people who cross borders must make informal side payments to officials, according to a household survey. Nonetheless, almost all communities still consider security actors to be legitimate and look to them to provide community security and protection. This is an important baseline from which to improve border security programming.

## **Considerations for policy and programming**

The study's findings give rise to several key considerations for policy and programming that aim to mitigate disruptions to livelihoods and limit VEO expansion and influence. Livelihood issues should be addressed as part of more holistic approaches that aim to promote stability in the region. West African governments, supported by key donors (in particular, the European Union and its member states, the United Kingdom, the United States, and multilaterals such as the UN and ECOWAS) should:

#### **1. Better align national security policy and programmatic responses with the communities' needs.**

Economic setbacks (such as inflation, currency depreciation, and protectionist policies that restrict imports and exports) are the primary issues disrupting livelihoods in the region. To date, policy responses to violent extremism – such as increased security deployments and restrictions on cross-border trade – have tended to exacerbate, rather than alleviate, stressors on livelihoods. Seeking to implement policies that require civilian support without addressing people's fundamental needs (such as ensuring uninterrupted trade) may undermine effective local engagement in counterterrorism and conflict prevention. Donors and regional governments should seek to address these issues through their local economic development and stabilisation assistance. There are also opportunities to support border communities through emerging localised responses that demonstrate their adaptability and resilience in the face of economic shocks.

#### **2. Recalibrate security deployments in Coastal West Africa's border regions to minimise disruptions to livelihoods and foster stability.**

In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin, VEOs exploit livelihood vulnerabilities by portraying national governments as neglecting citizens' needs. To prevent extremists from making similar inroads in Coastal West Africa, there are various opportunities to improve how borderland communities view their governments. Relatively high levels of support for military forces providing security in borderland

communities provides a solid foundation from which to improve relations between communities and the security forces.

As they seek to strengthen state–society relations in borderlands, governments could better clarify the roles and responsibilities of different security actors so that the population knows who they can turn to for protection. Options include engaging in regular town halls or undertaking military patrols to support people’s livelihoods (e.g. protecting markets or ensuring safe trading routes). Security forces can also improve relations by demonstrating internal accountability, including by establishing oversight systems for fee collection to address extortion, and acculturating new security forces to local practices. Improved interagency coordination could strengthen effective citizen engagement and service provision in border regions where the state’s presence has historically been uneven. National governments may also consider simplifying border crossing procedures that have traditionally been fluid, rather than increasing formalisation or hardening borders.

# Introduction

Borders of Coastal West African states do not deter violent extremists. The process by which they spread from one country to another – dubbed ‘spillover’ – has affected Côte d’Ivoire (2019), Benin (2021), and Togo (2022). The risk that violent extremists will penetrate further into coastal states, particularly Ghana and Guinea, is mounting.

Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) is the key organisation whose expansion threatens to spill over from the Sahel.<sup>1</sup> Its violent operations stretch across five West African states: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, and Benin. JNIM fighters active in the Sahel are known to rest, resupply, and recruit in Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and potentially in Senegal, Mauritania, and Guinea. However, JNIM’s expansion across borders is not inevitable or uncontrollable.<sup>2</sup>

For years, JNIM’s activities approached, but did not cross, state borders, and the group has made deliberate decisions regarding when – and when not – to attack (for example, along the Mali–Burkina Faso border in 2015; the Burkina Faso–Côte d’Ivoire border in 2020; the Burkina Faso–Benin border in 2021; and along the Burkina Faso–Togo border in 2022). A more appropriate term than ‘spillover’ to describe JNIM’s expansion to West Africa may be ‘conflict diffusion’,<sup>3</sup> reflecting an array of factors that propel violence across borders.<sup>4</sup> The right integrated response might contain diffusion. This report concentrates on one mechanism that might contribute to the diffusion of Sahelian conflicts to West Africa’s coastal borderlands: cross-border trade.<sup>5</sup>

Coastal West Africa’s borderlands are important hubs for formal and informal cross-border trade, both forms of which are economic engines for these areas.<sup>6</sup> While borders can divide social groups,

- 1 JNIM is a merger of several Al-Qaeda-linked groups (Ansar Dine, AQIM, Al-Murabitun, Katibat Macina, and later Ansarul Islam) that emerged in the context of the Algerian, Libyan, Malian, and Burkinabé conflicts. For more, see Nsaibia, H. et al. “Actor Profile: Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).” ACLED. 23 November 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/11/13/actor-profile-jamaat-nusrat-al-islam-wal-muslimin-jnim/>.
- 2 Peen Rodt A. (n.d), ‘Diffusion of Conflict,’ *Encyclopedia Princetoniensis* (Princeton University), <https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/261>. Forsberg, E. (2014), ‘Diffusion in the Study of Civil Wars: A Cautionary Tale,’ *International Studies Review* 16, no. 2 (June 2014): pp. 188–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12130>.
- 3 Buhaug, H. and Skrede Gleditsch, K., ‘Contagion or Confusion? Why Conflicts Cluster in Space,’ *International Studies Quarterly* 52: 2, 2008, pp. 215–33.
- 4 Schutte, S. and Weidmann, N.B., ‘Diffusion patterns of violence in civil wars,’ *Political Geography* 30: 11 March 2011, pp. 143–152, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.03.005>; Kibris, A., ‘The Geo-Temporal Evolution of Violence in Civil Conflicts: A Micro Analysis of Conflict Diffusion on a New Event Data Set,’ *Journal of Peace Research* 58:5 (1 September 2021): pp. 885–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320978695>. Andrew M. Linke, A.M.; Witmer, F.D.W.; and O’Loughlin J; ‘Space-Time Granger Analysis of the War in Iraq: A Study of Coalition and Insurgent Action-Reaction,’ *International Interactions* 38:4 (1 September 2012): pp. 402–425, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2012.696996>. McColl, R.W.; ‘The Insurgent State: Territorial Bases of Revolution,’ *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59: 4, December 1969, pp. 613–631, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2561830>. Other transmission belts are refugee flows, ethnic ties, and retaliation. Note that violence historically clusters around West Africa’s borders: OECD, *Borders and Conflicts in North and West Africa* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022), [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/borders-and-conflicts-in-north-and-west-africa\\_6da6d21e-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/borders-and-conflicts-in-north-and-west-africa_6da6d21e-en.html).
- 5 Murdoch, J.C. and Sandler, T., ‘Economic Growth, Civil Wars, and Spatial Spillovers,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): pp. 91–110.
- 6 Hoppe, M., Rippel, B., Gamberoni E., and Reyes, J.D. ‘Cross-border trade between Nigeria and CEMAC countries estimating trade flows, describing trade relationships, and identifying barriers to cross-border trade between Cameroon and Nigeria,’ World Bank Report No: 78283 (Washington DC: World Bank, May 2013); Afrika J.K., and Ajumbo, G., ‘Informal cross border trade in Africa: Implications and policy recommendations,’ Africa Economic Brief, Chief Economist Complex (Abidjan: African Development Bank Group, November 2012).

borderlands also exhibit strong cross-border community; social services straddle the line, including hospitals, schools, cultural festivals, and economic activity, such as farming.

People's livelihoods and lives are on the line in Coastal West Africa's borderlands due to an array of circumstances. Respondents in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, and Togo reported declining incomes, decreasing trade opportunities, diversion of trade to other areas, and a general sense of stress and livelihood pressures. Violent extremism and government security responses are additional stressors that, while significant, remain underexplored.

## Livelihoods as the key evidence gap

This study's focus on livelihoods is based on an assessment of key gaps in current literature on cross-border trade in West Africa and the impact of violent extremism. Five main areas were identified as requiring further evidence to better understand the intersection between livelihoods in Coastal West Africa's borderlands, extremist violence, and the effects of security measures aimed at countering the VEO threat.

1. West African cross-border trade is generally not well studied, but is critical to economies and local subsistence.<sup>7</sup> Estimates of the value of informal cross-border trade (ICBT) in West Africa range from 20 to as much as 90 per cent of GDP, with 43 per cent of West Africans making a living off ICBT and 30 per cent off staple foods traded through informal crossings and movement.<sup>8</sup> ICBT enables deeper regional economic integration and draws in those who otherwise would not be part of the formal economy.<sup>9</sup>
2. Existing research on the intersection of cross-border trade and violent extremism in this region focuses almost exclusively on trade and income that sustains JNIM activities. JNIM allegedly generates key income from theft of livestock ('cattle rustling'), fuel, and motorbikes, as well as kidnapping for ransom.<sup>10, 11</sup> The group also sometimes taxes commercial activities, such as artisanal gold mining, and commercial transports and routes.

7 International Food Policy Research Institute, 'Virtual event - Informal African trade: The hidden world of food flows,' 3 December 2020, <https://www.ifpri.org/event/virtual-event-informal-african-trade-hidden-world-food-flows>; <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2012.670909>.

8 Lesser, C. and Moisé-Leeman, E. 'Informal Cross-Border Trade and Trade Facilitation Reform In Sub-Saharan Africa Final Report,' 2008; Diawara, B. and Agyei Boakye, K.A. 'The impact of informal cross-border trade on regionalism and poverty reduction in West Africa', in Kobena T. Hanson, ed., *Contemporary Regional Development in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 95–118; World Bank 'Monitoring Small-Scale Cross-Border Trade in Africa: Issues, Approaches, & Lessons' (Washington, 2020).

9 Golub, S. 'Informal Cross-Border Trade and Smuggling in Africa', in Morrissey, O., Lopez, R., and Sharma, K. eds., *Handbook on Trade and Development* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781005316.00016>, pp. 179–209. See also UNDP-African Borderlands Centre (UNDP-ABC), 'Promise, Peril and Resilience: Voices of Agropastoralists in Africa's Borderland Regions,' 2022, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-12/UNDP-ABC-VOICES%20OF%20AGROPASTORALISTS%20IN%20AFRICAS%20BORDERLAND%20REGIONS%20REPORT\\_web.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-12/UNDP-ABC-VOICES%20OF%20AGROPASTORALISTS%20IN%20AFRICAS%20BORDERLAND%20REGIONS%20REPORT_web.pdf).

10 Nsaibia, H., Beevor, E., and Berger, F. 'Non-state Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM),' Global Initiative and ACLED, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JNIM-Non-state-armed-groups-and-illicit-economiesin-wWest-Africa-GI-TOC-ACLED-October-2023.pdf>; Assanvo, W., Dakano, B., Thérout-Bénoni, L., and Maïga, I., *Extrémisme violent, criminalité organisée et conflits locaux dans le Liptako-Gourma*, (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2019), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-fr.pdf>.

11 There is some evidence of potential participation in cattle rustling along the border with Burkina Faso and Ghana (Upper East), interview with Secretary General of the Fulbe council (Ghana), 6 February 2024. This could be tied to larger regional cattle theft schemes, with growing indications that cattle rustled by VEOs from the Sahel end up in cattle markets near



3. Relatively little research addresses the impact of JNIM's activities on livelihoods, and how such activities entangle the population in violence. Prior research in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa by this study's authors indicates that JNIM capitalises on peoples' needs and vulnerabilities, such as livelihood concerns, to gain influence. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, JNIM gained some support in 2020 by targeting customs officials disliked by the local population.<sup>12</sup> In Burkina Faso and Benin, the government introduced restrictions from 2016 to 2021 on herding, fishing, agricultural production, hunting, and artisanal gold mining around the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) Park. JNIM exploited government restrictions to engender local support.<sup>13</sup>
4. Some limited evidence indicates that initial JNIM engagement with local populations emerges from small-scale commercial interactions in border towns. JNIM members will build personal networks within local villages through the purchasing of day-to-day goods such as meat, cereals, vegetables, fuel, and water, reinforcing shared commercial interests at the local level. Evidence from Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire indicates that such relationships are sometimes converted over time into active support for violence.<sup>14</sup>
5. Disruptions to livelihoods are common in borderland areas, not least due to moves by the central state to depreciate currency, end subsidies, or impose export and import restrictions.<sup>15</sup> Local populations have developed a host of coping mechanisms to endure economic pressures.<sup>16</sup> Extremist activity along Coastal West Africa borderlands magnifies these challenges and disrupts cross-border trade in a new way. Similarly, government responses to a growing security threat, characterised by the significant expansion of state security in the borderlands, exacerbates pressure on local populations. The extent to which VEO activity and corresponding security responses impact livelihoods, and how communities adapt, is evolving and remains understudied.

## Report structure

This package of research comprises a summary report (this document) and four additional chapters, detailing research findings from the borderland regions of Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Mali. This summary report synthesises the findings from the four geographic areas of study on trade patterns and livelihoods, violent extremist activity, and the impact of border security responses and development

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Ghana's coastline, e.g. passing through Wechiau (Upper West) and Wanjaga (North East), Navrongo, and other border towns, with Ghana serving as the main destination market. KII interviews with cattle traders in Wechiau, Ghana, December 2023; interviews around Chereponi, interview with Fulbe trader, 7 February 2024.

- 12 Elva Community Engagement, SITREP for the Kingdom of the Netherlands (November 2020).
- 13 Brugger F., and Zongo, T. 'Salafist Violence and Artisanal Mining: Evidence from Burkina Faso,' *Journal of Rural Studies* 100 (1 May 2023): 103029, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103029>.
- 14 Bruijne, K. 'Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover,' Clingendael and ACLED, June 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/northern-benin-and-risk-violent-extremist-spillover>; Sampaio, A., Mossi, A.; Beavor, E., and Sambieni, E.N. 'Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin,' Global Initiative and ACLED, May 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/>; Bernard. A. and Mossi, A. 'An Assessment of the Experiences of Vulnerabilities of Pastoralists and At-Risk Groups in the Atakora Department of Benin,' Elva Community Engagement, January 2023.
- 15 OECD and Sahel and West Africa Club, *Borders and Conflicts in North and West Africa* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022); Radil, S.M. 'Contextualizing the Relationship Between Borderlands and Political Violence: A Dynamic Space-Time Analysis in North and West Africa,' *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37: 2, August 2021, pp. 253–271.
- 16 Andersen D.J., and Prokkola, E. 'Introduction: Embedding Borderlands Resilience,' in *Borderlands Resilience* (Routledge, 2021).

programmes. The report highlights key findings and implications for borderland policy and programming in West Africa.

This report unfolds in four primary sections. First, it examines cross-border trade and the strong role that cross-border trade plays in shaping community livelihoods. It points to unprecedented livelihood challenges in all areas studied, resulting from three factors:

1. Rising insecurity due to VEO presence and activity around the borders.
2. Restrictive practices of security forces deployed along the border to respond to the violent extremist threat.
3. Regional economic pressures.

Next, it discusses VEO presence and activity in the border regions and the impact this has on local lives and livelihoods. This section considers the ways that JNIM creates connections with local populations, and how its presence contributes to border insecurity and affects regional trade patterns.

Third, we explore the impact of government security activities in the areas studied (broadly defined as the army, gendarmerie, police, and customs and immigration officials). This section discusses how security force deployments and practices affect livelihoods, in part due to the proliferation of arbitrary payments required – and higher charges levied – on cross-border trade. It also highlights nuances in popular opinion: despite local grievances over restrictive policies and corrupt practices, residents tend to view security forces as legitimate and necessary security providers.

Finally, we raise considerations for policy and programming in Coastal West Africa's borderland regions. Roughly one quarter of stabilisation programming in the region is security-related, presenting both challenges and opportunities to achieving regional stabilisation objectives. This section offers recommendations for policy and programming to support community resilience, discussing potential avenues for recalibrating security deployments to limit livelihood disruptions in borderlands and improve relations with central government authorities.

## Research design

This study adopted a local political economy analysis (PEA) approach to understanding how people conduct trade in Coastal West Africa's borderlands and how instability at the border impacts cross-border trade and livelihoods. The goal is to inform more holistic, conflict-sensitive programming that limits the spread of violent extremism in Coastal West Africa. A detailed explanation of this study's research methodology can be found in the annex to this document.

The study sought to address four questions:

1. What are the primary cross-border trade flows, including formal and informal routes?
2. How do border communities engage in trade flows in Coastal West African borderlands?
3. What impact do violent extremist groups and governmental border management policies have on the livelihoods of communities along the border?

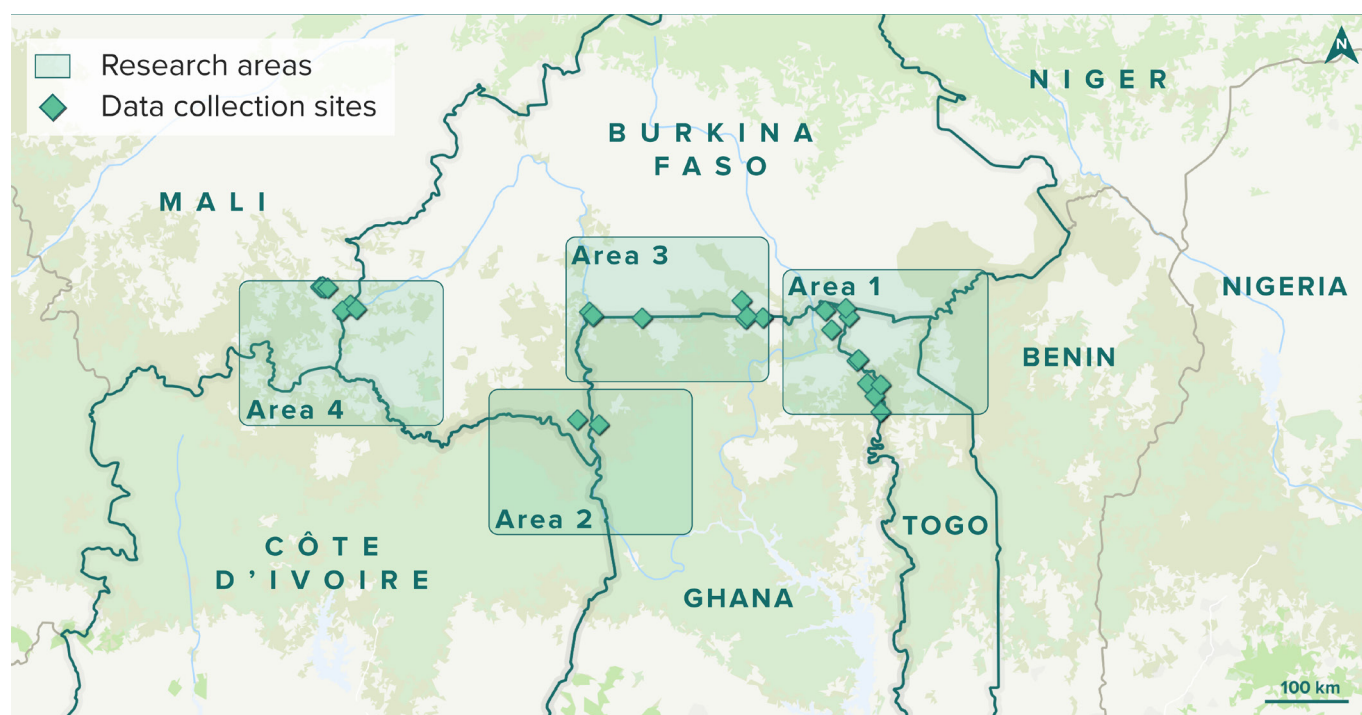
4. What implications do the research findings have for international and regional policy and programme responses?

