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Beyond the Borderline: The Politics and Impact of Nigeria-Benin Border Closure

Ibrahim IDRIS
Gender & Inclusivity Unit
National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, Abuja.
ibrahimabu430@yahoo.com

Christopher O. NGARA
Department of Democracy and Governance
National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, Abuja.
cossychris@yahoo.com

Shafiu Yahya MIKA'IL
Department of Democracy and Governance
National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, Abuja.
yusrah0209@gmail.com

Abstract

Most African borders are colonial legacies. In the post-colonial era, African states have pursued various multilateral and bilateral agreements to manage their borders peacefully and deepen regional economic integration, particularly through sub-regional frameworks like ECOWAS, SADC, and the EAC. These efforts aim to facilitate the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital while safeguarding national sovereignty. However, border closures remain a recurring phenomenon across the continent. This paper, based on a desk review and analysis of secondary data, examines the causes and consequences of border closures in Africa with a focus on the Nigeria–Benin case. While historically driven by disease outbreaks and diplomatic disputes, recent closures are largely motivated by national security concerns, including terrorism, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and insurgency. Thepaper finds that, despite their intended security benefits, border closures often have counterproductive effects, undermining regional integration, disrupting trade, increasing smuggling activities, and imposing severe economic hardships on local producers, consumers, and small-scale traders. It argues that border closures are an inadequate response to complex security and economic challenges. Instead, the paper recommends a shift toward smarter, technology-driven border management, enhanced regional cooperation in intelligence sharing, and strategic investments in domestic production and infrastructure as more effective and sustainable alternatives.

Keywords: Border closure, border security, Nigeria-Benin border regional integration

Introduction

African borders are largely artificial constructs imposed by colonial powers. For example, Nigeria shares land borders with four countries: the Republic of Benin to the west, Niger to the north, Chad to the northeast, and Cameroon to the southeast. These boundaries were arbitrarily drawn during the colonial era, often without regard for the cultural and ethnic composition of the regions. Green (2012) notes that up to 44 per cent of African national boundaries are straight lines, a result of colonial cartography that frequently divided communities with shared traditions and heritage into separate states. Despite these artificial demarcations, African countries have continued to form alliances and cooperative frameworks to foster regional integration and mutual development. Institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) were established to promote

economic cooperation, political stability, and the free movement of goods, services, and people across borders.

Over time, international trade has emerged as a critical driver of African development and diplomacy. The exchange of capital, goods, services, and technology across borders constitutes a substantial portion of the GDP of many African countries (Bela, Paul, & Romney, cited in Anuikwu, 2020). The rise of globalisation has further strengthened the ideals of borderless economies, encouraging the seamless flow of goods, services, and people within and beyond the continent.

Africa is currently structured into eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which serve as the pillars of the African Union: ECOWAS, Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), East African Community (EAC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). However, intra-African trade remains significantly low. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2019), intra-African trade accounts for only 15.4% of the continent's total trade, compared to 61.7% within the European Union and 40.3% in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) region. This stark contrast highlights the fragility of economic integration on the continent and the potentially damaging implications of border closures.

One critical initiative aimed at reversing this trend is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), signed by 54 of the 55 African Union member states (excluding Eritrea). AfCFTA aspires to create a unified continental market by boosting intra-African trade by 53.2%, progressively eliminating tariffs on up to 90% of goods, and ensuring broader access to markets across the continent. However, frequent and unilateral border closures threaten the successful implementation of this landmark agreement. The closure of the Nigeria-Benin border exemplifies this challenge. While the official rationale was to curb smuggling and enhance security, critics argue that it undermines regional integration efforts. Lumumba (cited in Ebhomele, 2019) contended that the closure was unnecessary, stating that borders can be secure without being sealed, especially if regulatory mechanisms are strong and consistently enforced. In contrast, Dickson (2024, p. 44) argued that smuggling activities between Nigeria and the neighbouring countries may have triggered border closure as "roughly 75% of the gasoline consumed in Benin, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, Cameroun, and even Togo is smuggled from Nigeria". This paper, therefore, explores the causes and consequences of border closures in Africa, with a particular focus on the Nigeria-Benin case.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Border Closure

