

**EXPLORING THE NEXUS BETWEEN  
IRREGULAR MIGRATION, SMUGGLING AND  
LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES IN ILLELA  
BORDER COMMUNITY, SOKOTO STATE**

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of establishing official border intersections is to regulate the widespread occurrence of unauthorised border crossings. In addition, they seek to facilitate the formalisation of informal cross-border trade, increase revenue generation, and regulate irregular migration. The primary socioeconomic transactions that transpire across an international boundary pertain to the movement of commodities and individuals for the purpose of commerce. This flow constitutes an integration process that binds individuals residing on either side of the border through trade relations or shared communal ties. Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) and cross-border trade (CBT) continue to be significant economic drivers for the Illela border community. For cross-border transactions, citizens utilise the designated border crossing point. Nevertheless, similar to other Nigerian border regions, the Illela frontier community is susceptible to illicit migration and smuggling activities. This research investigates the diverse socio-economic determinants of livelihood that are prevalent in the border community and motivate individuals to participate in a range of illicit*

*trafficking endeavours for immoral financial gain. The results indicate that the Nigeria-Niger border along the Illela-Konni axis has been permeable and vulnerable to repeated external disturbances, fragility, famine, drought, and poverty for an extended period of time. As a means of survival, locals have been compelled to engage in irregular migration and smuggling-related activities. Additionally, the study provided suggestions to aid in mitigating the prevailing pattern of engagement in clandestine migration and contraband.*

**Key words:** Border; Migration; Irregular migration; Livelihood.

### **Introduction**

The 'bordering' process, which refers to the ways in which borders impact the daily lives of individuals, has been the subject of numerous studies (Newman & Passi, 1998; van Houtum, Kramsch & Zierhofer, 2005). Research conducted in Africa has made a substantial contribution to this framework of reference. Additionally, an expanding body of literature on the continent investigates various aspects of borders, including how they distinguish distinct domains known as 'borderscapes' or 'borderlands' and perform vital functions within local economies (Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010; van Wolputte, 2013; Bakewell, 2015).

When examined through these lenses, borders symbolise geographical formations, and borderlands are territories in and of themselves (Feyissa & Hoehne, 2010). According to research from Borderlands, the mere presence of a border engenders a multitude of functions that are intertwined in a multifaceted network involving cooperation, assent, opposition, subversion, alliance, and power on various levels (Nugent & Asiwaju, 1996). In general, understanding the state's involvement in borderlands necessitates acknowledging its connection with local authorities and the "ordinary" inhabitants who shape the region's social history and topography (Baud & van Schendel, cited in Brambilla, 2007). Border communities are thus sites of interaction between the

state, local community leadership, and diverse communities in an effort to develop procedures for accommodating one another's interests and negotiating locally applicable conventions.

Newman (2006) argues that a comprehensive comprehension of borders should incorporate both top-down and bottom-up viewpoints. Specifically, distinctive border narratives and experiences should be highlighted to illustrate how borders impact the daily customs of individuals residing in the borderland and transition zones adjacent to the boundary. Put simply, border communities serve a greater purpose than mere locations where truck drivers are forced to wait interminably in their vehicles due to bureaucratic red tape, unethical practises, and inadequate fundamental standards (Walther, 2014). Local communities and producers both find them to be of considerable importance.

Border communities have been recognised by intellectuals as economically significant, rather than merely peripheral and occasionally extraneous components of national economies, within this broader context (Walther, 2014). The development of these entities should be a concern shared by all global actors. However, as stated by Walther (2014), despite the fact that borderlands have gained significant momentum since the 1990s due to the liberalisation of trade, public funding for their infrastructure and human capital development has been comparatively limited, despite the importance of these regions to national economies.

The importance of border crossings has been correlated with extensive infrastructure development along major transportation corridors and with the African Union's (AU) pursuit of regional integration agendas, including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA) and Regional Economic Communities. Such development aims to address the well-documented consequences of economic collapse by facilitating the unhindered flow of commodities and the unrestricted movement of people, which is a primary objective of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in West Africa.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The major aim of this study is to examine the nexus that exist between irregular migration, smuggling and livelihood opportunities in Illela border community of Sokoto State. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. ascertain the challenges confronting livelihood opportunities in Illela;
- ii. examine the impact of climate change on livelihood opportunities in Illela; and
- iii. find out viable sustainable livelihood opportunities in Illela

### **Research Questions**

This study therefore seeks to provide answers to the following research questions