## Research locations

Research was carried out in four border areas in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo (see Figure 1).

In each area, research concentrated on key cross-border trade hubs on both sides of the borders. Further details on target locations are included in the annex. These areas are:

- **Area 1**, which concentrates on the cross-border regions around Bawku and the cross-border region around Chereponi, Ghana. These cross-border regions present data on northeastern Ghana and neighbouring areas in Burkina Faso and Togo.
- **Area 2**, comprising the Wa cross-border regions. This includes areas around Wa, Ghana, and neighbouring areas in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.
- **Area 3**, covering the cross-border regions of Hamile and Paga, both towns in northern Ghana on the border with Burkina Faso.
- **Area 4**, which is the region around Sikasso, southwestern Mali, on the border with Burkina Faso. This cross-border region relies on data from Mali and Burkina Faso.



Source: XCEPT

**XCEPT**

**Figure 1.** Research areas



For ease of reference, this report references border regions rather than specific border crossings, villages, and markets. The four areas were selected to compare different characteristics of trade, livelihoods, governance, and levels of VEO activity. Areas with both formalised trade (such as the Bawku and Paga border regions) and informal trade patterns (such as the Hamile and Wa border regions) were selected to ensure consideration of variations in trade patterns and community dependence on cross-border trade.

Varying levels of violent extremist activity also informed case study selection. Areas with an active VEO presence (such as the Bawku border regions), an emerging VEO presence (such as the Chereponi and Sikasso border regions), and limited VEO presence (such as the Wa and Hamile border regions) were included.

Finally, areas were selected to evaluate the impact of different economic policies and security responses deployed by national governments in the four Coastal West African countries studied. Table 1 lists these areas, their prevailing types of trade activity, and the level of JNIM activity.

Overview of research zones				
Area	Trade hubs	Short hand	Trade type	JNIM presence
1	Bawku (Ghana) – Bittou (Burkina Faso) – Cinkassé (Togo)	Bawku district borders	Formalised (+Informal)	Active
	Chereponi (Ghana) – Mango (Togo)	Chereponi district borders	Semi-formal (+Informal)	Emerging
2	Wa (Ghana) – Batié (Burkina Faso)	Wa - district borders	Informal	Limited
3	Hamile (Ghana) – Ouessa (Burkina Faso); Tumu (Ghana) – Léo (Burkina Faso)	Nandom/Sissala district borders	Informal	Emerging
	Paga (Ghana) – Pô (Burkina Faso)	Kassena-Nankana district borders	Formalised (+Informal)	Limited
4	Sikasso (Mali) – Banfora (Burkina Faso)	Sikasso district borders	Semi-formal (+Informal)	Active

**Table 1.** Case selection

## Research methods

This study used a mixed-methods approach, outlined in greater detail in the annex and visualised in Figure 2 on the next page. Field research teams conducted 302 key informant interviews (KIIs) in 20 border communities across the four areas. Interviews were carried out between November 2023 and January 2024. Elva's Ghana-based consultant conducted interviews in the Hamile, Wa, and Paga border regions (Ghana). Clingendael and its research partner, the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) Ghana, carried out interviews in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions (Ghana). The Malian research organisation Cabinet Gaaya conducted interviews in the Sikasso cross-border region.

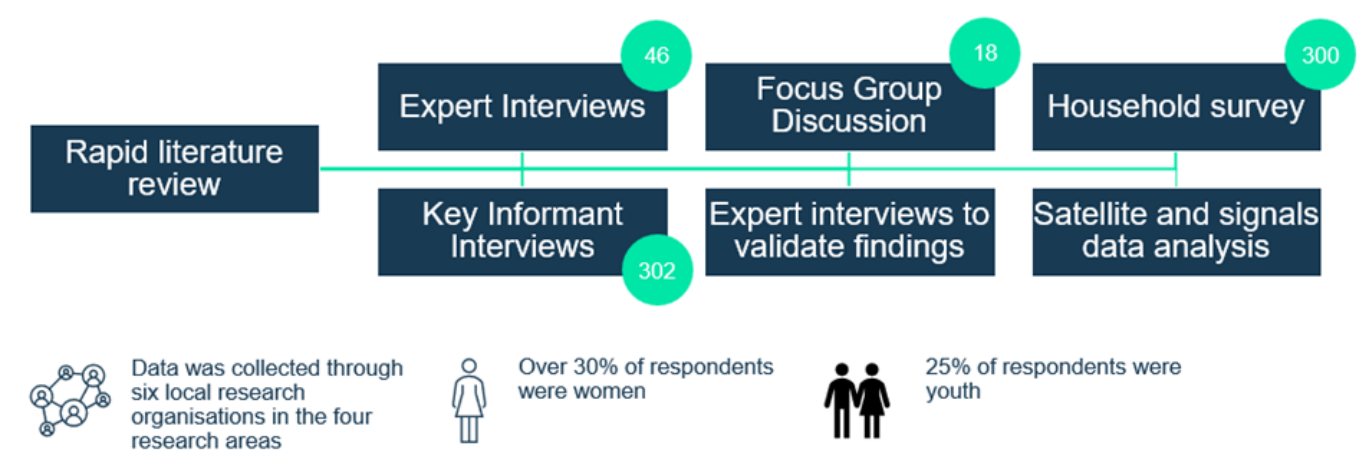
Quantitative data collection included a household survey with 300 respondents in two cross-border areas (Chereponi and Paga). A second round of surveys was administered in the same locales among 342 respondents and used to validate the initial survey results. The survey sample was selected using a random sampling method (see annex), and the questionnaire design aimed to ensure wider generalisability and validation of research findings. Data were collected from February to March 2024 by

the Afrobarometer team (CDD-Ghana and CROP-Togo) supplemented by the Institut de Stratégie et de Relations Internationales (ISRI) for data collection in Burkina Faso.

Satellite imagery and anonymised signals data supported identification of border crossings, informal routes, and the movement of vehicles across regional borders. These data were collected from January-March 2024 by Satellite Applications Catapult (SAC).

Two databases informed the research team’s analysis: a database on stabilisation programming in Coastal West Africa was compiled by the researchers from publicly available information; a second database, developed by Clingendael, monitored violent and non-violent VEO activity on the borders of Burkina Faso with Togo, Ghana, Benin, and Niger. Data obtained from ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data) on violence in Mali were added to the analytical frame.

Forty-six expert interviews with policy-makers and regional experts supported data validation and analysis. A three-week research trip to Ghana in February 2024 enabled initial analysis development.

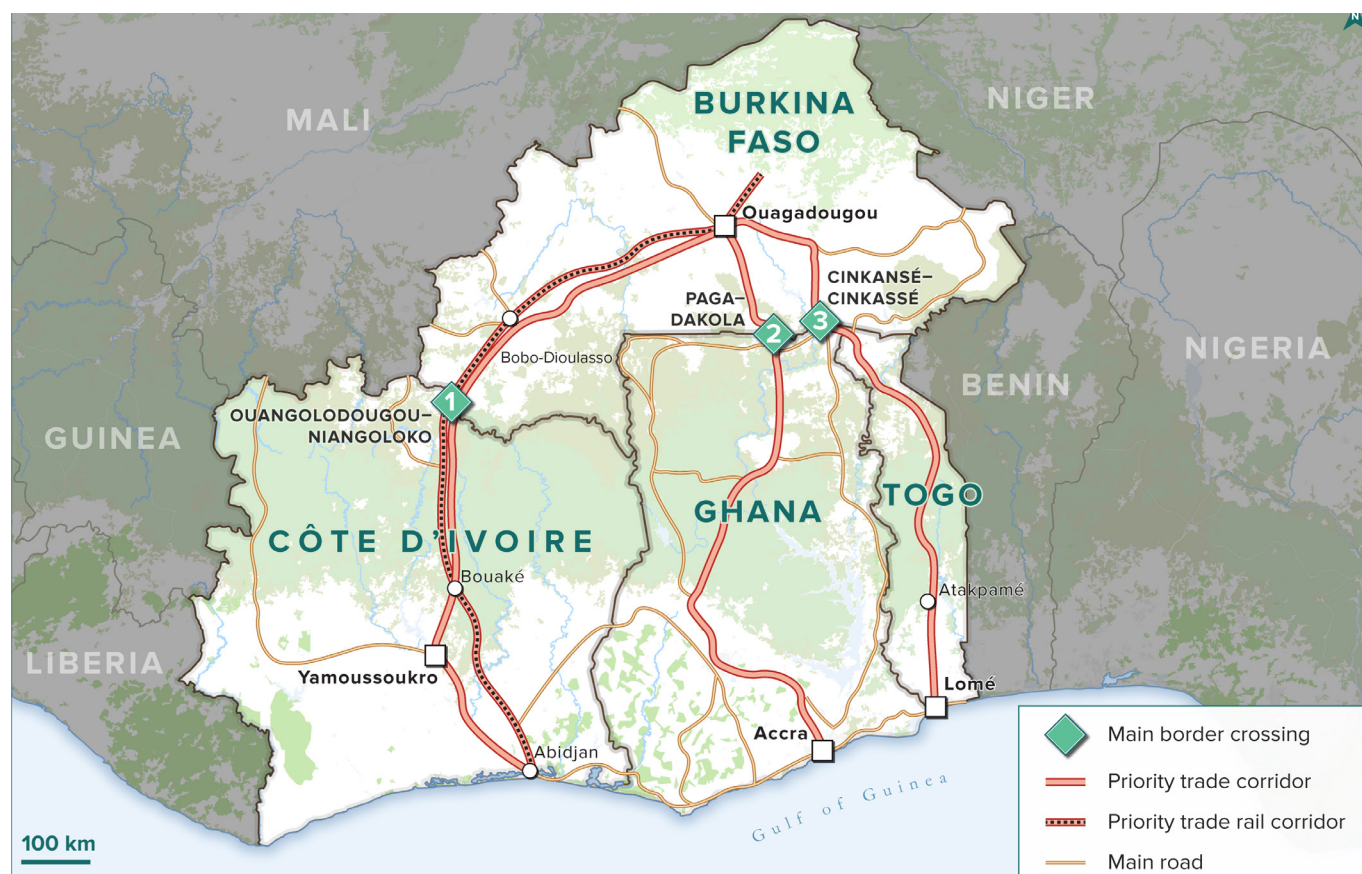


**Figure 2.** Research methodology

# Section 1: Cross-border trade and livelihoods in Coastal West Africa

Formal and informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is central to West Africa (see Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> Inter-regional trade is informed by regulations imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, which covers West Africa), and UEMOA (the West African Monetary Union or Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine, covering francophone countries).

Both organisations mandate fees for the movement of people, an external tariff for imports, and free trade of local unprocessed products from the agricultural, mining, and fishery sectors, as well as industrial products with West African certificates of origin (a waiver exists for products valued below US\$500). ECOWAS and UEMOA regulations are only partly implemented by different West African countries.



Source: World Bank Group (2019)

XCEPT

**Figure 3.** Map of formal trade corridors across Coastal West Africa

<sup>17</sup> See the Introduction to this report. See also: International Food Policy Research Institute 'Virtual event - Informal African trade: The hidden world of food flows,' 3 December 2020, <https://www.ifpri.org/event/virtual-event-informal-african-trade-hidden-world-food-flows>.



In West Africa, ICBT, in particular, is not sufficiently understood, despite a growing number of studies on the issue,<sup>18</sup> including some estimates of the value of cross-border trade, and case studies on crossings and specific trade systems.<sup>19</sup> A series of West Africa Trade Facilitation surveys by the World Bank and ECOWAS from 2020 onwards in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, and Benin focus on trade across six cross-border corridors in West Africa, offering a wealth of information on peoples' experiences at formal crossings.<sup>20</sup>

However, research is lacking on the organisation of informal trade, seasonal variations in trading patterns, the involvement of different border communities, the extent to which local livelihoods depend on cross-border trade, and, in particular, the connection between trade and rising insecurity.<sup>21</sup> To help address this knowledge gap, this section summarises key findings from across the four geographic areas studied. It finds that cross-border trade in Coastal West Africa involves both short- and long-haul trade, ecosystems of primary and secondary markets, and significant agricultural trade, as well as both formal and informal trade.

Long-haul trade follows extended transnational pathways, passing through trading centres located within 20 kilometres of border crossings. Trucks carrying long-haul goods transit border towns and formal crossings (see the example of a formal crossing in Figure 4, next page).<sup>22</sup> Short-haul trade is dominated by local suppliers crossing a border daily or weekly through formal and informal crossing points (see the example of an informal crossing in Figure 4). Most short-haul trade involves agriculture, such as cereals, vegetables, groundnuts, basic household provisions, and livestock.<sup>23</sup> Short-haul traders might purchase wholesale quantities from long-haul truck drivers (e.g. onions and tomatoes at the Paga crossings), but long-haul traders can also purchase wholesale quantities from small-scale local traders (e.g. cotton, cattle, and cashews).<sup>24</sup> Both long- and short-haul trade are interconnected, as long-haul traders can off-load goods in towns where they are then broken down into smaller quantities and sold in local markets.<sup>25</sup>

18 For two key studies: ECDPM, 'A system, not an error: informal cross-border trade in West Africa,' 2021, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1616/5546/8572/System-Not-Error-Informal-Cross-Border-Trade-West-Africa-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-300-2021.pdf>; UNDP-African Borderlands Centre (UNDP-ABC) (2022), 'Promise, Peril and Resilience: Voices of Agropastoralists in Africa's Borderland Regions.'

19 Key publications are: Walther, O. 'Traders, agricultural entrepreneurs and the development of cross-border regions in West Africa,' *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 24: 3–4 April 2012, pp. 123–141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2012.670909>; Bensassi, S., Jarreau, J., and Mitaritonna, C. 'Regional Integration and Informal Trade in Africa: Evidence from Benin's Borders,' *Journal of African Economies* 28: 1, 1 January 2019, pp. 89–118, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejy016>; Walther, O. 'Business, Brokers and Borders: The Structure of West African Trade Networks,' *Journal of Development Studies* 51: 5 May 2015, pp. 603–620, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2015.1010152>.

20 World Bank 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Trade Survey,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (Washington: 2020).

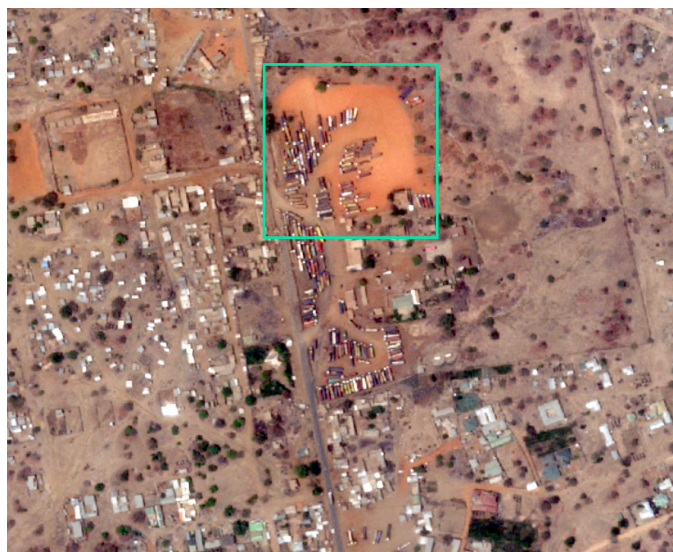
21 The study concentrates on formal border crossings. It concludes that the "lack of data represents an obstacle to efficient and effective policy making on a phenomenon which affects large sections of the region's poorest populations, and one which potentially has a significant role to play in the region's future development." World Bank 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Trade Survey,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (Washington: 2020). On seasonality: Siu, J. 'Formalising Informal Cross-Border Trade: Evidence from One-Stop-Border-Posts in Uganda,' 2020.

22 Benjamin, N., Golub, S., and Mbaye, A.A. 'Informality, Trade Policies and Smuggling in West Africa,' *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 30:3 (3 July 2015): pp. 381–394, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2015.1068203>.

23 Wa Municipal Assembly, 'Composite budget for 2022-2025: Programme based budget estimates for 2022,' <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/composite-budget/2022/UW/WMA.pdf>.

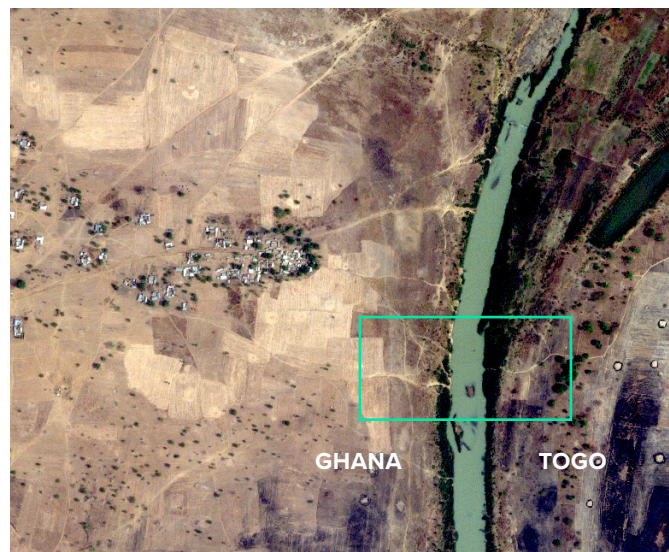
24 FGD with traders in Paga, Kassena-Nankana West District, Upper East Region, Ghana, 29 December 2023, and 3 KIIs with trucker drivers, Paga, Kassena-Nankana West District, Upper East Region, 7–9 December 2023.