Border closure is a state-driven policy action that involves the total or partial restriction of the movement of goods, services, and people across international boundaries. It is typically adopted as a protectionist strategy during periods of national crises ranging from economic distress, security threats, political instability, to public health emergencies (Adebayo & Onuoha, 2021). In essence, border closures are meant to shield a country from perceived external threats or to assert economic or political control. However, while the justification is often grounded in national interest, the implementation and outcomes can be highly contentious. In the African context, where borders are often porous and arbitrarily drawn as colonial legacies, closures are frequently used as reactive tools to combat smuggling, illegal migration, trafficking, and insurgency (Okorie & Enwere, 2020). Nigeria's closure of its land borders with Benin and Niger in 2019 was aimed at halting the illegal importation of foreign rice, second-hand vehicles, petroleum products, and firearms. According to Edeh and Uchenna

(2022), smuggling persists not only due to weak institutional capacity but also because of strong informal economic ties that transcend colonial border demarcations.

Border closure can also be understood as a form of non-tariff barrier (NTB), often associated with import restrictions designed to protect domestic industries from foreign competition. Orjinmor (2019) likens the practice to a form of "economic warfare," intended to assert national economic sovereignty in a globalised economy. Udeh and Nwokorobia (2021) define it more strictly as a policy measure that halts cross-border movement with minimal exceptions, sometimes even at the cost of disrupting formal trade routes and diplomatic relations. From a theoretical standpoint, border closure falls under the broader umbrella of protectionism. Protectionism is an economic policy framework that involves imposing tariffs, quotas, and trade restrictions to insulate domestic industries from external competition (Abdullahi & Abdulrazak, 2021). It is often justified by governments as a way to nurture "infant industries," conserve foreign exchange, or prevent job losses. However, empirical studies suggest that prolonged protectionist measures can lead to inefficiencies, suppress innovation, and elevate the cost of goods for consumers (Krueger, 1997; Rodrik, 2007).

Historical experiences further underscore the limits of protectionist border closures. For instance, in the post-independence era of the 1960s and 1970s, countries in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa adopted import-substitution industrialisation (ISI) policies backed by heavy trade barriers. While these measures initially supported local manufacturing, they often resulted in economic distortions, inefficient state-owned enterprises, inflationary pressures, and external debt accumulation (Aniukwu, 2020; World Bank, 1993). Brazil's use of prolonged border and trade restrictions, accompanied by unrestrained monetary expansion, led to a debt crisis and hyperinflation in the 1980s. In contrast, Hong Kong and Singapore present examples of how effective border and trade regulation can occur without complete closure. In response to rising smuggling and the influx of substandard goods, Hong Kong adopted a high-tech approach employing electronic customs profiling, automated cargo scanning, and strategic intelligence cooperation to stem illicit flows without disrupting legitimate trade (Stephen, 2019). These approaches demonstrate that targeted interventions, rather than wholesale closures, can yield better outcomes in managing border-related challenges.

Moreover, recent studies argue that unilateral border closures contradict the principles of regional economic communities such as ECOWAS and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which are founded on the ideals of free movement and market integration (Agbakwuru & Jallow, 2021; UNECA, 2020). Frequent closures undermine trust, disrupt cross-border supply chains, and increase transaction costs for small businesses and traders who are key to the informal economy. In summary, border closure refers to the temporary or prolonged restriction of movement across national borders, typically used as a measure to address specific crises such as pandemics, insecurity, or economic imbalances. While it may offer short-term relief, the long-term political, economic, and humanitarian consequences of such closures, particularly in interconnected regions like West Africa, necessitate more strategic and cooperative alternatives such as smart surveillance systems, regional security collaboration, and economic diplomacy.