- i. What are the challenges confronting livelihood opportunities in Illela community
- ii. What is the impact of climate change on livelihood opportunities in Illela community
- iii. What are the viable sustainable livelihood opportunities in Illela border community

### **Methods**

The research methodology employed in this study was exclusively qualitative in nature. This methodological approach enabled the assessment of the aforementioned border community's livelihood opportunities. The researcher conducted qualitative data collection in the border community with the assistance of two research assistants, one male and one female, who served as interviewers and moderators. A range of stakeholder groups, including law enforcement agencies, community elders, adolescents, women, and vigilantes, participated in focus group discussions (FGDs). In addition to these focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews were conducted with specific resource persons at the border community (e.g., the head of law enforcement agency, a traditional leader in the border area). These interviews enabled the investigation of diverse issues

pertaining to the study's aim and objectives concerning the relationship between irregular migration and livelihood opportunities.

### **Results and Discussions**

#### Nexus between irregular migration and livelihood opportunities in Illela

Because the Nigeria–Niger border in the Illela–Konni axis has long been permeable and prone to fragility, recurrence of external shocks, drought, famine, and poverty, cross-border transactions are crucial for the border communities' resilience and survival. "International movement or residency in contravention of migration laws" is the definition of irregular migration as given by the IOM (2008). To put it another way, irregular migration occurs when an individual breaches the entry requirements of another nation or traverses its borders without the proper authorization (Jordan and Düvell, 2002). In essence, the term "human smuggling" refers to the act of a migrant voluntarily acquiring services in order to circumvent immigration restrictions, without inherently involving themselves in fraudulent activities or exploitative situations (Carling, 2006).

ICBT and CBT continue to be indispensable economic components of the Illela border community. For transactions involving the two countries, locals utilise the designated border crossing point. The Illela border community, akin to other Nigerian border paths, is susceptible to activities associated with unauthorised migration. The border community is influenced by a multitude of socio-economic and regulatory factors that compel individuals to partake in diverse forms of illicit trafficking in order to support themselves. Thus, the acknowledged policy resolutions – which persistently seek to restrict migration – concentrate on "combating" or "fighting" irregular migration through stricter border controls and a crackdown on smuggling and trafficking-related offences. As a result, a number of residents have been compelled to engage in various forms of smuggling due to social issues including high unemployment, poverty, a get-rich-quick mentality syndrome among the youth, excessive taxation, an

embargo on consumer goods, a lack of valid travel documents, ignorance of the law, bribery, and corruption. The proximity and permeable characteristics of the Illela frontier region facilitate this.

The inclination towards smuggling has become an institutionalised behaviour and an illegal enterprise, according to Akano (2006), cited in Omotosho (2013). This is because residents of border communities provide the necessary impetus for the expansion of smuggling operations in and around the Nigerian borders. Diverse participants in FGDs and KII sessions conducted for this research have attested to the presence of unauthorised migration within the Illela border community, which is supported by both local inhabitants and corrupt law enforcement personnel. Illicit activities of this nature encompass not only the smuggling of migrants but also contraband items.

Notwithstanding the abundance of trans-Saharan routes, the majority of transcontinental migrants entered the Maghreb through Agadez, Niger, until relatively recently (Brachet, 2005). Participants in multiple focus group discussions (FGDs) involving NIS, community elders, youth, and vigilante groups have identified the participation of transport agents and operators of motorbike taxis (*okada*) in facilitating migrant smuggling in the Illela border community. This is attributed to the area's permeable terrain and their extensive familiarity with the area, which allows them to contraband migrants into Konni for the subsequent journey to Agadez and beyond.

Smuggling is prevalent in our border region, as noted by Eselebor (2013), because criminal perpetrators are cognizant of lax law enforcement and the low probability of apprehension. A factor contributing to the flourishing of migrant and consumable goods smuggling in the Illela corridor is the proximity of the corridor to the border with sub-Saharan and North African nations, as well as the inefficiency of border law enforcement agencies in their efforts to oversee and regulate the smugglers. In addition to personnel, stakeholders surveyed for this report have lamented the dearth of adequate logistics—including desert

vehicles, motorcycles, and communication devices—which hinder the NIS’s ability to conduct effective patrol, surveillance, monitoring, and control of irregular migration, particularly along illegal routes.