25 For more on the intricacies of these networks see; Walther, 'Business, Brokers and Borders'; World Bank, 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Trade Survey,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (TFWA) (Washington: World Bank, 2020).



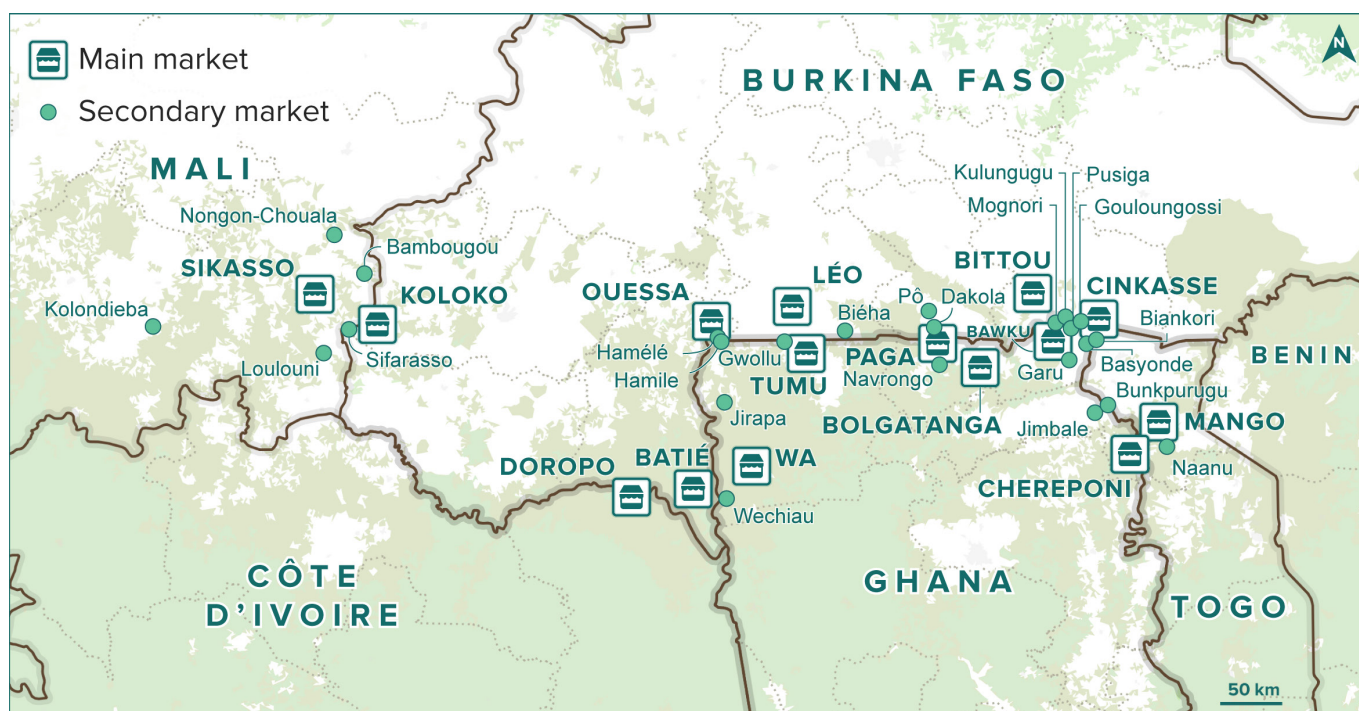
Cargo loading area in Bolga, Ghana (formal)

Source: March 2024, Satellite Imagery © Planet Labs



Trade route along the Oti River, Ghana–Togo border (informal)

**Figure 4.** Examples of formal and informal trade routes



Source: XCEPT

**XCEPT**

**Figure 5.** Map showing the market ecosystems in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa

KIIs and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) reveal variation between formal and informal trade. Formalised trade is reportedly more common in the Bawku and the Paga border regions, where it involves truck trade by registered companies traveling along approved routes. Both districts are part of the trade corridors that run from the coast into Burkina Faso and vice versa, originating in Tema Port in Ghana and the Lome harbour in Togo, respectively. Informal trade dominates in other areas.

Trade patterns in the Sikasso and Chereponi border regions involve both formal and informal trade. Interviews in this area indicated the formalised trade of cashews or cotton and redirected long-haul truck routes from the Central Sahel.<sup>26</sup> Field data also mentioned informal trade in small-scale agriculture products by unregistered economic units and the use of informal border crossings.<sup>27</sup> Informal trade patterns are even more pronounced in Ghana's Wa border regions and the Hamile border regions with Burkina Faso.

The border regions contain market structures involving links and coordination across borders, forming an ecosystem of co-dependent markets.<sup>28</sup> Large markets on both sides of the border act as key hubs. These tend to operate on alternating weekdays to ensure that the markets do not compete against each other and people can travel between them. Goods move from these primary markets to secondary, smaller markets, and from there to local villages. Figure 5 (previous page) displays the market ecosystems for the Bakwu, Chereponi, and Sikasso border regions.

This mix of short- and long-haul trade, passing through both formal and informal crossings via primary and secondary markets, defines cross-border trade in Coastal West African borderlands. Table 2 (next page) provides an overview of the most traded items, and the direction of trade based on an analysis of items listed by all 302 KIIs in response to the question: "What are the three major goods that are bought and sold in this trade centre?".

All areas reported significant trade volumes in agricultural products such as cereals (millet, grain, maize, rice), vegetables, and livestock, regardless of formalised trade patterns in border zones.<sup>29</sup> The high volume of agricultural products was also reflected in household surveys conducted along the more formalised Paga border regions and the semi-formal Chereponi border regions. Less than 10 per cent of respondents reported trade in non-agricultural products.<sup>30</sup> Consumable items such as household goods and clothing were found to be traded across the border in most research areas. A minority of interviewees referenced trade in fuel, fertiliser, cattle, arms, motorbikes, and cars.

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26 Lebovich, A., *Stability and livelihoods challenges in the Sikasso border regions* (Chapter 4 of 'Life on the line').

27 Along Ghana's Chereponi border with Togo, the household surveys found that 34% of all surveyed individuals relied on informal crossings (question: "Would you choose informal cross-border routes instead of formal – where authorities are based/present – routes?"), with 40% stating they opted for this route because it was cheaper.

28 Based on KII items "What are the main trade centres (towns, markets, etc.) in your area?" and "Can you explain how these trade centres are connected with communities on the other side of the border?".

29 The research concentrates on trade volumes rather than trade value.

30 Fifteen out of 118 survey respondents reported awareness of the import of non-agricultural goods from Togo and Burkina Faso, and eight out of 109 reported awareness of non-agricultural goods exported from Ghana. Household survey (HHS) item "Top five goods/ services that you export to Togo and/or Burkina Faso" and "Top five goods/services that you export import from Togo and/ or Burkina Faso." The amount of non-agricultural products is smaller than previous surveys on the Paga border regions have indicated; this may be due to differing samples and the informality of the trade. (The survey locations of Boenia, Nyangolongo, Chania, Beyim, and Gingringo are all small villages).



Traded items	Direction of trade	Dominant demographic
Vegetables (onions, tomatoes, peppers, tubers) and legumes (soya beans, groundnuts, sesame)	Burkina Faso → Ghana; Mali ↔ Burkina Faso Ghana ↔ Togo	Older women (short haul) Men (long haul)
Cereals (millet, soy, maize, corn, rice, gari)	Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana; Ghana ↔ Togo Mali ↔ Burkina Faso	Older women (short haul) Men (long haul)
Nuts (cashews, groundnuts, shea)	Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana Mali ↔ Burkina Faso	Men Women
Livestock (cattle, goats, fowls, sheep)	Batié, Burkina Faso → Wechiau, Ghana Mali → Burkina Faso; Togo → Ghana	Older men
Household items (ataya tea, cooking oil, plastic goods, bottles & bags, utensils, soap)	Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana Mali ↔ Burkina Faso; Togo → Ghana	Women
Fabric, clothing, and sandals	Burkina Faso → Ghana Mali ↔ Burkina Faso	Men Women
Fertiliser and pesticides	Ghana → Burkina Faso	Older men (in charge) Male youth (as workers)
Fuel	Paga, Ghana → Pô, Burkina Faso Burkina Faso → Mali; Bittou, Burkina Faso; Cinkassé, Togo	Older men (in charge) Male youth (as workers)
Construction material (steel bars, plumbing material, cement, pillars, zinc)	Burkina Faso ↔ Ghana	Men

**Table 2.** Commonly traded goods<sup>31</sup>

## Livelihoods in Coastal West African borderlands

Research findings suggest that the livelihoods of border communities across Coastal West Africa are highly dependent on cross-border trade and are also facing unprecedented pressure.

The survey results presented in Figure 6 (next page) detail the economic activity of people in the Kassena-Nankana and Chereponi border regions of Ghana. Among the responses offered, farming was most often cited as the primary economic activity (35 per cent), followed by trading (about 10 per cent) and service provision, such as running a shop or hairdressing (12 per cent). Cross-border trade is important for the livelihoods of locals, especially women (see box on gender and cross-border movement on page 20).<sup>32</sup>

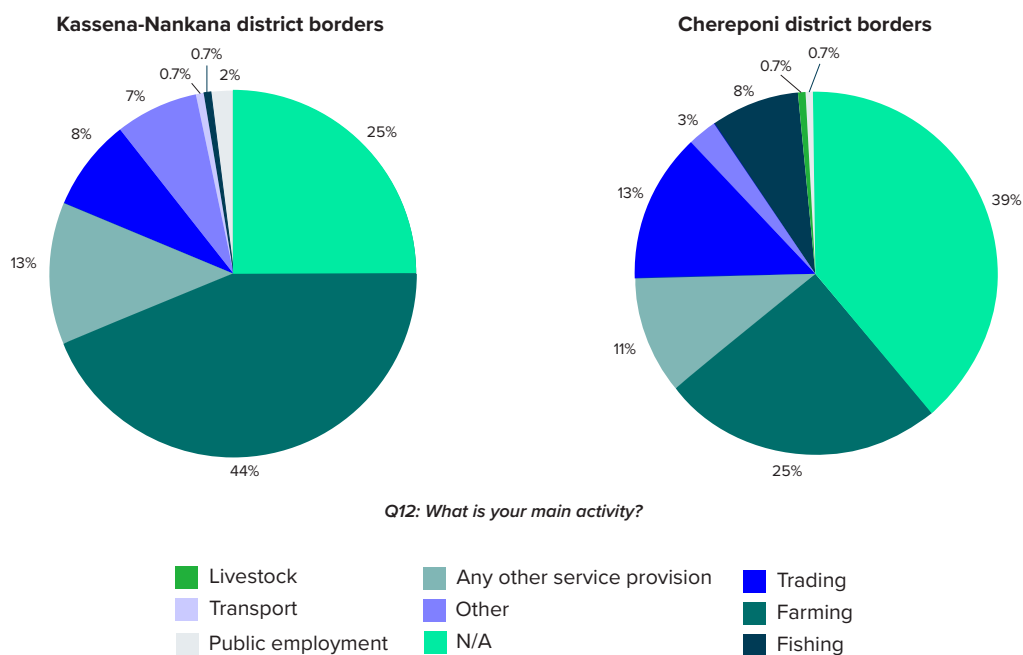
The survey also provides insight into the frequency of cross-border movement. While regional trends vary, Figure 7 (next page) shows that nearly two-thirds of survey respondents across both locations claim to cross borders regularly (184 out of 300). This involves trading, family visits, travel to public services on the either side of the border, and cross-border agriculture (it is common for people to have ancestral agricultural lands on both sides of the border).<sup>33</sup>

The surveys were carried out in areas with significant formal cross-border trade (Paga border regions) and semi-formal trade (Chereponi border regions). It is likely that cross-border movement is higher in areas with small-scale unregistered trade and movement along unapproved routes, such as the Sikasso (Mali) and Wa and Hamile (Ghana) border regions.

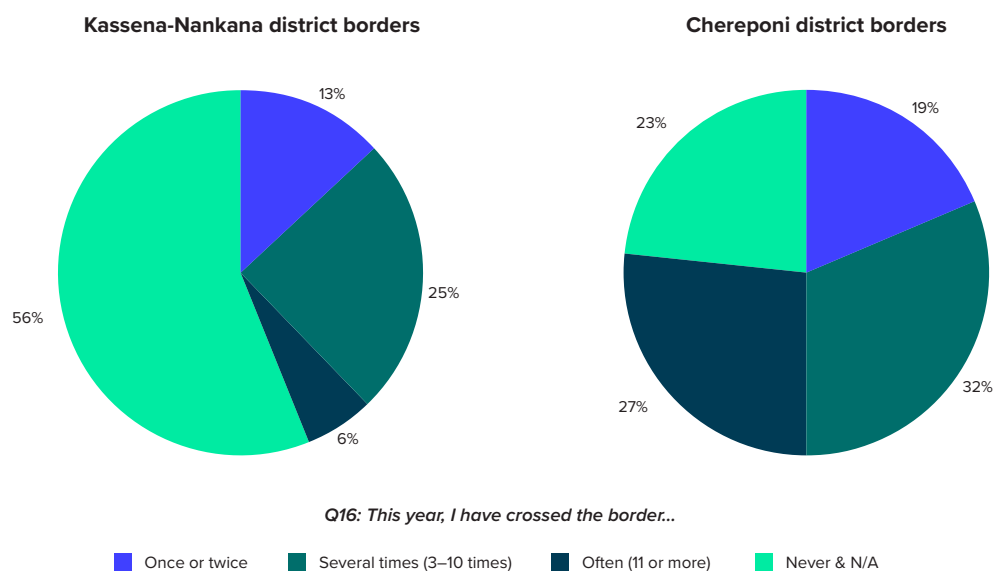
31 World Bank 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Infographic,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (Washington: 2020).

32 It is important to note that the survey data does not address the value of these markets. For example, high values of small sectors can sustain the livelihoods of many people.

33 Note, there are statistically significant differences between the four border regions (Fischer exact 0.000).



**Figure 6.** Types of economic activity



**Figure 7.** Cross-border trade involvement

KIIs shed further light on the dependency of livelihoods on cross-border trade. Respondents across all border regions point to four ways in which their livelihoods depended on cross-border trade and movement. Most interviewees said they:

- Earn their living via importing and/or exporting and transporting goods
- Provide services to people who come from the other side of the border (often to visit family for extended periods)
- Depend on food and foodstuffs moved across the border
- Sell their agricultural surplus

The survey found that about 35 per cent of people engage in subsistence farming and interviews highlighted how surplus is sold across the border. “Not all of the little I get from my farm is consumed”, one interviewee said. “A small part of it is used to sell to keep the family going till the next season”.<sup>34</sup> For example, small-scale farmers in Burkina Faso often trade vegetables to Ghana while newly developed irrigation systems have increased Ghanaian production and increased export to Burkina Faso.<sup>35</sup>

## Gender and cross-border movement in Coastal West Africa

Existing research highlights how informal cross-border trade is a gendered affair.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, many women play a role in the growing ICBT sector. According to research, 60–70 per cent of ICBT in Africa could involve female traders.<sup>37</sup> In West Africa, women are likely to be mainly involved in agriculture trade. One study found that 53 per cent of women at formal crossings alone trade agriculture).<sup>38</sup>

In the Sikasso (Mali) and Bawku (Ghana) border regions, although data show men tend to be involved in bigger volume and larger revenue-generating activities, such as transporting livestock and fuel, women said they were increasingly taking agricultural products across borders. This is consistent with research on the rice trade along the Benin–Niger–Nigeria border.<sup>39</sup>

34 KII, Bunkpurugu, Ghana, December 2023.

35 Bernard, A.; Stability and livelihoods challenges in the Wa, Hamile–Ouessa, and Pô–Paga border regions between Ghana and Burkina Faso (Chapter 3 of 'Life on the line').

36 Olabisi, Y. 'Gender Dimensions of Informal Cross Border Trade in West-African Sub-Region (ECOWAS) Borders,' *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 18, 2014, pp. 19–33. Macheng, C.L., (2021), 'Women without borders: What the AfCFTA can do for Botswana's informal cross border traders,' *Africaportal*, 13 January 2021. <https://africaportal.org/feature/women-without-borders-what-the-afcfta-can-do-for-botswanas-informal-cross-border-traders/>; Karkare, P.; Byiers, B.; Apiko, P., and Kane, M. (2021), 'A System, not an Error: Informal Cross-border Trade in West Africa,' Discussion Paper No. 300 (Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) and Centre Africain pour le Commerce International et le Développement (CACID), June 2021), <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1616/5546/8572/System-Not-Error-Informal-Cross-Border-Trade-West-Africa-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-300-2021.pdf>; Trade Facilitation West Africa, *Regional Gender Assessment Report*, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099060624234127664/pdf/P168113114378a0e418e171bc73040c3e1c.pdf>.

37 Nakayama, Y. 'Why Do Informal Cross Border Traders (ICBTs) Operate Informally? The Paradox of the Formalization of ICBTs in Africa' (2022).

38 World Bank, (2020), 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Infographic,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (TFWA) (Washington: World Bank).

39 Walther, O.J., Tenikue, M.; Trémoilières, M. Economic performance, gender and social networks in West African food systems, *World Development* 124. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104650>.



Women in the Bawku border regions (and, to a lesser extent, the Chereponi border regions) also said they were increasingly taking agricultural products across borders. They argued that they face lower risks of being interdicted by security forces, and of being targeted by VEOs in Burkina Faso and Togo. “The jihadists hate the sight of men”, one woman said. “And so it is we, women, who are still able to go and trade in these places”.<sup>40</sup>

In other areas, however, this dynamic is reversed. For instance, in Ghana’s Wa border regions, men are reportedly increasingly engaged in the cross-border cereal and vegetable trade. This change is not always for livelihood reasons; in this case, it is to lessen women’s exposure to violence. Different dynamics may arise depending on the degree of JNIM activity and demand for male recruitment.