Table 1: Incidences of Border Closures in Nigeria and Other African Countries

s/n	Incidence	Purpose
1	Nigeria (August 20, 2019): Closure of land borders with Benin, Niger, and Cameroon	To curtail the influx of smuggled goods (especially rice), prevent illegal export of petroleum products, and curb arms trafficking
2	Sudan, Rwanda, and Kenya (2020)	To mitigate cross-border transmission of Ebola and COVID-19
3	In 1985, during the regime of Maj. Gen. Buhari, the border was closed	Response to widespread smuggling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, child labour, and insurgency
4	Nigeria (2003, under President Obasanjo): Partial border closure	Due to increasing criminal activities and insecurity at border regions, specifically linked to the refusal of the Beninese government to extradite a wanted criminal, Ahmed Tijani (The Punch, 2003; Daily Champion, 2003)
5	Nigeria (October 14, 2014)	To prevent smuggling of rice, poultry, frozen foods, arms, second-hand clothing, and cement, aimed at controlling the influx of substandard goods
6	Nigeria (1996, under Gen. Abacha)	Retaliation against Benin after President Soglo criticised Nigeria's execution of the Ogoni Nine
7	Nigeria (1987): Partial closure	In response to the importation and trade of barley, which was temporarily banned

Source: Compiled from John (2019); Okorie & Enwere (2020); Abegunrin (2003); Ani, Baajon & Samuila (2020).

The Rationale for Border Closure in Africa

Border closures in Africa are driven by a variety of economic, security, and regulatory factors. This section highlights some of the key reasons why African countries, particularly Nigeria, resort to this policy measure: Firstly, illicit trade remains one of the most pressing challenges along African borders. In 2014, Africa reportedly lost US$60.25 billion to illicit trade, equivalent to 2.5% of the continent's GDP, 151% of foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in 2015, and 120% of foreign aid (Khama, 2016). In Nigeria, illicit trade is rampant along land borders, particularly with the Benin Republic. Smuggling of rice, frozen foods, second-hand vehicles, and petroleum products persists despite various government countermeasures. Hoffmann and Melly (2015) observed that over 80% of gasoline and 20% of diesel consumed in the Benin Republic were smuggled from Nigeria. In 2019, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) estimated that up to 10 million litres of petrol were smuggled daily through the borders, amounting to a revenue loss of approximately ₦2 billion ($650,000) per day (Adekoya, Jeremiah & Abuh, 2019).

Similarly, over 1 billion kilograms of rice were smuggled into Nigeria from Benin in the first quarter of 2019 alone (Munshi, 2019). Furthermore, in 2016, the U.S. Department of State identified Benin as the world's second-largest destination for India-manufactured Tramadol, a controlled opioid, most of which entered Nigeria through the porous Benin border (Kazeem, 2018). The consequences of such illicit trade are extensive. Smuggling of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has led to an estimated 1,000 deaths annually in Nigeria since 1999 due to armed violence (Okeke & Oji, 2014). It has also fueled insurgency (Awoda & Ayuba, 2015), oil bunkering and pipeline vandalism in the Niger Delta (Badmus, 2010), urban gang violence (Oruwari & Opuene, 2006), farmer-herder conflicts (Omitola, 2014), and secessionist movements (Adeniyi, 2017). Counterfeit products, adulterated drugs like Tramadol, and

substandard goods smuggled across the border have further jeopardised public health, eroded government revenue, and endangered national food security (Dogarawa, 2013).

Secondly, while the ECOWAS Revised Treaty (Article 3, Paragraph 2d) guarantees the free movement of goods and people across member states, Article 41(3) allows for restrictions on grounds of national security, arms control, and other critical threats. Similarly, the WTO's GATT Article XXI permits trade restrictions for the protection of national security interests. Nigeria's border with Benin is among the most porous in the subregion. According to Adejo (2005), weapons and other contraband regularly cross these borders, contributing to rising insecurity. A notable case involved Hamani Tidjani, a Nigerien car thief based in Benin who led a cross-border armed gang that smuggled stolen vehicles from Nigeria. Nigeria eventually closed its border with Benin until Tidjani was extradited (The Nation, 2013). With 84 official border entry points and 1,499 illegal routes into Nigeria, often through forests and mountainous terrain, poor border management has allowed for the unchecked movement of arms, drugs, and terrorists (Enehikhuere, 2019; Eselebor, 2014). It is estimated that 70% of the 80 million illegal weapons in West Africa are in Nigeria, many trafficked via the Benin border (Okorie & Enwere, 2020). Some of these arms are smuggled inside trucks under the guise of legitimate trade, aided by corruption and lax enforcement under the ECOWAS free movement protocol (Onuoha, 2013).