### **Challenges confronting livelihood opportunities in Illela border**

The axis between Illela and Konni is a critical hub for the international trade of livestock and livestock products emanating from sub-Saharan countries. This region has a thriving domestic international border market where agro-allied and manufactured commodities are traded and exported. Niger and Mali supply the majority of this thriving import commerce, which is supported by CBT with the neighbouring city of Konni. Typically, livestock is transported by foot across both formal and informal border passages in order to be sold in Illela, where it is subsequently subjected to official taxation in marketplaces. In the end, it is distributed through formal market channels in both the Northern and Southern States of Nigeria. During focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted for this research, interested parties expressed their disapproval of the recent prohibition on livestock trade at Illela livestock market and other livestock markets in Sokoto State. This ban was imposed by the Sokoto state government in an effort to stem the spate of banditry in the state, but it has severely harmed the livelihoods of those living along the border.

In a similar vein, stakeholders have identified the absence of social and infrastructure amenities—including but not limited to inadequate educational and health facilities, portable water supply, and electricity—as obstacles to the sustainable development of livelihood opportunities in the border community. Moreover, a focus group discussion (FGD) involving vigilante groups, community elders, and a traditional ruler revealed that banditry-related insecurity is a significant contemporary obstacle to livelihood prospects in the Illela border community. This obstacle prevents residents from effectively engaging in agricultural and pastoral pursuits, consequently resulting in food

scarcities, insecurity, and the escalation of illicit trafficking operations.

Moreover, during a focus group discussion (FGD) involving community members and the traditional ruler, the district head of Illela (Sarkin Rafin Illela) apprised the researcher of the grave economic downturn caused by the unequal currency exchange rate between the CFA currency of Niger and the Nigerian Naira, which threatens livelihood opportunities in the Illela border community. Due to the weak Naira-CFA exchange rate, many businessmen and women are unable to travel to Niger to import commodities, which would cause them to incur enormous losses. In contrast, their counterparts from Konni and other regions of Niger travel daily to Illela town to purchase and export goods, manufacture at a relatively lower cost, and amass enormous profit margins. However, this is detrimental to the local economy and the way of life of the residents of Illela.

### **Impact of climate change on livelihood opportunities in Illela**

It is anticipated that climate change will lead to a 3°C to 5°C rise in global temperatures and, in numerous regions, a decrease in precipitation as well as increased variability in seasonal temperatures and rainfall (Quentin et al., 2014).

Illéla, a border community situated in the Sahel region, is characterised by its extensive grain belt and physical grain exchange markets. The region's vulnerability to severe drought conditions and substandard land quality heightens the likelihood of a substantial deficit in cereal production (Odozi, 2015). The results of this research indicate that the participants possess knowledge regarding the occurrence of climate change and its consequences for the means of subsistence of individuals within the locality. Therefore, considering the critical nature of water scarcity in numerous regions and the fact that agriculture is a fundamental source of income in the region, climate change represents a significant concern for households (Verner 2012; Foresight 2011).



In numerous FGD sessions, participants have observed that the region's precipitation pattern has changed as a result of climate change, with fewer falls occurring in recent years. Drought, desertification, and the drying up of water bodies (as in the case of the Kalmalo dam) have also been identified as consequences of climate change. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Galadima and Lawal (2017), which investigates the perception and adaptation of farmers in Sokoto State to climate change. Their study reveals that farmers in Illela Local Government exhibit a comparatively high level of awareness regarding climate change. This may be attributed to the local government's proximity to the Niger Republic, an area that has long been impacted by desertification.

In addition, participants have observed that climate change has had an adverse effect on agricultural operations in the region, with an increasing number of farmers experiencing low yields of farm products due to diminished precipitation, desertification-induced land loss, and irrigation land depletion-induced water scarcity. This has led to the deprivation of livelihood prospects, plunging numerous individuals into severe destitution as a consequence of income, crop, and livestock losses, among other things. Consequently, a considerable number of individuals have resorted to a variety of coping mechanisms, including illegal trafficking in the border region and, to a lesser degree, migration to alternative areas within the nation. As observed by the NIS staff during a focus group discussion (FGD) session, while youths residing in Illela border communities do not partake in emigration to North Africa or Europe, a subset of them actively assists in the transportation of individuals, primarily from the southern region of the country, across the border, thus engaging in unauthorised migration. A subset of the adolescents additionally partake in seasonal migration to states located in the northern and southern regions of the nation, where they are employed in agricultural and other economic pursuits.