## Livelihoods under stress in Coastal West African borderlands

Livelihoods are under pressure in all the border regions of Coastal West African states (Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo). Most respondents in the KIIs and FGDs said local trade in all border regions had slowed significantly in the previous three years. In the Bawku and Chereponi regions, respondents said that various businesses – particularly wholesale and cattle trading – had stopped and that people had abandoned cross-border trade in search of alternative livelihoods. Most KIIs reported struggling to make ends meet.<sup>41</sup> As one respondent from Bawku said: “The businesses have contracted and things are not moving [...] it’s hard to feed [one’s] family and those kind of things. It becomes very difficult to take care of a family like this”.<sup>42</sup>

Field research found that market activity has also slowed in the Wa, Hamile, and Paga border regions. While there are significant disruptions to livelihoods in these locations, they are not as devastating as in the Bawku and Chereponi areas. For example, cattle traders stated that fewer trucks are loaded with cattle, and that other goods are mixed with cattle to fill up the truck.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, stall/shop operators reported that cross-border farming had decreased and that travel to Burkina Faso had reduced.<sup>44</sup>

One interviewee noted: “Some of the traders here no longer travel to Burkina Faso to transact business for [cooking] oil and rice. I personally no longer go there unless I must do something very important”.<sup>45</sup> In the Sikasso border regions (Mali and Burkina Faso), respondents reported that their livelihoods had been adversely impacted since at least 2017, following the imposition of a series of taxes.<sup>46</sup>

Generally, people reported that their livelihoods are under stress: “We are experiencing a lot of difficulties in our business in terms of sales, and our income fell, which made it very difficult to support my family”, one respondent said.<sup>47</sup> Another person added that life is “very difficult, given the soaring prices of staple foods”.<sup>48</sup> One KII interviewee stated how this pattern has been going on for some time:

40 Togolese woman, FGD in Chereponi, Ghana, February 2024.

41 KII in Bawku, Ghana, December 2023.

42 KII in Bawku, Ghana, December 2023.

43 KII in Wechiau, Ghana, November 2023.

44 KIIs in Batié, Burkina Faso, and Wa, Gwollu, and Jawia in Ghana, November/December 2023.

45 KII, female, in Jawia, Ghana, December 2023.

46 Lebovich, A., *Stability and livelihoods challenges in the Sikasso border regions* (Chapter 4).

47 KII, female, in Tiéfinbougou, Mali, December 2023.

48 KII in Wayerma II, Mali, December 2023.

“Life hasn't been that easy for me since COVID-19, the attacks on Hermakono station in 2023, and the high cost of living”.<sup>49</sup>

Yet compared to other areas, there are also some positive developments, particularly among traders in Mali. As one interviewee said: “My situation has improved since last year thanks to my trips across the border, because the products I buy are cheaper on the other side of the border than in Mali, and that's good for us”.<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, border communities are used to disruption.<sup>51</sup> Policies on both sides of each border can change economic incentives quickly. Border communities – building on generations of adaptation, struggle, and innovation – have hard-won resiliencies and mechanisms to respond to these changes. These include community support, selling off cattle, and shifting trade patterns.<sup>52</sup>

Figure 8 presents data from the household survey on various external shocks experienced by respondents in 10 communities during the preceding year, and respondent perceptions of their ability to overcome these pressures. This data was used to assess community resilience based on 22 items



**Figure 8.** Community resilience

49 KII in Hermanoko, Mali, December 2023.

50 KII in Sanoubougou I, Mali, December 2023.

51 Hippe, S., Bertram, D., and Chilla, T. ‘Convergence and Resilience in Border Regions,’ *European Planning Studies* 32:1 (2 January 2024): pp. 186–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2023.2170214>.

52 Brower, T. ‘Could we please stop talking about resilience,’ *Forbes* (2021). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/11/07/could-we-please-stop-talking-about-resilience/>.

from the Communities Advancing Resilience Toolkit (CART) survey.<sup>53</sup> The data suggests moderate to high levels of resilience in most of the communities studied. Communities with the highest exposure to shocks (Bukasu, Naduni, Kpani), are also among those with the highest resilience scores. The capacity to withstand varied external shocks may suggest similar resilience among some communities against extremist expansion, even in conditions of economic and physical insecurity. This theme is addressed in Section 4, which considers implications for policy and programmatic response.

## Livelihood disruptions explained

Three key issues challenge people's livelihoods in Coastal West Africa's borderlands, according to the study's field research (listed in order of importance): 1) economic pressures; 2) the effects of restrictive and sometimes extractive practices of security forces deployed along the border; and 3) rising insecurity due to violent extremism, communal conflicts, and militia activity. Table 3 summarises the research team's analysis of the main livelihoods stressors based on the field data, with further discussion of each issue below.

Area characteristics				Key findings	
Area	Short hand	Trade type	JNIM Presence	Livelihoods under stress	Causes for livelihoods stress
1	Bawku district borders	Formalised (+Informal)	Active	High stress	1. Economic: downturn 2. General insecurity (VE) 3. Security deployments
	Chereponi district borders	Semi-formal (+Informal)	Emerging	High stress	1. Economic: cereal ban 2. Security deployments 3. General insecurity (VE)
2	Wa - district borders	Informal	Limited	Low stress	1. Economic: downturn 2. Security deployments 3. General insecurity
3	Nandom/Sissala district borders	Informal	Emerging	Medium stress	1. Economic: downturn 2. Security deployments 3. General insecurity (VE)
	Kassena-Nankana district borders	Formalised (+Informal)	Limited	Medium stress	1. Economic: downturn 2. Security deployments 3. General insecurity (VE)
4	Sikasso district borders	Semi-formal (+Informal)	Active	Low stress	1. Security deployments 2. General insecurity 3. Climate factors 4. Economic: restrictions

**Table 3.** Summary of key findings on livelihood stressors

<sup>53</sup> The CART Survey, developed by the Terrorism and Disaster Center of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, measures community resilience. Survey questions asked were: "During the last 12 months, was your household negatively affected by any of the following 21 items?" (yes/no); "Has your household been able to recover from XXX shock?" (Likert Scale 1–5); and "To what extent do you agree with the following statements...?" (Likert scale 1–5). For specific items, see: Pfefferbaum, R.L., and Pfefferbaum, B. 'Assessing community resilience: A CART survey application in an impoverished urban community,' *Disaster Health* 3: 2, 2016, pp. 45–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21665044.2016.1189068>.

## Economic disruption

The study's methodology was designed to measure the effects of violent extremism and security deployments on livelihoods and the risk of violent extremism expansion. However, field data collection revealed that economic challenges are viewed as the most significant stress on livelihoods in border communities, which are then exacerbated by violent extremism and concomitant security responses.

Economic stress stems from a regional economic downturn, cost-of-living crises, and national import and export restrictions. The cost-of-living crisis is well documented.<sup>54</sup> COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 affected global value chains, leading to market disruptions and price spikes due to higher energy prices. The war in Ukraine further impacted energy prices and the price and availability of staple foods, with knock-on effects for transportation costs and basic commodities. In addition to these global market shifts, country-specific economic policies have affected cross-border livelihoods in the region. Since 2022, the depreciation of the Ghanaian currency, the cedi, spurred price hikes for basic commodities, fertiliser, and seed, and reduced agricultural yields in all the areas studied within and bordering Ghana. Goods imported into Ghana from Togo and Burkina Faso became more expensive, and exports from Ghana increased as local traders found that Ghanaian commodities, such as locally grown agricultural products, could be sold at a higher price across the border. Prices for all goods rose in Ghana as a result. As one Ghanaian respondent noted: "I remember last year, when we started the business and the rate changed, people collapsed".<sup>55</sup> Another respondent from Burkina said: "In 2023, it was more difficult for us to sell cereals in Ghana, but easier for us to buy them".<sup>56</sup>

Since 2021, protectionist policies by West African countries have also affected cross-border livelihoods. ECOWAS officially prohibits export restrictions. However, since 2022, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo have all implemented import and export restrictions to ensure that local produce remains in their countries to prioritise feeding their own populations.<sup>57</sup>

### Sahel – ECOWAS rupture

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975 as a regional economic bloc to promote economic development, requires its members to uphold principles of equity, interdependence, solidarity, cooperation, non-aggression, regional peace, promotion of human rights, and economic and social

54 Bouët, A., Laborde, D., and Traoré, F. 'West Africa faces mixed food security impacts from the Russia-Ukraine conflict', in Glauber, J. and Laborde, D. eds., *The Russia-Ukraine conflict and global food security* (Washington, DC: IFPRI, 2023), pp. 150–153, [https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896294394\\_29](https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896294394_29); Sutthichaya, Y. 'High Rice Prices Worldwide Likely to Continue Into 2024', *VOA News*, 26 December 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/hold-for-holidays-high-rice-prices-worldwidelike-to-continue-into-2024/7403691.html>.

55 Ghanaian trader in Chereponi, Ghana, December 2023.

56 KII, female, in Pô, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

57 Ngo-Eyok, S. 'Advocacy for free trade', *Rural 21*, published online February 2013, [https://www.rural21.com/fileadmin/downloads/2013/en-02/rural2013\\_02-S16-17.pdf](https://www.rural21.com/fileadmin/downloads/2013/en-02/rural2013_02-S16-17.pdf) For Togo: Dossavi, A.R. 'Togo: nouveau tour de vis sur les exportations des produits de grande consommation,' *Togo First*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.togofirst.com/fr/gouvernance-economique/1905-9989-togo-nouveau-tour-de-vis-sur-les-exportations-des-produits-de-grande-consommation>. For Burkina Faso: Koubakin, R. 'Interdire les exportations des produits est-ce efficace ?' *Deutsche Welle*, 8 July 2021, <https://www.dw.com/fr/afrique-de-l-ouest-sahel-cereales-interdiction-exportations-cherte-prix/a-58206998>; Radars Info Burkina, 'Les exportations de céréales restent suspendues sur toute l'étendue du territoire (communiqué)', 16 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RadarsBF/photos/a.335290720284987/1487823691698345/?type=3>.



justice.<sup>58</sup> ECOWAS protocols include the free movement of persons and labour, and allow for the deployment of peacekeeping forces in member countries in times of unrest.

In 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS and the establishment of a new regional bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States (or in French, AES). The announcement followed ECOWAS sanctions on Niger and a short-lived peacekeeping mission in response to the Nigerien military's overthrow of the country's democratically elected president in July 2023.<sup>59</sup> Although sanctions were lifted by February 2024, relations between ECOWAS and the three Sahel states remain damaged.<sup>60</sup> Led by the presidents of Senegal and Togo, ECOWAS is working to restore diplomatic and trade relations with Sahel states.<sup>61</sup>

In September 2021, Ghana implemented an export ban on some cereals, including rice and maize,<sup>62</sup> which has been renewed multiple times, most recently in August/September 2024.<sup>63</sup> Interviewees in the Chereponi, Bawku, and Paga border regions cited these bans as hindering their ability to trade across the border and make a living. “The government put a ban that no grain should cross the border, so our business is not moving at all”, one person noted in Chereponi.<sup>64</sup> In Hamile, an interviewee said, “Cereals are in short supply in Burkina Faso, so there is a ban now on export of goods to Ghana. There is a counter ban on export of cereals from Ghana too”.<sup>65</sup>

58 Economic Community of West African States, <https://www.ecowas.int/about-ecowas/>.

59 Obasi, Nnamdi. ‘ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate’. *International Crisis Group*. 5 December 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/ecowas-nigeria-and-niger-coup-sanctions-time-recalibrate>.

60 Onuah, Felix. ‘West African bloc lifts sanctions on junta-led Niger’. *Reuters*. 26 February 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-ecowas-bloc-mulls-new-strategy-towards-junta-states-2024-02-24/>.

61 Sow, Djibi and Kone, Hassane. ‘As AES and ECOWAS drift apart, dialogue on the fundamentals is vital.’ *Institute for Security Studies*. 23 July 2024. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/as-aes-and-ecowas-drift-apart-dialogue-on-the-fundamentals-is-vital>.

62 Mugabi, I. ‘Ghana extends ban on grain exports,’ *Deutsche Welle*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ghana-extendsban-on-grain-exports/a-61955785>.

63 AgFlow, ‘Ghana Still Bans Corn Export, and Imports Hit \$27 Million,’ 4 August 2023, <https://www.agflow.com/agriculturalmarkets-news/ghana-still-bans-corn-export-and-imports-hit-27-million/>.

64 KII in Chereponi, Ghana, December 2023. The complexity of the problem is illustrated by this quote: “Last year we couldn't work, because the borders are closed. We buy from Bunkpurugu (Ghana) and we pass through Togo to Chereponi [Ghana] because it's shorter. The issue I had was that because of the ban when I bought the grains in Bunkpurugu and sent them to Chereponi, they thought I was trying to play smart by pretending to be sending to Ghana and selling in Togo.”

65 KII in Hamile, Ghana, December 2023.

## Section 2: JNIM's impact on livelihoods in the borderlands

Since 2019, the border areas between the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso and Mali) and Coastal West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin) have progressively experienced growing violent extremist presence.<sup>66</sup> This section examines the challenges that this trend poses for livelihoods in Coastal West Africa's borderlands.

### JNIM presence in Coastal West African borderlands

Coastal West Africa is threatened by four JNIM katiba ('brigades' in Arabic), each controlling a variety of geographic 'markaz' (literally 'centre' but used to describe 'areas'). These katibas are engaged in both violent and non-violent activity, with the latter involving village visits and trade. Figure 9 (next page) displays clusters of violent and non-violent incidents in JNIM-affected areas based on ACLED and Clingendael tracking of VEO activity in West African borderlands. ACLED data captures incidences of political violence and disorder. Clingendael supplements this with data on the locations of violent and non-violent activity (e.g. visits to villages) in Benin, Ghana, Togo, and Burkina Faso.<sup>67</sup>

One katiba operates in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions, and to a lesser extent, the Paga border regions.<sup>68</sup> The group began as part of Ansarul Islam, but later integrated some fighters from the Islamic State's Sahelian branch, alongside a number of Katibat Macina fighters from Mali who were operating on JNIM's eastern front.<sup>69</sup>

Incident data shows that the eastern katiba is one of JNIM's most active cells. It operates out of its main bases around Kompienga (Est Region, Burkina Faso); but since 2021, it has expanded into Centre-Est and Centre-Sud (Burkina Faso), Savanes (Togo), and the Atakora department (Benin).

Particularly relevant for this study is a markaz around the Kangagamore forest, close to the town of Bittou (Burkina Faso) in the Bawku border region.<sup>70</sup> Several smaller cells (sarayas) have been dispatched from this markaz, such as in Kabore Tambi forest (in Burkina Faso, but now defunct), and Bagre (Burkina Faso).<sup>71</sup> In Togo, this same group operates in two prefectures of the Savanes Region (Cinkassé and Tone). There is increasing evidence of a cell emerging in the Oti prefecture, based on reports of local recruitment since mid-2022 and violent incidents throughout 2023 and 2024.<sup>72</sup>

66 Early operations of violent extremists in West Africa's coastal states were isolated incidents, and until 2020, most VEO activity focused on the Sahel. In 2015, VEOs operated briefly in southern Mali near the border with Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, and in 2016, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) attacked beachgoers in Grand Bassam (Côte d'Ivoire), killing 19.

67 This information comes from regular data collection on Ghana by Clingendael Institute.

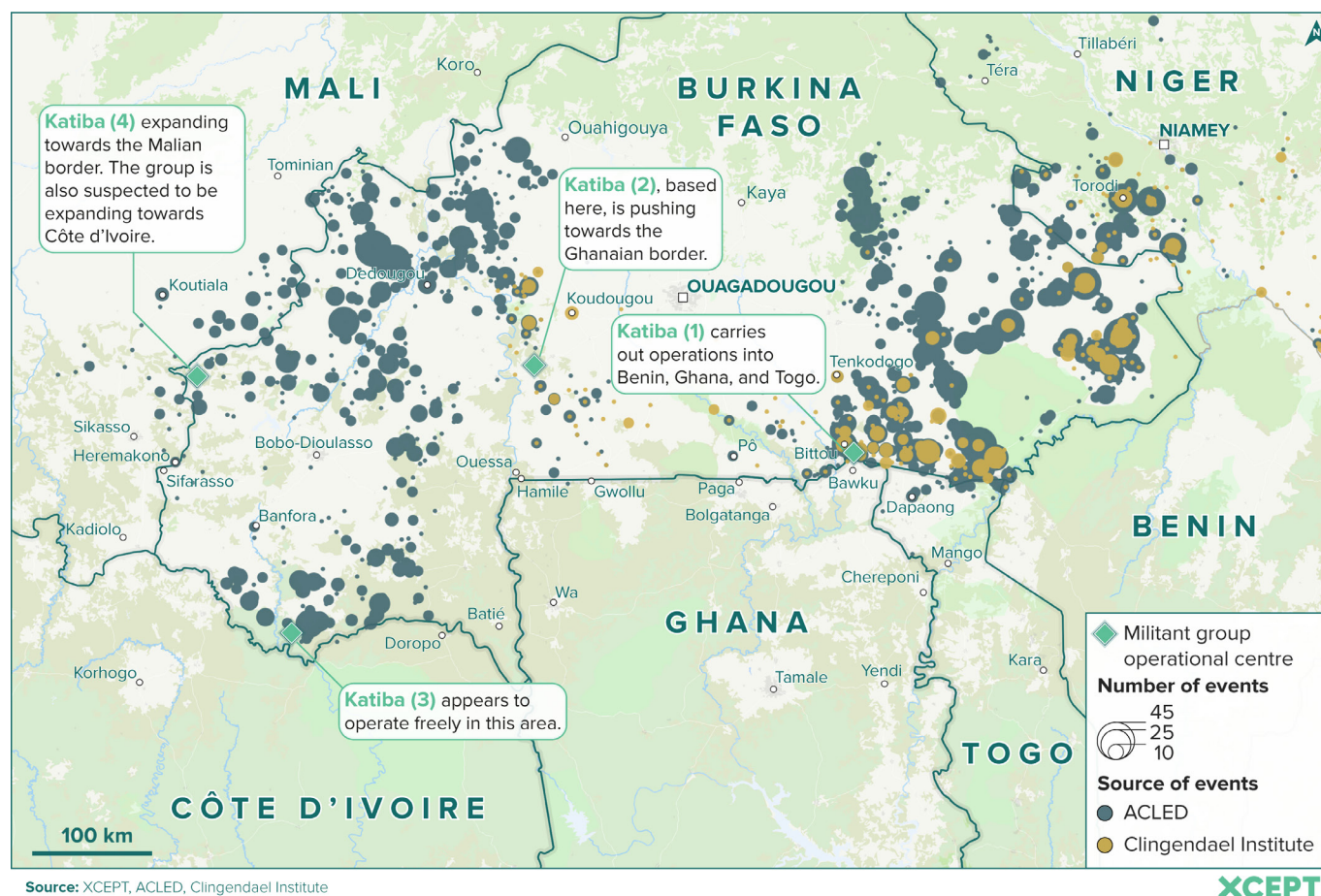
68 Interview with Heni Nsaibia, Security Analyst, MenaStream, January 2024; interview with Eliasu Tanku, journalist for Joy News, December 2023 and January 2024.