Thirdly, another rationale for border closures is the widespread importation of substandard and contraband goods, often facilitated by insufficient enforcement capacity and technological deficits at the borders. Unscrupulous traders exploit regional agreements such as the ECOWAS Protocol and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to traffic illegal products under the guise of free trade. The Nigerian Export Processing Zones Authority (NEPZA) reported in 2018 that goods worth ₦1.45 trillion were smuggled annually into Nigeria from Benin (Kingsley, 2019). In mid-2018, the Nigeria Customs Service confiscated over 124,000 bags of smuggled rice, most of substandard quality (Godwin, 2018). The Nigerian Governors Forum (2017) also appealed for stringent border control in light of the increasing health risks associated with such imports. The period following the border closure in 2019 recorded a significant decline in the influx of these goods (Sanya, 2019).

Fourthly, a key economic rationale for border closure is to protect domestic industries and boost national productivity, especially in agriculture and local manufacturing. Closing borders helps reduce smuggling, cut down on illegal rice imports, and prevent subsidised Nigerian fuel from being smuggled into neighbouring countries such as Niger, Benin, and Cameroon; an activity that places a heavy financial burden on the Nigerian state (Adeola & Fayemi, 2020). Given that Nigerian goods often struggle to compete with foreign alternatives, especially on price and quality, border closure provides temporary relief for local producers. It aims to create an enabling environment for fledgling industries (infant industries) to mature and become globally competitive.

Consequences of Border Closures in African Countries

There are two dominant perspectives on the implications of border closures among African countries. The first critiques such policies for breaching international treaties and causing adverse economic effects on member states. The second emphasises the benefits to the country implementing the closure, particularly in protecting citizens from illegal imports, human trafficking, insurgency, and substandard goods. These views are discussed under the following sub-themes. The first is that border closures have been used as a tool to bolster import substitution strategies. In Nigeria, this policy reportedly led to an increase in local rice production (Nnodim, 2019). The growth of rice milling industries and improvements along the agricultural value chain, processing, packaging, marketing, and storage have been notable outcomes. Mohammed (2019) noted that the closure of the border with Benin reduced foreign

rice smuggling, boosted local rice patronage, and increased government revenue resources that can be reinvested in infrastructure and critical sectors. A 2020 survey showed that the share of foreign rice in Nigerian markets dropped from 70% to 37% (Agencies, 2020).

According to NNPC, the border closure led to a significant reduction in fuel consumption, thereby easing fuel scarcity. Customs revenue surged, reportedly reaching ₦6 billion per day by late 2019 (Agboluade, 2019). Ajimotokan (2019) confirmed a rise in daily customs revenue from US$12.4 million to US$22 million. Former President Muhammadu Buhari stated that domestic fuel consumption dropped by 30% due to decreased cross-border smuggling (Ships & Ports, 2019). However, Oni, Jerumeh, and Nathan (2020) argued that unless border closures are matched with expanded local production, increased revenue may simply reflect income redistribution from citizens paying higher prices to the government collecting more in duties. Timothy-Asobele & Medupin (2003) observed that smuggling is a significant foreign exchange earner for the Benin Republic, second only to cotton. Raballand and Mjekiqi (2010) reported that textile smuggling into Nigeria in 2006 was valued at US$402 million, contributing to the collapse of key textile companies (Maiwada & Renne, 2013). The World Bank estimated Nigeria loses US$1.2 billion annually to smuggling (Von Uexkull & Shui, 2014).