These findings confirm that the livelihood opportunities of the people in the border region are most susceptible to being

negatively impacted by extreme weather events resulting in low farm yields, which are anticipated to occur more frequently as a consequence of climate change. Furthermore, they have fewer coping mechanisms at their disposal, which encourages them to resort to negative coping mechanisms. In order to address the circumstance at hand, tree planting is necessary. Therefore, as highlighted by the World Bank (2010) and IPCC (2012), it is anticipated that the frequency of extreme weather phenomena, including floods and droughts, will increase. This will impact coping and adaptation strategies, as well as domestic and international migration.

### **Viable sustainable livelihood opportunities in Illela**

The Illela border community is a hive of commercial activity, which creates an environment conducive to the development of sustainable livelihood opportunities for the community's inhabitants. The results of the study suggest that the region is replete with a variety of socioeconomic activities that provide individuals with gainful employment. Agro-pastoral activities serve as the foundation of the Illela economy. The participants in this study have recognised agriculture and livestock rearing as significant livelihood alternatives in the region. By implementing irrigation systems and providing agricultural inputs such as fertilisers and seeds, these activities can be enhanced to generate a wider range of employment opportunities for the local populace. Likewise, participants in a focus group discussion (FGD) featuring community elders and traditional administrators have identified a multitude of commercial enterprises through which the local populace sustains themselves. The aforementioned items consist of petroleum, foodstuffs and cereals, fertiliser and other agricultural inputs, building and construction materials including cement, roofing, sheets and paint, livestock and animal feeds. In addition to tailoring, carpentry, welding, blacksmithing, masonry, and ICT, various other occupations have been recognised as viable means of subsistence that sustain individuals' gainful employment in the region. In addition to the

aforementioned, various skills acquisition programmes serve as invaluable instruments that can be utilised to establish sustainable livelihood prospects, thereby contributing to the mitigation of irregular migration.

### **Conclusion**

Borders are not simply pointers to the limit of the sovereignty of a state, and the start of delimitation between two countries. Rather, a border's existence brings about diverse functions: roles of border law enforcement agencies, cross-border traders, traffickers, smugglers, and community members. Relationships are created by these actors that organize and shape the socioeconomic structure and livelihoods in the border communities. The findings from the experiences of stakeholders in this study suggest that Illela border community is a site for irregular migration with implications for livelihood opportunities where several factors such as poverty, unemployment, lack of valid travel documents, excessive taxation, ignorance of the law, etc, have predisposed people to involve in illicit activities to earn a living in the community. Various trafficking activities such as smuggling of contraband items, petroleum as well as migrant smuggling are being perpetrated by youths and others in the border community through illegal routes (owing to porous nature of Nigerian border with Niger) that by pass the official border control posts to evade detection by law enforcement agencies.

### **Recommendations**

In this regard, the active involvement of individuals from the border community is critical for the efficient management and prevention of unauthorised migration. Hence, it is crucial to ensure that individuals residing in the border community have access to sustainable and viable livelihood opportunities. With the objective in mind, this research has put forth the following valuable suggestions:

Providing frontier communities with social and infrastructure amenities should be a top priority for

administrations at every level. Insufficient infrastructure and social amenities that hinder the socioeconomic progress of border communities constitute a significant obstacle for these regions. Border communities in the study area are fundamentally deprived of essential social amenities required for survival, as demonstrated by the results of this research. Border communities and main thoroughfares that link to the state capital are severely deficient in road networks. Inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, as well as educational and medical facilities, continue to be critical obstacles to the region's advancement. Electrification issues persist as well. When fundamental amenities are lacking, viable means of subsistence are reduced, and individuals are compelled to engage in illegal activities in order to survive.

In an effort to reduce unauthorised migration, border communities should also address the issues of destitution and unemployment. People are compelled to engage in irregular migration as a means of survival due to the alarmingly high rate of destitution among border communities' inhabitants. Consequently, the implementation of skills acquisition initiatives would significantly contribute to the employment stability of border communities by facilitating their participation in a wide array of commercial enterprises.

Furthermore, the establishment of earthen dams and boreholes by the government to facilitate livestock husbandry and irrigation systems would significantly enhance the prospects for livelihoods. Availability of sufficient water during the arid season, in conjunction with the effects of climate change, is crucial due to the fact that members of border communities rely heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Furthermore, in order to manage irregular migration more effectively, law enforcement agencies should hire or recruit youths from the border community who are well-versed in the terrain and the strategies and techniques utilised by smugglers and traffickers. These individuals should then be stationed in their community. Ultimately, curbing irregular migration would be

significantly aided by increased awareness-raising campaigns in the border community concerning migration regulations and laws. It is advisable that members of the border community be sufficiently educated on the regulations that govern the mobility of individuals across the territorial demarcation.

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