69 de Bruijne, K. *Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover*, Clingendael and ACLED, June 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/northern-benin-and-risk-violent-extremist-spillover>. Ansarul Islam is an Islamist reform movement active in Burkina Faso from 2016 onward.

70 Interview with Ghanaian security official in Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

71 Interview Heni Nsaibia, security analyst, MenaStream, January 2024.

72 Interview with Eliasu Tanku, journalist for Joy News, January 2024.



**Figure 9.** Map of VEO activity in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa (2022-2024)

A second katiba operates from bases in Burkina Faso's border areas of Boucle du Mouhoun and the Centre-Ouest Region (Kalié and Tiaga forest).<sup>73</sup> This group has dispatched cells from these bases along the Centre-Ouest Region's borders with Ghana, according to audio files, tracking of VEO movements, an incident in October 2023 where Ghanaian military arrested a number of militants in Fatchu, and fieldwork conducted for this research.<sup>74</sup> Throughout 2022 and 2023, the group has had a more sustained presence around Bofian, Léo, and potentially Yinga, in Burkina Faso.

A third katiba, 'Katibat Alidougou,' is named after the town in Burkina Faso where the group has been based since 2019. Despite operating from more than 50 kilometres away (see Figure 9), this group could pose a threat to the Wa border regions. This katiba likely emerged as an offshoot of both Katibat Macina in Mali, or Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso.<sup>75</sup> This group became notorious after carrying out attacks around Kafolo in Côte d'Ivoire in 2020 and leading the subsequent insurgency in the Bounkani and Tchologo region from 2020 to 2022. While violent activity has subsided in Côte d'Ivoire, the cell sustains a presence just across the border in the Sud-Ouest Region of Burkina Faso.

<sup>73</sup> Nsaibia, H. et al. 'Actor Profile: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM),' ACLED. 23 November 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Ghanaian security official in Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

<sup>75</sup> Duhem, V. '[Série] Terrorisme : de Kafolo à Tengrela, comment la Côte d'Ivoire fait face à la menace (2/4),' *Jeune Afrique*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1105294/politique/terrorisme-de-kafolo-a-tengrela-comment-la-cote-divoirefait-face-a-la-menace/>; Mieu, B. 'Côte d'Ivoire : ce que l'on sait de l'attaque terroriste de Téhini,' *Jeune Afrique*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1254085/politique/cote-divoire-ce-que-lon-sait-de-lattaque-terroriste-de-tehini/>; Nsaibia, H. 'In Light of the Kafolo Attack: The Jihadi Militant Threat in the Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast Borderlands,' ACLED, 24 August 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/24/in-light-of-the-kafolo-attack-the-jihadi-militant-threat-in-the-burkina-faso-and-ivory-coast-borderlands/>.

A final katiba emerged from collaboration between Burkinabé and Malian militants. This cluster of violent extremists straddles the Sikasso border regions (Mali). One part stems from Katibat Macina fighters in Central Mali and another from Burkinabé militants from the Ansarul Islam network that moved into Hauts-Bassins (Burkina Faso) in 2023.<sup>76</sup> This group could pose a future threat to Côte d'Ivoire, by expanding either towards Tengrela or, potentially, towards the tri-border area of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali.<sup>77</sup>

## Impact of JNIM on livelihoods in borderlands

Livelihoods around Coastal West Africa's borderlands are threatened by the perception or fear of violent extremist presence in border areas, as well as actual VEO activity. Field data highlights two primary ways that JNIM affects local livelihoods in border regions:

1. It can seek access to border markets and, in the process, creates linkages with local populations.
2. It causes general insecurity and fear in border areas that disrupts trade ecosystems.

## Border communities as a source of JNIM sustenance

This study found concrete – albeit limited – evidence of JNIM commercial links with local borderland communities for sustenance and re-supply, surfacing new data on an issue about which there previously was little information. Agricultural products and fuel are particularly in demand by JNIM. Interviewees in the Bawku, Chereponi, and Wa border regions pointed to suspected extremist or associates buying agricultural products in the border villages of Ghana Last, Sapelliga, and Jirapa, and fuel in Pulmakom. “There have been people who buy the goods for them, you know, to feed”, one interviewee in Pulmakom said. “Sometimes these [people] that buy the goods [...] are arrested”.<sup>78</sup>

There was also some evidence of JNIM buying small-scale agricultural products in the Hamile border regions, and of procuring fertiliser and fuel from farmers in the towns of Hamélé and Ouessa, Burkina Faso.<sup>79</sup> In October 2023, security forces found backpacks filled with goods procured from Jirapa, a trade centre far south of the border in Ghana, when they uncovered an extremist presence in Fatchu (Ghana).

According to interviewees, JNIM agents order and purchase fuel directly from smuggling networks on the Paga–Dakola pass;<sup>80</sup> engage in cattle rustling in Burkina Faso and sell the cattle in Ghana;<sup>81</sup> and purchase food and basic commodities in Bambougou and Danderesso in Mali, and in Oradora in Burkina Faso.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Heni Nsaibia, security analyst, MenaStream, phone conversation, January 2024; interview with Global Initiative staff, September 2023; interview with representative of Resilience for Peace, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, September 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with representative of Resilience for Peace, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, September 2023; interview with pro-mediation staff, phone conversation, April 2024.

<sup>78</sup> KII in Pulmakom, Ghana, December 2023. Interviewees in the Paga, Hamile, and Sikasso border regions reinforced this impression.

<sup>79</sup> KII in Pô, Hamile, Ouessa (all Ghana), December 2023.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with security official in Gwollu, Ghana, February 2024.

<sup>81</sup> As well as, possibly, the procurement of explosives from mining sites; interview with UN official in Accra, Ghana, February 2024.



## Trade disruption

VEO activity, and the real or perceived insecurity it generates, negatively affects regional and local trade ecosystems and livelihoods. Movement along formal and informal trade routes is consequently disrupted, as are cross-border networks feeding primary and secondary markets. The level and type of disruption differ depending on the presence and activity of VEOs in each area studied. The Bawku and Chereponi border regions (Ghana) and the Sikasso border regions (Mali) are more deeply affected than the Wa, Hamile, and Paga border regions, where violent extremist presence is less established.

In the Bawku and Chereponi regions, KII and FGD participants reported sustained disruptions to their livelihoods due to VEO presence. For example, interviewees from the Bawku border regions said VEOs operate in Bittou (Burkina Faso) and that civilians encounter bodies of VEOs' victims when they cross the border for market days.<sup>82</sup> Other interviewees reported attacks in Burkina Faso that shutter markets and businesses in Ghana.<sup>83</sup> Some respondents said militants target men crossing the border, reducing the ability of young men, in particular, to conduct cross-border business.

However, even where VEO presence is limited, intermittent livelihood disruptions are reported. In Wa, Hamile, and Paga, this manifests as roadside banditry and localised displacement from violence.<sup>84</sup> Farmers in southern Burkina Faso described limiting time in the fields due to security concerns and disrupted water supplies, which impacted the Burkinabé vegetable trade with Ghana.<sup>85</sup> In the Wa district town of Wechiau, where extremist presence is low (the closest reported VEO incident was at least 50 kilometres away), interviewees cited reducing farming and limiting travel to market towns to avoid any real or perceived VEO threats. One person noted: "I will not say there are official restrictions, but our movement is self-restricted now, and everyone is living in fear. People avoid gatherings and festivals [...] because of fear that terrorists may strike [...] It is only a matter of time".<sup>86</sup>

VEO presence also spurs alterations of major trade routes, leading to increased costs.<sup>87</sup> Interviews in Ghana highlight how truck drivers adapt by using new routes. For example, incoming trade from Burkina Faso to Ghana is re-routed from Bawku to Barikosi and Mango.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, in January 2024, the onion trade between Burkina Faso and Ghana came to a halt after VEOs burned several onion trucks in eastern Burkina Faso. As a result, onion trucks took longer routes around the violence-struck areas and joined secure convoys, but the cargo became stuck in border transit centres for weeks. In short, re-routing means more waiting time, and other increased costs that are then passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices.

Finally, data from Sikasso border regions in Burkina Faso and Mali highlight that deteriorating security is not solely a function of the presence or activity of VEOs — other armed actors also pose a threat.<sup>89</sup>

82 FGDs conducted in Bawku, Upper East Region, Ghana, with Ghanaian social and community actors, Ghanaian women and under-represented groups, January 2024.

83 Insights from FGDs in Bawku, Ghana, January 2024.

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

85 KII in Dakola, Burkina Faso, December 2023. This specifically applies to cash crop farmers outside Léo, in the Centre-Sud Region of Burkina Faso, who supply in bulk to Ghanaian traders.

86 KII in Wechiau, Ghana, November 2023.

87 In the long run, this might lead to an increase in high-value goods traded via unapproved routes. This could involve illicit goods.

88 Along the R9 and N2. Interview with senior customs official in Paga, Ghana, February 2024.

89 This dynamic is also visible for the Bawku border regions, where a chieftaincy conflict and communal militias have an impact on general levels of insecurity and contribute to trade disruptions.

In addition to violent extremist operations, the emergence of communal militias and bandits in Mali and Burkina Faso has had a disruptive effect on livelihoods. As one respondent in the area noted: “Insecurity exhausts us in our commercial work”.<sup>90</sup> Generally, local respondents in the Sikasso border regions were reticent to talk about the impact of insecurity on their livelihoods, possibly due to the presence of communal militias from whom they feared retaliation.<sup>91</sup>

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90 KII in Koloko, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

91 See report for more detail.

## Section 3: Security forces and border livelihoods

The increased presence of security actors constitutes a third – and significant – disruption to livelihoods in Coastal West Africa's borderlands. Violent extremism in the Sahel since 2012 and, in Coastal West Africa since 2019, has resulted in a series of national, bilateral, and regional counterterrorism responses with two main characteristics: the reinforced security presence in border areas and the hardening of borders (e.g. through expanding checkpoints and closing informal crossings) to stop violent extremists.

Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Mali have all reinforced borders with various security forces (army, gendarmerie, police, and customs and immigration officials).<sup>92</sup> In 2020, Ghana stationed two battalions in Upper East and Upper West as part of Operation Conquered Fist. Security personnel have established and reinforced checkpoints staffed with immigration and army units, and deployed intelligence agents.<sup>93</sup> Sometimes reinforcements are sent; for example, in April 2023, 1,000 security officers were deployed to Upper East after an unidentified armed group killed an immigration officer.<sup>94</sup>

### Expanding regional counterterrorism operations

As violent extremism expanded outside the Sahel in 2019 and 2020, Coastal West African countries positioned unilateral and multilateral counterterrorism operations on their borders to address what they saw as a 'spillover' of violent extremism. In recent years, these counter-terror operations have been bolstered by US and European security assistance.

In 2017, Ghana established Operation Conquered Fist with UK Ministry of Defence funding. The anti-terrorism operation initially focused on issues perceived to be closely connected to VEO activity, including illicit trade and cross-border criminal activity, particularly combatting artisanal (illegal) mining.<sup>95</sup>

Also in 2017, Coastal West African states established the Accra Initiative – Multilateral Joint Task Force (AI-MNJTF). The AI has launched joint operations, often referred to as Koudanlgou, which bring together Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo in joint combat operations on borders to police for VEO activity.<sup>96</sup> Under this framework, member countries can share intelligence and plan joint strategies and operations.

92 Forces vary from one country to another, and the shorthand 'security forces' is technically incorrect. In Burkina Faso, the douane is part of the police (and interacts in rural areas with the gendarmerie) and functions under the umbrella of the Ministre de l'Administration territoriale et de la Décentralisation. But in Ghana, the Customs, Excise and Preventive Service (CEPS) resides under the Ministry of Finance. The number of checkpoints and agents is not publicly available.

93 Ministry of the Interior - Republic of Ghana, 'Government Taking Measures To Strengthen Border Management – Interior Chief Director,' 30 August 2023, <https://www.mint.gov.gh/government-taking-measures-to-strengthen-border-management-interior-chief-director/>; interviews with senior intelligence and border security officers in Gwollu and Paga, Ghana, 11–15 February 2024; in 2020, the Ministry of National Security established Operation Conquered Fist to oversee and merge a coordinated border security and counterterrorism response across various ministries.

94 Crisis24 (2023), 'Ghana: Security forces deployed in Bawku, Upper East Region, as of early April,' 12 April 2023, <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2023/04/ghana-security-forces-deployed-in-bawku-upper-east-region-as-of-early-april>.

95 Ministry of Ghana Republic of Defence. 'Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) for 2020-2023.' <https://mofep.gov.gh/sites/default/files/pbb-estimates/2020/2020-PBB-MOD.pdf#>.

96 Birikoran, E. and Abdallah, M. 'The Accra Initiative: An Old Wine in a New Bottle?' <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/occational-paper-51.pdf>.

The Accra Initiative was designed to be led and driven by its member states, rather than external stakeholders and donors. This set the AI apart from previous regional coordination mechanisms, such as the G5 Sahel and Multi-National Joint Task Force-Lake Chad Basin. However, due to challenges coordinating partner countries' security and policy responses, funding shortfalls, and the absence of a cohesive political vision, the Accra Initiative has struggled to effectively deliver on its mandate. There may also have been some misalignment between Coastal West African member states and donors on the Initiative's envisioned role as an integrated security programme.

Similarly, in 2020, Côte d'Ivoire mobilised Operation Frontière Fermée after JNIM's Katibat Alidouougou launched an assault on a security outpost in Kafolo in 2020. Focused on the Northern Operational Zone, the counterterrorism operation includes 3,000 troops on active patrol.

Additionally, in 2021, Côte d'Ivoire launched the Counterterrorism Operational Intelligence Center (CROAT), which is the Ivorian government's fusion centre (where intelligence from all ministries is collected and shared to holistically coordinate information and activities aligned with counterterrorism efforts), and the International Counterterrorism Academy (AILCT) as a training centre for counterterrorism security activities.<sup>97</sup>

In 2018, Togo started a military campaign, Koundjoare, in the north of the country and has since reinforced its military presence multiple times.<sup>98</sup> In Burkina Faso, military presence in border regions has been reinforced since 2020. However, since the military coups partly redirected to active battlefields, control of checkpoints and policing tasks has been left to the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) militia, among others.<sup>99</sup> In Mali, the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA) reinforced positions in Sikasso in 2015, and again in 2017.

These security deployments impact livelihoods in Coastal West Africa's borderlands in different ways, including by disrupting cross-border trade and increasing extortion at checkpoints. However, local residents still see security forces as legitimate armed actors who play an important role securing communities and, by extension, local livelihoods.

Regional economic changes may have the largest overarching impact on borderland livelihoods, but security deployments appear to have a stronger effect on local livelihoods than violent extremist activity (see Table 3 on page 23).<sup>100</sup>

## Altering 'practical norms': impact of security operations on livelihoods

There are three mechanisms by which security forces impact livelihoods in Coastal West Africa's borderlands.

97 United States Department of State. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Cote d'Ivoire." <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/cote-divoire#>.

98 Tounkara, G.I. 'Le Togo renforce son armée contre la menace djihadiste,' *Deutsche Welle*, 23 June 2023, <https://www.dw.com/fr/menace-djihadiste-togo-renforce-armee/a-65994786>.

99 As a female stall operator in Ouessa explained: "The security forces are focused on the jihadists, and so the VDP sometimes police the border in their absence now." KII in Ouessa, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

100 This does not hold in the Bawku border regions, where general insecurity is more important.



First, the deployment of security forces inhibits free movement and trade among local communities. Respondents often see the presence of security as a sign of increased threat and tend to self-limit movement as a result – as was the case with interviewees in the Wa border regions.<sup>101</sup> It is possible that such concerns among community members, sparked by an increased security presence, will diminish over time.<sup>102</sup>

Second, checkpoints lead to more opportunities for ‘taxation.’ Residents of border areas experience three types of fees at checkpoints: legitimate taxes; collusive corruption (to circumvent regulation); and coercive corruption (extracting money forcefully).<sup>103</sup> Checkpoints in borderlands have always been places where security personnel charge these fees, and the increasing number of checkpoints has simply resulted in residents having to pay more of them.

For example, in Bakwu and in the Chereponi border regions, interviewees reported encountering more checkpoints than previously – each with a fee requirement.<sup>104</sup> In the Wa border regions, interviewees described journeys from Ghana’s northern border to Burkina Faso that involved passing through four to six checkpoints, depending on the day. In the Hamile and Paga border regions, truck drivers and traders in Burkina Faso reported encountering more VDP checkpoints and army mobile patrols.<sup>105</sup> In Wa, people pay fees of £0.30–2.50 at every new checkpoint.<sup>106</sup> In the Bawku and Chereponi border regions, more than half of KII participants reported paying fines at new checkpoints.<sup>107</sup> A female trader there noted: “The security [forces] are the new ‘robbers’, finding every possibility to extort money multiple times from us when business is at its lowest already [...] When the robbers were there – it’s not all the time you meet them on the road, but with the security, it is constant”.<sup>108</sup> Some people travel further to less policed routes, but incur higher transport costs.<sup>109</sup>

The household survey sheds light on the level of taxation in the Chereponi and Paga border regions in early 2024. As shown in Figure 10 (next page), most of those who cross the borders regularly cited needing to pay officials or offer goods. Almost two-thirds (48) of the 74 respondents who regularly cross borders reported that they make informal payments. This figure is consistent with existing data on cross-border movement elsewhere in Africa, but it might reflect a change in the areas of Coastal West Africa

101 KII in Gwollu, Ghana, December 2023. Mechanism also seen in Paga; KIIs in Paga, Ghana, December 2023.

102 Interview with security sector reform specialist, Teams conversation, 18 March 2024.

103 Shleifer, A. and Vishny, R.W. ‘Corruption,’ *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 108:3 (1 August 1993): pp. 599–617, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2118402>.