The border closure reportedly curbed trafficking in arms, drugs, and petroleum products. Mohamed (2019 cited in Abegunde & Fabiyi, 2020), highlighted declines in smuggling and human trafficking. Nonetheless, Bensassi, Jarreau, and Mitaritonna (2019) found that official trade between Nigeria and Benin was severely underreported by as much as 85% for exports and 50% for imports. Bennouna and Polo (2022) concluded that while formal trade was negatively affected, informal (including illegal) trade remained largely unaffected, indicating that smuggling still dominated cross-border commerce. Border closures can trigger job losses, especially in informal sectors. Farinto (2020), cited in Foyeku (2020), stated that over 1,000 licensed customs agents and more than 200,000 workers lost their jobs following Nigeria's August 2019 closure. Inflation also spiked, rising to 11.8% in December 2019 and 12.26% by March 2020 (Adesoji, 2020). Many businesses, particularly those reliant on imports, suffered severe financial losses. Perishable goods were stranded at Cotonou's ports, causing defaults on loans and staff layoffs (Aniukwu, 2020).

Its negative impact on regional trade and the economics of neighbouring African economies has been adduced as a serious problem. For instance, with the Nigeria border closure in 2019, reports attested that the Benin Republic's economy in the south is heavily dependent on the informal re-export and transit trade with Nigeria, as 80% of imports into Benin are from Nigeria, which accounts for 20% of the nation's GDP. The World Bank (2023) presented the export statistics of Nigeria from 2017 to 2021 as follows: Nigeria exports for 2021 was $47.34B, a 34.92% increase from 2020, Nigeria exports for 2020 was $35.09B, a 48% decline from 2019; Nigeria exports for 2019 was $67.48B, a 3.5% increase from 2018 and Nigeria exports for 2018 was $65.36B, a 32.06% increase from 2017. Of the years presented decline of 48% is noticed in the year 2020 following the border closure of August 21, 2019.

Moreover, border closures often trigger retaliatory policies and diplomatic tensions. Former Ghanaian President John Mahama condemned Nigeria's border closure, citing harm to smaller West African economies (Aderibigbe, 2019). Such closures contradict the principles of global institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which discourages trade discrimination. Akinkuolie (2020) and Prabhakar (2010) noted that Nigeria's relations with its African trade partners deteriorated, and retaliatory actions ensued, such as Ghana shutting down 70 Nigerian-owned businesses under the guise of enforcing the GIPC Act (CNBC Africa, 2020). This undermines regional integration efforts under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Border closure also trigger rural poverty, which according to Dickson (2025, p. 68)

is a "condition in which people living in rural areas experience significant deprivation in terms of income, access to basic services, and opportunies."

A key criticism is whether domestic production can meet national demand. For example, Nigeria's rice demand in 2017 was 6.7 million tons, with local production at only 3.7 million tons (Tahir, 2019). While farmers may benefit from higher prices, consumers bear the brunt. The price of rice doubled to US$55.25, equal to the monthly income of a Nigerian living in extreme poverty, of whom there are an estimated 87 million. Golub et al. (2019) also noted that many cross-border trades are legal and vital to subsistence farmers and herders, and the closure disrupts their livelihoods. A major justification for border closures is improved national security through the reduction of arms trafficking. However, whether this has led to long-term improvements is debatable. UNICEF reported that insecurity, particularly in northern Nigeria, disrupted the education of over 1.3 million children in 2021. School kidnappings forced over 11,536 schools to shut down. The resulting rise in out-of-school children and unemployment could worsen insecurity, reduce investment, and hinder economic growth (TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a combination of the Theory of Comparative Advantage developed by Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and David Ricardo and the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) model as a multidimensional analytical framework. The theory of comparative advantage posits that countries should specialise in the production of goods and services for which they have the lowest opportunity cost. Through international trade, countries can obtain goods they do not produce efficiently from others that can, thereby enhancing overall economic welfare (Ricardo, 1817). Nations are differently endowed with natural resources, technology, and infrastructure, making some more efficient at producing certain goods than others. This theory underpins the rationale for regional economic integration and open-border trade, as promoted by regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU). However, in practice, the ideal of open borders is often confronted with security concerns. The influx of armed groups, proliferation of small arms, and smuggling of illicit goods have led many governments to adopt protectionist policies, including border closures, import restrictions, and tariffs to safeguard their national economies and security interests.