104 Over half of the respondents in Pulmakom and Bunkpurugu said they faced issues at the border. KII in Chereponi, Ghana, December 2023.

105 FGD with traders in Pô, Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso, 13 December 2023. Compared to data from 2012, this seems to suggest that checkpoints have indeed increased; Foltz, J. and Li, K. ‘Competition and corruption: Highway corruption in West Africa,’ *Journal of Development Economics* 163, June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdevco.2023.103080>.

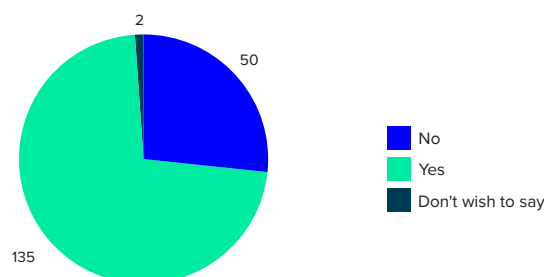
106 This is the range of prices reported by all 42 KIIs in Wechiau, Ghana, and Batié, Burkina Faso, Wa border regions.

107 Count of all 70 interviews in these areas referencing ‘fees’ for KII item “Are there checkpoints along the transit route, by either the government or other armed groups, that charge fees?”

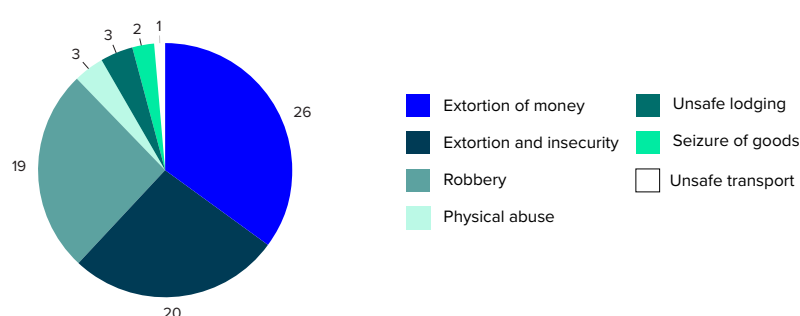
108 Female trader from Silbelle, Ghana, December 2023.

109 Interview with security consultant in Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

*When trading across borders, have you ever had to make any informal (on the side) payments or give free goods to any official?*



*If you feel unsafe crossing the border, what are the causes of this feeling?<sup>106</sup>*



**Figure 10.** Informal payments and safety at border crossings

under study,<sup>110</sup> where previous recorded rates were around 40 per cent.<sup>111</sup> Among those who feel unsafe crossing the Paga border to Burkina Faso, extortion is the primary reason cited (Figure 10).<sup>112</sup>

The third, and most common, mechanism that links security deployments to deteriorating livelihoods involves altered 'practical norms' around informal payments: fines imposed by security forces have become higher and increasingly arbitrary compared to the more limited fees imposed in the past.<sup>113</sup>

Crossing a border requires the presentation of valid identification and travel documentation. Often, people do not have these documents, and it is common practice for security personnel to accept payments for passage – a form of collusive corruption.<sup>114</sup> New norms might be developing, too: field

<sup>110</sup> There are differences between regions, with higher values reported for the North East of Ghana.

<sup>111</sup> Comparison with previous studies are difficult given differences in sampling and methodology; Ghana, see Foltz, J.D. and Opoku-Agyemang K.A. 'Do Higher Salaries Lower Petty Corruption? A Policy Experiment on West Africa's Highways' (International Growth Centre, 2016); on West Africa: World Bank 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Infographic', Trade Facilitation West Africa (Washington: 2020). On Benin, a percentage of about 80 is reported: Bensassi, S., and Jarreau, J. 'Price discrimination in bribe payments: Evidence from informal cross-border trade in West Africa,' *World Development* 122, October 2019, pp. 462–480, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.05.023>. In Burkina Faso, this remained at around 40%.

<sup>112</sup> There are significant differences between regions, and even villages.

<sup>113</sup> Titeca K. and de Herdt, T. 'Regulation, Cross-Border Trade and Practical Norms in West Nile, North-Western Uganda,' *Africa* 80:4 (November 2010): pp. 573–94, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2010.0403>.

<sup>114</sup> Shleifer, A. and Vishny, R.W. 'Corruption,\*' *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 108:3 (1 August 1993): pp. 599–617, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2118402>.

research in the Wa border region found that customs officials and police demanded traders pay for police fuel in exchange for a protective escort between towns.<sup>115</sup>

In the Bawku and Chereponi border regions, researchers heard frequent complaints about Ghanaian customs officials subjectively adjusting fees for the “standard” charge of duties.<sup>116</sup> At other times, officials reportedly charge people without explanation.<sup>117</sup> Some interviewees also gave examples of immigration officers charging fees per item, which is not part of their official mandate.<sup>118</sup>

In the Hamile border regions, for example, respondents reported high fines of CFA 1,000–5,000 (£1.30–6.50) for individuals, cattle, produce, and/or vehicles to pass through checkpoints.<sup>119</sup> In the Sikasso border regions, one respondent explained that, “the difficulties we face are at the police, customs, and gendarmerie posts, concerning abusive payments, and enormous fees for trade routes”.<sup>120</sup> A respondent in the Chereponi border area summed up the spirit of most responses: “Even if a woman is holding a black plastic bag, immigration will charge her”.<sup>121</sup>

## Security forces as ‘trusted’ actors

While their livelihoods are at risk, border communities underscored that they still trust security forces. However, local perceptions vary based on the type of security actor.

Figure 11 (next page) depicts household survey findings on trust levels for various community members and authorities (a score of 5 represents ‘complete’ trust). It also shows perceptions of the extent to which these actors hinder or help cross-border trade (a score of 5 indicates the actor ‘helps a lot’).<sup>122</sup> The results reinforce a narrative that emerged from the KIIs: The multiple security forces operating in the borderland are viewed differently. Customs authorities and immigration officers are viewed more negatively than other official actors, particularly in relation to cross-border trade. Negative views of customs and immigration officials similarly surfaced in other household survey questions.<sup>123</sup>

115 Two KIIs in Wechiau, Wa Municipal District, Upper West Region, Ghana, November 2023.

116 Over half of the KII respondents in Pulmakom and Bunkpurugu said they faced issues at the border. FGD participants confirmed that these charges fluctuate. FGD, women, and under-represented groups in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.

117 The eight participants in the Bawku FGD referred to immigration officers charging fees for traders to pass into Bawku. FGD, women, and under-represented groups in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, 5 January 2024.

118 The answers of KII respondents in the Upper East and North East varied. Most quoted around 20–30 GHS (US\$1.28–1.91) was quoted, although some people report having to pay more than 100 GHS (US\$6.38). KIIs, Upper East and North East, Ghana, December 2023–January 2024.

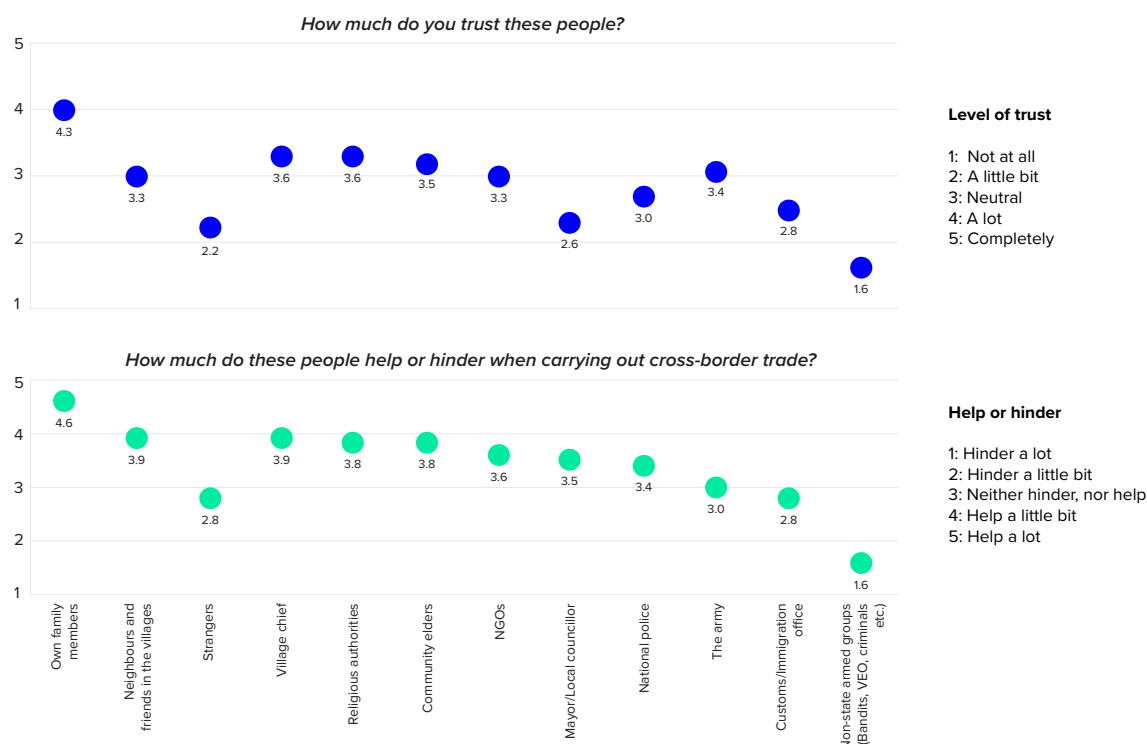
119 Over 20 KIIs in Pô and Dakola (Nahouri Province, Centre-Sud Region) and Ouessa and Hamélé (Ioba Province, Centre-Ouest Region), Burkina Faso, December–January 2024.

120 Interview with young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

121 KII in Chereponi, December 2023.

122 Items defined: Trust questions: [1] Not at all, [2] A little bit, [3] Neutral, [4] A lot, [5] Completely. Border question: [1] Hinder a lot, [2] Hinder a little bit, [3] Neither hinder, nor help, [4] Help a little bit, [5] Help a lot.

123 For example, items such as, “When you need support for problems in crossing borders safely and without trouble, who do you turn to?”; or “Officials you usually make informal (on the side) payments or give free goods” also point strongly at customs and immigration officers.



**Figure 11.** Level of trust in community members and authorities in Ghana

The police and army are viewed more positively; it is notable, however, that the army is viewed as less helpful in cross-border trade, particularly in relation to the higher level of general trust expressed for the army.<sup>124</sup> The survey findings showing higher trust in the army are consistent with Afrobarometer data that indicates militaries are generally trusted and perceived positively, on par with village chiefs and religious authorities.<sup>125</sup>

In Sikasso, Hèrèmakono, and Koloko, interviewees expressed positive views of the Malian and Burkinabé army, noting that they offered protection and restored a measure of calm after rising insecurity: “The presence of the armed forces alongside us is reassuring and allows us to carry out our activities in our community,” one person said.<sup>126</sup>

Similarly, in Bawku, various KII and FGD respondents argued that the army’s deployment contributed to a sense of safety among local communities, noting the army’s presence on roads to provide protection on market days.<sup>127</sup> In the wider Bawku border regions, the army (not the police) was cited as the first point of

<sup>124</sup> While responses to this question could mean that respondents do not see the army as involved in cross-border trade, it could also mean that they view the army as a hindrance rather than a help, which would constitute a warning that institutional trust levels in the army could decline if people continue to have negative experiences.

<sup>125</sup> Afrobarometer and Center for Democratic Development Ghana (2022), ‘Summary of results: Afrobarometer Round 9 survey in Ghana, 2022.’

<sup>126</sup> KIIs in Koloko, Burkina Faso, December 2023, and Hèrèmokono, Mali, December 2023.

<sup>127</sup> During a FGD in Bawku in January 2024, one woman said: “I think the security personnel on the road help us in a way because it makes us feel safe and I think they are there to protect us.” Another referred to feeling much safer travelling on market days because of the visibility of the security forces.



contact to whom people felt confident reporting their security concerns.<sup>128</sup> Across all zones, respondents consistently expressed the expectation that security forces would work to ensure community safety, despite negative experiences arising from increased deployments.

People therefore have competing perceptions of security forces: they look to security forces for help, but also stress that their behaviour needs to change. One interviewee from the Hamile border regions in Burkina Faso summarised this conundrum clearly, albeit for the VDP (a non-state security actor tasked with state-like functions): “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”.<sup>129</sup> Policy responses in Coastal West African borderlands will need to address this duality in the lived experiences of border communities.

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<sup>128</sup> Male participant of an FGD, community and social actors in Chereponi, North East, Ghana, January 2024. In Bawku and Biankori, respondents referred to their sense of freedom and the ability to move around when they know security forces are active. This was conveyed in the KIIs conducted in December 2023 and in the FGDs in Bawku, Upper East, Ghana, January 2024.

<sup>129</sup> KII in Hamile, Ghana, December 2023.

## Section 4: Considerations for policy and programming

This study has explored challenges affecting livelihoods in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa. It finds that livelihoods across the region are under stress for three main reasons. Primarily, regional economic conditions and policies have adversely affected people in border communities. Regional insecurity in the borderland regions has an effect: security force deployments and the presence of VEOs negatively impact income-generating activities as they disrupt local and regional trade.

### Livelihood disruptions as a potential extremist entry point

The literature on conflict diffusion and the spread of violent extremism points to the ability of extremists to exploit popular grievances as they expand into new areas.<sup>130</sup> Field data from this study suggests limited evidence of JNIM's direct involvement in informal cross-border trade, except for some examples involving the localised procurement of food and goods.

At the same time, commercial interactions with border communities to re-supply could be an entry point for more proactive efforts by VEOs to engrain themselves within local populations. These patterns are already visible in Benin, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.<sup>131</sup> <sup>132</sup> What's more, KIIs indicated some concerns about the vulnerability to recruitment of Ghanaian men, who no longer regularly trade across the border in Burkina Faso due to the disruption of markets and trade. Some female interviewees expressed fears that these young men might be offered financial incentives to join VEOs.<sup>133</sup> Women also experience financial hardships that VEOs could seek to exploit, including competition in their traditional trades

130 Black, N.W. 'The Spread of Violent Civil Conflict : Rare State-Driven, and Preventable,' (Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012), <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/74274>.; Kibris, A. 'The Geo-Temporal Evolution of Violence in Civil Conflicts: A Micro Analysis of Conflict Diffusion on a New Event Data Set,' *Journal of Peace Research* 58: 5, September 2021, pp. 885–899, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320978695>; Dowd, C. 'New Territory, Geographic Diffusion and Civilian Targeting,' *Civil Wars*, March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2024.2302735>. See for examples: de Bruijne, K. 'Inside the attacks on Porga and Keremou,' Clingendael, December 2021, [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/CA\\_Under\\_the%20\\_microscope.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/CA_Under_the%20_microscope.pdf).

131 Brugger, F. and Zongo, T. 'Salafist Violence and Artisanal Mining: Evidence from Burkina Faso,' *Journal of Rural Studies* 100 (1 May 2023): 103029, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103029>; 'Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin,' Global Initiative and ACLED, May 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/>. Elva Community Engagement, SITREP for the Kingdom of the Netherlands (November 2020); de Bruijne, K. *Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover*, Clingendael and ACLED, June 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/northern-benin-and-risk-violent-extremist-spillover>.

132 A related risk is that JNIM could act when it feels its supply networks are disrupted. For evidence from the Kafolo attack (Côte d'Ivoire), see: Nsaibia, H. "In Light of the Kafolo Attack: The Jihadi Militant Threat in the Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast Borderlands". ACLED, 24 August 2020. and the first incidents in Porga and Keremou (Benin) illustrate how JNIM moved into action to protect its interests; de Bruijne, K., Nsaibia, H., Brottem, L., and Raleigh, C. 'Under the microscope: Inside the attacks on Porga and Keremou,' *Clingendael*, December 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/under-microscope-inside-attacks-porga-and-keremou>.

133 Interview, Fulbe Council of Chiefs, Ghana. These dynamics were also reported in Wechiau, where female KIIs warned that young boys and men active in male-dominated trades such as livestock and long-haul transregional truck driving were at risk of succumbing to JNIM's influence and financial incentives to join the group. This was also a concern expressed about young men who used to participate in hunting near the region's parks but who have been unable to do so due to rising insecurity.

as more men avoid long-haul trade and cattle herding in favour of selling vegetables, fruits, and other household items closer to home.<sup>134</sup>

The real danger is that JNIM presents itself in its propaganda as attuned to popular needs and sensitive to the day-to-day concerns of local communities.<sup>135</sup> Continued deterioration of the economic and security conditions in borderland regions may give JNIM an opening to blame regional governments for not doing enough to address the needs of local populations, or for pursuing policies that exacerbate disruptions to lives and livelihoods. The danger with the otherwise positive findings that security forces are still perceived as providing security to people could therefore backfire: a perceived failure by security forces to act in the interests of people could enhance the credibility of JNIM's anti-government messaging in the future.

## Current policies and programmes in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa

A mapping of donor-supported programming in Coastal West Africa since 2018 undertaken for this report identified at least 155 programmes focused on security and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in the Central Sahel, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. These have a total value of US\$2 billion, and each programme lasts an average of 3.5 years, averaging US\$570 million a year. Key donors are European countries and (until recently) the United States, as well as multilateral organisations such as the European Union, World Bank, and a variety of UN agencies.<sup>136</sup>

Such programming in Coastal West Africa's borderlands is typically presented as a form of stabilisation support to reduce the space for 'destabilising' actors and reinforce community resilience amid instability. In practice, a wide variety of programmes fit under the stabilisation umbrella. These include: development projects (such as socio-economic and infrastructure programmes); P/CVE activities (which may aim to change narratives, strengthen social cohesion and community resilience, build capacity of local actors, and support civic engagement); as well as security-related initiatives, such as partner force capacity building and weapons transfers. Security initiatives have traditionally focused on military assistance, but increasingly these efforts also incorporate training and equipping law enforcement and border security agencies, gendarmeries, and customs and immigration services.

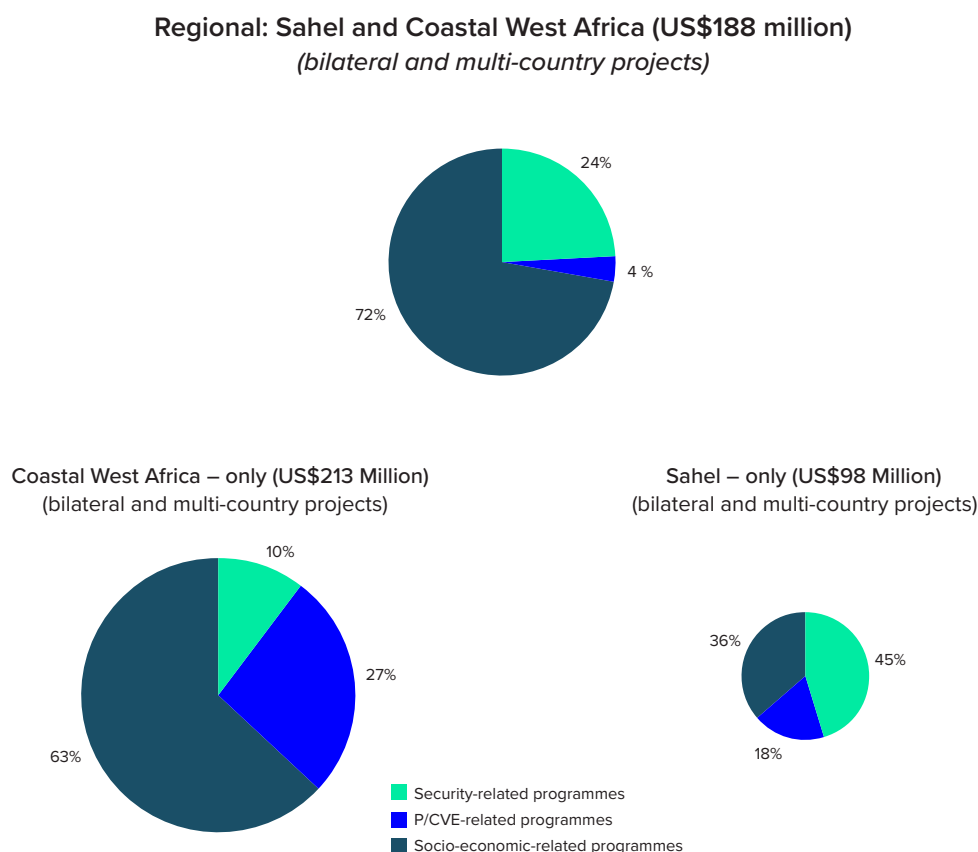
Figure 12 (next page) provides a rough breakdown of donor programming in Coastal West Africa (humanitarian assistance is excluded).<sup>137</sup> About a quarter of foreign assistance goes towards P/CVE-related programmes. Another quarter is spent on security assistance, while nearly half of donor funding supports development projects.

<sup>134</sup> Several KILs in Wa and Wechiau highlighted the growing trend of men displacing women's traditional livelihoods (see Area 2, section: 'Impacts of insecurity from non-state actors on local trade' for more details).

<sup>135</sup> Nsaibia, H. et al. "Actor Profile: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)." *ACLED*. 23 November 2023.

<sup>136</sup> As there is no centralised information management system that collates all interventions, it is difficult to determine where programming takes place. Interviews with experts in Ghana showed that this is also a problem for donors and West African governments alike. Interviews with various diplomatic missions in Accra, Ghana, February 2024.

<sup>137</sup> These numbers should be taken with extreme caution due to the deep ambiguity around funding.



**Figure 12.** Estimate of yearly international donor programming in Coastal West Africa

Until recently, Coastal West Africa received less stabilisation support than the Central Sahel. Donors instead prioritised infrastructure development and macro-economic policy support for countries like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Starting in 2019, after the passage of the Global Fragility Act, the United States intensified focus on stabilisation programming in Coastal West Africa. This shift was propelled by a growing threat of violent extremist expansion from the Sahel into Coastal West Africa; it also reflected the increased complexity of working in the Sahel after a series of coups made political engagement difficult.<sup>138</sup>

This study included questions about respondent perceptions of NGO support for local livelihoods.<sup>139</sup> The overwhelming majority of respondents were unfamiliar with donor-supported cross-border trade programmes in their areas. For example, in the Chereponi and Bawku border regions, 53 out of the 70 interviewees noted no awareness of such programming. This may be due, in part, to the recent

<sup>138</sup> In 2019, the US government launched the Global Fragility Act, a plan to shift towards stabilisation programming in Coastal West Africa; Alliance for Peacebuilding, *Global Fragility Act*, <https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/globalfragilityact>. In the years following, the EU and the US explored an approach touted as robust coordinated stabilisation efforts; Christianson, J., Stiles Herdt, C.S., and Nadolny, G. 'The Global Fragility Act: Unlocking the Full Potential of Interagency Cooperation,' Center for Strategic and International Studies Brief, May 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-fragility-act-unlocking-full-potential-interagency-cooperation>. These initiatives are hampered by the 2025 budget cuts to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

<sup>139</sup> Item: "What kind of programmes by the government or NGOs exist on cross-border trade in your area?" This also encompasses programmes undertaken before stabilisation programming began.

establishment of certain stabilisation initiatives, which have not yet begun programming. However, the overall lack of visibility of such efforts highlights the messaging and substantive challenge donors, international NGOs, and national and local governments face in building community awareness and buy-in.

## Security programming: lessons from the Central Sahel

A decade or more of security-centred assistance in the Central Sahel offers key insights and lessons for security programmes in Coastal West Africa. Like in Coastal West Africa, the security threat in the Sahel is transnational, spanning multiple countries. Programmatic responses were, however, largely siloed by country. Even the G5 Sahel – a joint regional counterterrorism force established by five Sahelian countries in 2014 – faced setbacks deploying forces across borders due to coordination challenges among donors, regional bodies, and participating national governments. Overlapping priorities and uncoordinated funding streams contributed to the initiative's collapse.<sup>140</sup> Similar challenges to effective security responses face Coastal West Africa, including a lack of political consensus on how to establish joint operations, share intelligence, and conduct cross-border activities.<sup>141</sup>

One crucial difference between Coastal West African and Central Sahelian security forces is the level of experience in countering insurgency and armed violence. Military and security forces in the Sahel are familiar with frontline deployments and operating in remote border regions.<sup>142</sup> Despite prior fighting experience, Sahelian forces struggled to effectively respond to security threats due to insufficient resourcing, staffing, and specialised training in counterinsurgency operations. By contrast, the militaries of Benin, Togo, and Ghana have limited experience protecting remote interior regions, apart from some participation in multilateral missions.<sup>143</sup> Coastal West African militaries should learn from the Sahelian experience, investing in training and supporting forces to operate in remote, frontline, and cross-border contexts – and fostering collaborative civil-military interactions.<sup>144</sup> Such an investment will help Coastal West African forces avoid replicating some costly mistakes made in the Sahel, such as employing security tactics that undo gains made in other spheres. Sahelian forces were criticised, for example, for resorting to 'clearing operations' that depopulated areas at risk, displaced local communities, and unintentionally set back economic development.<sup>145</sup>

In general, the Ivorian, Beninois, Ghanaian, and Togolese security forces have prioritised hardening borders, cracking down on immigration, and strengthening law enforcement efforts against groups

140 Théroux-Bénoni, L. and Adam, N. 'Hard counter-terrorism lessons from the Sahel for West Africa's coastal states,' (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2019), <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/hard-counter-terrorism-lessons-from-the-sahel-for-west-africas-coastal-states>; The Accra Initiative has fared better, but similar issues are starting to emerge: Birikorang, E. and Abdallah, M. (2023), 'The Accra Initiative: An Old Wine in a New Bottle?', Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Occasional Paper 51, 2023, <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/occasional-paper-51.pdf>.

141 Abatan, J.E., Matongbada, M., and Kwarkye, S. 'Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states?', *Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa*, 30 September 2019, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-the-accra-initiative-prevent-terrorism-in-west-african-coastal-states>.

142 ACLED 'Conflict Watchlist 2024: The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-Long Conflict,' 17 January 2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/>.

143 Kusi, Brig-Gen. B. 'Ghana's experiences in peace operations and contingent weapons management,' *Small Arms Survey*, October 2017. <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/MPOME-1WS-Paper1.pdf>.

144 These dynamics are reinforced by the fact that traditional centres of economic, social, and political power tend to concentrate in the southern, coastal regions of these states.

145 Golovko, E. 'Sahel: Stabilisation efforts should address internal displacement,' Clingendael Policy Brief, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/sahel-stabilisation-efforts-should-address-internal-displacement>.



considered suspect, such as foreigners, labour migrants, and ethnic Fulbe.<sup>146</sup> Since 2022, Côte d'Ivoire and Benin have worked to reduce reliance on security tools for counterterrorism and integrate more holistic approaches that include engagement with local communities – with some positive results along their borders.<sup>147</sup> Coastal West African countries could take further steps to demonstrate responsiveness to local needs and livelihoods concerns, in particular working to accommodate the traditional reliance of border communities on cross-border mobility.<sup>148</sup> Emphasis by international donors on livelihood challenges stemming from security interventions in borderlands could help bring these issues to fore, in conjunction with targeted needs assessments and capacity-building support for national security forces.

## Considerations for policy and programming

This report focuses on livelihoods and does not include a wider set of suggestions related to other social and political dynamics that VEOs could exploit. However, governments and donors should aim for holistic approaches that address the broader range of potential drivers for conflict and instability at the individual, community, and structural levels. Livelihood concerns are an important, but they are not the sole indicator of vulnerabilities.

### 1. Better align national policy and programmatic responses with community needs

Government and donor priorities for improved security and reducing the threat of violent extremism do not always align with the priorities of the population for better economic opportunities and access to jobs, education, and other resources. Borderland communities rely on access to trade with a range of actors, sometimes including non-state armed groups and VEOs. Their key concerns are economic.

Security deployments that disrupt the financing, resourcing, and supply of armed groups often have direct or indirect consequences for vulnerable groups in these borderlands. Implementing policies that require civilian support without addressing the fundamental needs of the population (such as ensuring uninterrupted trade) may hinder local engagement in counterterrorism and conflict prevention efforts.

#### Consideration 1.1: Address community priorities alongside security needs

Livelihoods and trade disruptions are the paramount popular concern in borderland communities. Respondents cited the need for the development of infrastructure, such as roads, streetlights, hospitals, and schools.<sup>149</sup> Many noted government failure to deliver services and ascribed expanded government presence in borderland areas to national security imperatives. These people can feel neglected and policed by the state.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Brottem, L. 'Benin's Approach to Fighting Jihadists Is Fueling the Cycle of Violence,' *World Politics Review*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/benin-west-africa-military-democracy-jihadist-violence-us/>; Amnesty International *Benin – Togo: Fight against armed groups must not justify human rights violations*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/07/benin-togo-fight-against-armed-groups-must-not-justify-human-rights-violations/>.

<sup>147</sup> de Bruijne, K. 'Despite military progress, it's not going well in Northern Benin; International Crisis Group (ICG), Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W,' Africa Report N°310 (Brussels: ICG, 26 January 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africas-park-w>.

<sup>148</sup> "Boundary commissions" are a promising development. Burkina Faso and Ghana, for example, have continued to engage with one another to support cross-border mobility.

<sup>149</sup> For a similar request in Burkina Faso, Nigerien, and Malian communities, see: UNDP-African Borderlands Centre (UNDP-ABC) (2022), *Promise, Peril and Resilience: Voices of Agropastoralists in Africa's Borderland Regions*, 2022.

<sup>150</sup> KIIs and FGDs in Paga, and Wa, Ghana, December 2024.

Incorporating economic development, job training, education, and livelihood support into local and regional programming could enhance popular buy-in for stabilisation and security initiatives. Examples include micro-finance initiatives such as village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) that help communities adapt to a changing business environment; encouraging Burkina Faso and Ghana to consider the livelihoods and income implications of cereal bans; and facilitating greater coordination across West Africa – rather than mainly their own country – on agriculture and production initiatives to help mitigate the economic impact of disparate national policies on borderland communities. Governments that ban cross-border trade and thereby force people to sell at lower prices domestically could also consider buying agricultural goods at competitive prices. Such government support could help strengthen community trust in government resilience to disruptive forces.

### **Consideration 1.2: Leverage existing practices to strengthen local resilience**

Stabilisation approaches could benefit from incorporating adaptation measures developed over years by border communities navigating often fluid and unpredictable border dynamics – such as banditry, armed violence, population movement and displacement, climate stress, and economic volatility. Increased insecurity due to rising violent extremism and the disruptions caused by security force responses constitute a new and unprecedented shock, but populations are likely to respond with coping mechanisms that have been tested over time.<sup>151</sup> These responses involve travelling in convoys, breaking trade into smaller bundles, having women engage in cross-border trade rather than men (to avoid targeting by VEOs), and carrying Ghanaian identity cards (JNIM appears to avoid deliberately targeting Ghanaians, likely to avoid confrontations with Ghanaian security forces).<sup>152</sup>

## **2. Recalibrate security deployments to minimise disruptions to livelihoods and foster stability**

Popular criticism of heavy-handed responses and corrupt practices of security forces along the borders of Coastal West Africa highlights the need for regional government attention on improved engagement with local communities and better integration and oversight of security forces. Respondents stressed how the burden of fees extracted by security forces is unfairly placed on people who cannot afford to pay and who lose income waiting at checkpoints. Security forces also have, at times, taken a harder-edged approach to preventing the spread of violent extremism into their territories by increasing the policing of civilians, including foreigners who frequently travel and trade across borders.

VEOs could exploit local livelihood vulnerabilities and other grievances related to security deployments by spreading misinformation and disinformation about national government negligence and attempting to position themselves as a credible alternative. Improving civilian awareness and government delivery of assistance and security programming could improve perceptions of the government in border regions.

Several key considerations can improve and preserve local stability, as well as mitigate the adverse effects of borderland security deployments:

### **Consideration 2.1: Improving community relationships with security forces in the borderlands.**

Interviewees said they wanted improved engagement with security providers so that community members could better understand their intentions and activities. Avenues for improving relations

<sup>151</sup> This is explored in a survey item (“How has your household coped with these shocks over the last twelve months?”). The most common responses were to sell livestock (35%), undertake new economic activity (11%), or rely on social safety nets (20%).

<sup>152</sup> Ellis G., and de Bruijne K., ‘Stability and livelihoods challenges in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions,’ (Chapter 1 of ‘Life on the line’).

between the population and the security services could include conducting regular town halls or other civilian-facing engagements (e.g. patrolling on foot), and military activities that support local livelihoods (e.g. protecting markets on market days or establishing safe corridors for local and cross-border movement). Local army leadership could proactively reach out to residents of border communities to raise awareness of security forces' roles and responsibilities, helping to promote transparency and accountability.

This study's findings on local trust in the armed forces shows a foundation exists for building communal partnerships to prevent violent extremist expansion. Consultations between security forces and local communities could be held in local gathering places, such as community centres or the homes of traditional leaders, or privately through more secure channels, such as an 'emergency hotline' where citizens would be able to raise more sensitive issues.<sup>153</sup> Mechanisms for reporting suspicious behaviour or improper security force conduct exist, but do not always work as they should. Often, these issues are dealt with in the national capital (far away from border communities) and handled within the hierarchy of the specific security actor, such as customs, immigration, or police.

## **Consideration 2.2: Coordination and deconfliction of official mandates in the borderlands.**

To build community confidence, security forces could strengthen intra-governmental coordination. The mandates of army units, gendarmerie, customs, police and immigration in Coastal West Africa's borderlands often overlap and can sometimes represent political fiefdoms.<sup>154</sup> Developing a whole-of-government approach that integrates staff and resources from various sectors within government could support operational deconfliction. Ghana's Ministry of National Security (MNS) offers a promising model wherein actors from across the security sector and civil society jointly share data, produce analysis, and prepare interventions (fusing intelligence collection, sensitisation, and development in one joint mission).

Enhancing and ensuring coordination between security and civilian officials could further strengthen security provision in the borderlands. For example, improving security coordination with the justice sector could strengthen evidence collection and build the sector's capacity.<sup>155</sup> Including economic advisors, possibly as part of 'joint government units', could improve military understanding of, and responsiveness to, local economic pressures that might undermine stability. Any interagency government effort should also prioritise engagement with influential local actors, such as traditional and religious authorities (see Figure 11 on page 36).

153 See also UNDP-African Borderlands Centre (UNDP-ABC) (2022), *'Promise, Peril and Resilience: Voices of Agropastoralists in Africa's Borderland Regions,'* 2022.

154 See for example, ECDPM, (2021), 'A system, not an error: informal cross-border trade in West Africa,' 2021, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1616/5546/8572/System-Not-Error-Informal-Cross-Border-Trade-West-Africa-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-300-2021.pdf>.

155 There are plenty of models on using battlefield evidence collection from CT missions to support justice proceedings. For one example, see: U.S. Department of State, Department of Justice and Department of Defense (2021), 'Non-Binding Guiding Principles on Use of Battlefield Evidence in Civilian Criminal Proceedings' (Washington DC, 2021), <https://www.theij.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/USG-Non-Binding-Guiding-Principles-on-Use-of-Battlefield-Evidence-EN-1.pdf>. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2018), *Supporting legal responses and criminal justice capacity to prevent and counter terrorism* (Vienna, 2018), [https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Menu%20of%20Services/18-05646\\_Terrorism\\_Prev\\_Branch\\_Services\\_Ebook\\_NEW.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Menu%20of%20Services/18-05646_Terrorism_Prev_Branch_Services_Ebook_NEW.pdf). It remains key to ensure that mandates are respected and that softer parts of the government are not actually engaging in intelligence collection.

### Consideration 2.3: Transparency about security activities in the borderlands

Field research revealed that civilian respondents often misunderstood the roles and responsibilities of security actors, who have, at times, unevenly applied the region's practical norms regarding cross-border movement. For example, many civilians did not fully understand their rights should they be interdicted by law enforcement or forced to pay a fee. They also struggled to evaluate the legitimacy of fees or tell the difference between bribes and regular taxes.

A World Bank study found that 90 per cent of respondents had limited or no knowledge of border trade regulations.<sup>156</sup> Governments could engage more proactively with the public to, for example: clarify the responsibilities of different security actors along the border; provide information on planned security operations as appropriate (such as curfews or counterterrorism operations); and increase engagement with local authorities (local government, customary chiefs, and branches of national authorities). It is particularly important to focus on engaging locals involved in cross-border trade.

### Consideration 2.4: Uphold standards of conduct by addressing extortion

There are at least two ways that national governments can forcefully hold accountable offending officials who extort locals (often customs and immigration officials, according to border community residents).

First, governments can establish an oversight system for fee collection, such as issuing official receipts for payment.<sup>157</sup> While some fees lack a legal basis under ECOWAS regulations, there are – from the state's perspective – legitimate fees (such as for processed goods or imported goods) and taxation on goods and services that are circumvented by informal trade (e.g. VAT).<sup>158</sup> Improving checkpoint processes to confirm individuals have already paid fees would reduce incidents of over-charging for legitimate fees. In Burkina Faso, VDP forces stationed at different checkpoints communicate with each other about who they are taxing along the way. JNIM also employs this system to limit the local population's tax burden and ensure voluntary zakat collection in other contexts. Governments can adopt similar systems so that people no longer have to pay double or triple the usual fees.

Second, national governments and their international partners should try to improve awareness among new security forces of local taxation practices for collecting legitimate fees, as well as the 'practical norms' related to collusive corruption (circumventing regulation). People expect to pay fees, even when they are not always legitimate. But the present systems lead to arbitrary, coercive, and elevated fines. Security forces (particularly new immigration and customs officers) should learn the going rates for various goods, transport routes, and informal crossings to reduce arbitrary fines. An efficiently organised, albeit informal, system of payments would help to normalise residents' expectations around fees.

<sup>156</sup> World Bank 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Infographic,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (Washington: 2020).

<sup>157</sup> Previous research at the six main West African trade corridors show that only 26–47% of traders receive a receipt: World Bank 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Infographic,' Trade Facilitation West Africa (Washington: 2020).

<sup>158</sup> See for example, ECDPM, 'A system, not an error: informal cross-border trade in West Africa,' 2021, <https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1616/5546/8572/System-Not-Error-Informal-Cross-Border-Trade-West-Africa-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-300-2021.pdf>.

## Consideration 2.5: Simplify border crossing procedures where possible

Most interviewees called for more official border crossings and formalised border crossing processes.<sup>159</sup> However, such calls run counter to recent research on West Africa that indicates increased formalisation of trade and border-crossing procedures – while raising formal trade and government revenue – pushes informal traders towards unofficial routes, often resulting in higher overall fees along the way.<sup>160</sup>

Informal cross-border trade and movement is difficult to counter and regulate.<sup>161</sup> A 2010 study found that paying higher salaries to border officials, as was tried in Ghana, led to an increase, rather than a decrease, in fees – contradicting the theory that underpaid security officials are more prone to corruption.<sup>162</sup> Other research suggests that lowering trade barriers and simplifying border processes (such as reducing paperwork, decreasing points of interaction with officials, cutting import and export limitations, or exempting loads below a certain net value) lowers the cost of fees (legitimate and otherwise).<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, providing up-to-date, actionable information on market prices to people who trade cross-border can have a positive impact on livelihoods.<sup>164</sup>

One potential strand of action – consistent with a recently concluded ECOWAS/World Bank study examining informal cross border trade – would be to develop informal trade facilitation mechanisms that aim to ease processes such as issuing identification and paperwork. This approach would prioritise people who move across borders frequently, including traders, labourers, and drivers.<sup>165</sup> Such policies are the best way for governments to prevent or counter violent extremism as they build on the real concerns of people living in the region.

<sup>159</sup> A policy that could increase government revenue via taxation.

<sup>160</sup> Foltz, J. and Li, K. 'Bargain to Extort: Spatial Allocation of Checkpoints and Highway Corruption in West Africa,' 2020; Cooper, J. (2018), 'How robust is institutionalised corruption? A field experiment on extortion along West African highways,' unpublished Working Paper; Siu, J. 'Formalising Informal Cross-Border Trade: Evidence from One-Stop-Border-Posts in Uganda,' 2020; Bensassi, S. and Jarreau, J. 'Price Discrimination in Bribe Payments: Evidence from Informal Cross-Border Trade in West Africa,' *World Development* 122, 1 October 2019, pp. 462–80.

<sup>161</sup> Wiseman, E. 'Economists and Traders Have More to Learn about Trade: The Role of Information Frictions in Informal Trade,' *World Bank Blogs* (blog), 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/impactevaluations/economists-and-traders-have-more-learn-about-trade-role-information-frictions>.

<sup>162</sup> Foltz, J.D. and Opoku-Agyemang, K.A. 'Do Higher Salaries Lower Petty Corruption? A Policy Experiment on West Africa's Highways' (International Growth Centre, 2016).

<sup>163</sup> Lesser, C. and Moisé-Leeman, E. 'Informal Cross-Border Trade And Trade Facilitation Reform In Sub-Saharan Africa Final Report', 2008; Bensassi S. and Jarreau, J. 'Price Discrimination in Bribe Payments: Evidence from Informal Cross-Border Trade in West Africa,' *World Development* 122 (1 October 2019): pp. 462–80, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.05.023>; Bensassi, S., Jarreau, J., and Mitaritonna, C. 'Regional Integration and Informal Trade in Africa: Evidence from Benin's Borders,' *Journal of African Economies* 28:1 (1 January 2019): pp. 89–118, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejy016>.

<sup>164</sup> Wiseman, E. 'Economists and Traders Have More to Learn about Trade: The Role of Information Frictions in Informal Trade. Guest Post by Eleanor Wiseman,' *World Bank Blogs* (blog), 2022.

<sup>165</sup> World Bank (2020), 'Small-Scale Cross-Border Trade Survey.'



# Annex: Data collection methodology

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A mixed-methods research approach was deployed, combining qualitative and quantitative field research with remote data analysis through satellite imagery.

Research was carried out in four borderland areas:

- Area 1, featured in Chapter 1, reviewed borderland dynamics around trade zones near Bittou in Burkina Faso; Mango and Cinkassé in Togo; and Bawku and Chereponi in Ghana.
- Area 2, featured in Chapter 2, focused on borderland dynamics between Wa in Ghana and Batié in Burkina Faso. To a lesser extent, the chapter also discussed how informal trade from northeastern Côte d'Ivoire feeds into the bustling illicit supply chain around these two trade towns.
- Area 3, featured in Chapter 3, reviewed borderland and trade dynamics between Paga in Ghana and Pô in Burkina Faso, and between Hamélé in Ghana and Ouessa in Burkina Faso.
- Area 4, featured in Chapter 4, studied borderland activity between Hèrèmakono and Sikasso in Mali, and Koloko and Sifarasso in Burkina Faso.

These four areas were identified because of the variation in impacts on livelihoods that each exhibited due to activities of armed groups and government security responses.

Research was then narrowed down in each area, after the research team identified specific cross-border trade centres based on the volume and type of trade there.

Research locations were determined based on the following indicators: 1) the prevalence of high volume long- and short-haul traffic of traded items; 2) the proximity of the town in relation to known VEO activities and strongholds; 3) the importance of these specific trade towns to local and regional economies; 4) the known role of non-state armed groups in exploiting goods in these areas (specifically for two trade centres: Chereponi in Area 1 and Paga in Area 2); and 5) the effects of violent extremism on people's livelihoods under varying conditions.

Research was based on a literature review guided by a gap analysis of existing research on this topic, coupled with primary research carried out through mixed-methods data collection using semi-structured and open surveys (Figure 2, page 13).

The qualitative data collection included expert interviews, FGDs, and KIIs using semi-structured surveys deployed across targeted locations in all four areas with community leaders, traders, and people living at the border.

The 302 KIIs were complemented by 18 FGDs to ensure participation of varied subgroups from local populations. Qualitative data collection targeted an ethnically and demographically mixed sample, including a mixture of countries (Ghana=129, Togolese=48, Burkina Faso=99, Mali=26); at least 25 per cent of which were youth, and 30 per cent of which comprised women. It also included a mix of individuals involved in formal cross-border trade and informal cross-border trade (ICBT), as well as community leaders.

There were 300 respondents in two cross-border areas (Chereponi and Paga) as part of a structured household survey. The sample was selected using a random sampling method and the questionnaire was designed to support wider generalisability and validation of research findings. This report reflects data from the first round of data collection (300 Ghanaian respondents). A second round of surveys was administered in the same locales among 342 respondents and used to validate the initial survey results.

The quantitative data collection was done via a face-to-face household survey carried out along the borders between Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Togo. These methods were sequenced to allow qualitative data collection to inform the quantitative survey. Data from both qualitative and quantitative methods were anonymised to protect the identity of respondents, and were supplemented with satellite imagery and signals data analysis on border crossings and trade centres in all four areas.

Research findings were validated with officials in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana in November 2024 and January and March 2025.

## Focus group discussions and key informant interviews

Twenty-five locations were selected for field data collection across four research areas. Considerations that informed site selection related to: accessibility; relevance of specific goods and actors to VEO activity; VEO interests in the research area; scope of security-related deployments, and programming and evidence gaps. To address the changing nature of trade, the research focuses on geographic hubs that encompass multiple formal and informal border crossings within a given area. These factors were assessed in consultation with the experts interviewed, and through open-source information.

Due to security and accessibility concerns, the research team was unable to collect data in Togo. To support comparison, the team conducted research among Togolese communities living in Ghana. Security incidents near data collection sites in Mali also limited researcher access within some communities.

Qualitative data collection using semi-structured interviews took place between November 2023 and January 2024. The research sample was identified through purposive sampling, and participants included a mix of local people from the selected research locations who regularly participated in cross-border commercial and social activities (e.g. traders, students, taxi drivers, farmers, and pastoralists).

Clingendael led the research in Areas 1 and 4. In Area 1, data collection was carried out through a Ghanaian NGO, Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana). Because of limitations imposed on conducting data collection in Togo, the enumerators travelled to towns on the border with Togo, inside Ghana, that have significant Togolese populations, owing to the fluid, cross-border nature of these towns.

For example, in Wenchiki (Chereponi District, Ghana), Togolese traders who were active in the cattle markets were interviewed in place of data collection inside Togo. In Area 4, Cabinet Gaaya, a Malian NGO, collected data in both Mali and Burkina Faso. Elva led the research in Areas 2 and 3 via its locally based consultants and enumerators in Ghana and Burkina Faso.

A total of 302 KIIs and 18 FGDs were carried out across the research sample. Thirty per cent of the sample comprised women and 25 per cent were youth (defined as 18–29). The higher proportion of men in part reflects their dominance in cross-border trade, particularly in the fuel and cattle trades that were featured in the political economy analysis.

- Area 1: 102 KIs and 6 FGDs in Bawku, Biankori, Pulmakom, Garu (Upper East Region, Ghana) and Bunkpurugu and Chereponi (North East Region, Ghana).
- Area 2: 22 KIs and 1 FGD in Wechiau (Upper West Region, Ghana) and 20 KIs and 1 FGD in Batié (Sud-Ouest Region, Burkina Faso)
- Area 3: 14 KIs and 1 FGD in Hamile (Upper West Region, Ghana), 14 KIs and 1 FGD in Gwollu (Upper West Region, Ghana), and 25 KIs and 2 FGDs in Paga (Upper East Region, Ghana); 11 KIs and 1 FGD in Ouessa and 8 KIs and 1 FGD in Hamélé (Sud-Ouest Region, Burkina Faso), 25 KIs and 2 FGDs in Pô, and 11 KIs in Dakola (Centre-Sud Region, Burkina Faso).
- Area 4: 21 KIs and 2 FGDs in Sikasso (Sikasso Region, Mali), and 5 KIs in Hèrèmakono (Segou Region, Mali); 12 KIs in Koloko and 12 KIs in Sifarasso (Hauts-Bassins Region, Burkina Faso).

## Household survey

The face-to-face household survey of 300 community members was conducted in February and March 2024 by the Afrobarometer team (CDD-Ghana and CROP-Togo), supplemented by the Institut de Stratégie et de Relations Internationales (ISRI) for data collection in Burkina Faso. One-hundred and fifty surveys were carried out in Paga, Ghana, and 150 surveys were carried out in Chereponi, Ghana. This report reflects data from the household survey among 300 initial Ghanaian respondents; a second round of surveys was administered in the same locales among 342 respondents and used to validate the initial survey results.

The household survey relied on previously designed Clingendael Institute surveys and seven modules: pre- and post-survey modules, a basic household description module, a border module (developed for this research), a community shock and response module, a resilience module, a legitimacy/trust module, and a security module.

The new border module was field-tested before deployment by CDD-Ghana and the items scaled as expected. Two Clingendael surveyors standardised scales per item and pre-tested questions.

CDD, ISRI, and CROP field-enumerators – who come from the communities surveyed – were trained for a day in the border areas. The survey was then piloted, and pre-deployment and response categories were slightly altered to reflect the local context. Surveys were conducted in French, English, and various local languages.

To select locations, CDD-Ghana, CROP, and ISRI constructed a comprehensive roll of all border villages and towns per area, from which five villages were randomly drawn (based on random number assignments). Thirty interviews were conducted in each village.

To reach the 30 respondents, the field research assistants (FRAs) determined the sample interval based on the household population of the community. In communities with less than 170 houses or households, every third household was selected. In communities with 320 houses or households, every fifth household was selected. In each village, two starting points were randomly selected (either at a junction or crossroad, for example); the team would divide the community into five sections. In each direction, the enumerator would randomly identify select households using the agreed sampling interval for the community. The procedure continued until each of the five FRAs had interviewed six respondents.

Due to the absence of a reliable census or other population data (particularly on ethnicities and age), the research team was unable to apply stratified sampling techniques. To ensure a randomised sample, the gender of the respondents was alternated at each interview. In addition, consideration was given to including 60 per cent youth. Data were collected via mobile phones and tablet and monitored by a data controller.

## Expert interviews

Expert interviews helped to inform the data collection, and included 46 consultations with experts, government officials, and practitioners with recent programming experience in the region. The interviews took place before and after field data collection, to inform tool design and help validate findings. Some interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp.

The research team conducted about 30 in-person expert interviews during the field visit to Ghana in February 2024, and included almost exclusively Ghanaian experts, civil society, and government and security officials. This meant the research had a particularly strong focus on Ghana's politics and security.

Interviews were carried out in English. Most were conducted in the capital city, and on the record. However, field interviews in the north conducted by Elva were anonymised to protect individuals speaking about sensitive issues related to security and politics.

## Satellite imagery and signal data

Satellite imagery and signal data analysis are referred to as remote methods. They were used to provide a visual perspective to the analysis, aiding the interpretation of results that concern a diverse set of geographies with distinctive properties.

Signals data, which refers to information collected from 'call data' records provided by Emdyn, typically only cover a 12-month span. This type of data was employed to indicate movement of people between locations of interest.

Analysis of remote methods, which is the satellite imagery of border crossings and market towns, helped to identify patterns not captured by one-off field data collection, and to triangulate findings from the field, to further strengthen the conclusions of this study.

It was initially assumed that the data could be used for longer trend development analysis as images are often available for more than five years. However, this kind of analysis was not possible due to the limited availability of images over time of these areas.

## Existing databases and literature

The research team carried out an extensive literature review and gap analysis ahead of data collection to ensure the primary research focused on where research and knowledge is lacking.

The literature is mostly reflected in the chapters. This includes the use of a database from the Clingendael Institute (in collaboration with ACLED) that maps VEO movement and activities in the target areas of the research study.

The literature and expert consultations also helped to update an existing database by Elva, which maps stakeholder activities and projects in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa that focus on development, stabilisation, and security.

The database reviews programmes dating back to 2021 and was updated based on a standardised list of websites and convenience sampling via expert interviews and general networking. A total of 329 programmes are included in the database, of which 123 were ongoing at the time of writing.

## Limitations in field data collection

Initial piloting of both qualitative and quantitative data collection raised important issues that informed the final data collection methodology and introduced some limitations. Limitations to the field research included:

**Limitations on time and resources allocated to the study.** This research study was intended to review the borderland dynamics related to trade and security between all of Coastal West Africa and the Sahel.

However, the research team faced limitations covering the entire border region given its enormous size, a short window for data collection, and limited financial resources. As a result, the team narrowed the research locations to specific cross-border locations, while ensuring it collected a broadly representative sample. Additionally, the research team sought to focus on areas that are typically less researched, given existing research on borderland dynamics in certain areas like Côte d'Ivoire–Burkina Faso, and Benin–Burkina Faso.

**Challenges of data collection on sensitive issues.** Research on sensitive topics, such as violent extremism, faces particular challenges. Some respondents, particularly in all four areas of Burkina Faso, withheld information to avoid perceived threats; this was assessed based on empty responses to some questions related to security and politics, and feedback given by the enumerators on each transcription about the KII.

For example, in Area 4, respondents self-censored to avoid potential reprisals from known VEOs or government-affiliated security actors if they shared criticism of the state's security, according to the feedback and notes left by the enumerator during the quality assurance phase.

Additionally, some respondents provided skewed information or opinions presented as 'fact,' either because they were ill-informed, could not recall events, wanted to be viewed favourably by the interviewer, self-censored their responses, or sought to discredit others.<sup>166</sup>

This was particularly obvious in Ghana across Areas 1, 2, and 3 when discussing the role of VEOs in local livelihoods. Many KII participants had limited awareness of the effects of VEO activity, but would suggest in their interviews that the presence of VEOs was more serious than it actually was, based on mis- or dis-

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166 Khalil, J. (2019), 'A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42: 4, 2019, pp. 429–443.



information. To mitigate this, enumerators carefully explained the study, used neutral language, included follow-up questions, and sought to make the respondents as comfortable as possible, reminding them of their right to terminate the discussion at any point.

Additionally, due to the sensitive nature of the questions and the focus on cross-border trade, the sample skewed towards men. Due to traditional gender norms, women typically do not speak with unfamiliar men in public, which can limit the female sample. Additionally, the PEAs on both cattle and fuel trade are predominantly male dominated, so there were less women to interview about these topics.

**Security and political challenges in Burkina Faso and Togo.** In Burkina Faso, enumerators faced challenges accessing certain communities and populations. For Areas 2 and 3, the research consultant was required to travel further distances to avoid roads and towns where government and VEOs were clashing; however, research was conducted in the same planned locations.



**XCEPT**

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