The CPTED model, originally developed by Jeffrey (1972), is based on the principle that the physical environment can be manipulated to reduce opportunities for crime and improve the quality of life. It advocates for proactive crime prevention by designing spaces that deter criminal behaviour rather than merely responding to crime after it occurs (Agbola, 1997). CPTED identifies five core strategies for modifying physical space to reduce criminal activities: The first is surveillance to enhance visibility in public and private spaces to deter criminal actions. The second is natural surveillance, which involves the strategic placement of physical features, activities, and people to maximise visibility and encourage positive interaction. The third is artificial surveillance, which includes the deployment of security infrastructure such as CCTV, electronic monitoring systems, guard posts, and patrols (Ola & Adewale, 2014).

The fourth is access management by controlling entry and exit points using physical barriers such as gates, fences, lighting, and landscaping to regulate movement and restrict unauthorised access. The fifth is territoriality, that is, encouraging ownership and responsibility by delineating public and private spaces clearly, thereby discouraging intrusions. The sixth is activity support by promoting legitimate activity in public areas to increase natural surveillance and reduce opportunities for crime. The seventh is maintenance by ensuring that public and private spaces are well-kept to signal active ownership and deter criminal behaviour.

Agbola (1997) and Ola & Adewale (2014) emphasise that effective surveillance, whether through informal community oversight or formal security technologies, plays a crucial role in protecting spaces from vandalism and other crimes. Notably, electronic surveillance, such as CCTV and sensor-based monitoring systems, can significantly improve border management, making it possible to detect and deter illegal activities without resorting to full-scale border closures. In a globalised economy, Nigeria cannot afford to remain isolated. Economic growth and development depend on strategic engagement with other countries, particularly in trade, finance, and services. The theory of comparative advantage suggests that countries should focus on producing goods where they hold a competitive edge and trade for goods that they do not produce. This specialisation leads to improved efficiency and welfare among trading partners. However, Nigeria's 2019 border closure contradicts this economic logic. Empirical evidence points to negative consequences, including rising inflation and disruptions in supply chains, which undermine the country's economic stability.

On the other hand, while comparative advantage supports open borders, it does not suggest leaving borders unregulated. Unchecked cross-border trade can become a channel for transnational crimes such as the smuggling of counterfeit goods, arms trafficking, human trafficking, and the infiltration of militias, all of which undermine national security. In this context, the CPTED model becomes relevant. Rather than closing borders entirely, countries can deploy modern surveillance technologies and environmental design strategies to deter illegal activities. For instance, improved surveillance systems, access control mechanisms, and smart monitoring tools can enhance border security while preserving the economic benefits of cross-border trade. By investing in these measures, governments can avoid the adverse economic consequences of border closures while addressing legitimate security concerns.

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on a comprehensive desk review and analysis of secondary data. It draws on existing literature, official government reports, policy documents, statistical databases, and scholarly publications to examine the causes and consequences of border closures in Africa, with particular emphasis on the Nigeria–Benin border closure. The study also reviews data from institutions such as the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), TheGlobalEconomy.com, and relevant international organisations to assess the economic, security, and social impacts of the policy. This method enables a critical synthesis of diverse perspectives and empirical trends to inform evidence-based conclusions and policy recommendations.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth was estimated at 2.3% in 2019, following the partial closure of the land borders in August and full closure in October of the same year. This was a marginal increase from 1.9% in 2018 (NBS, 2019). The growth was primarily driven by improvements in the transport sector, oil production, and information and communications technology. However, the agricultural sector struggled due to sporadic flooding and persistent conflicts between herders and local farmers, while manufacturing continued to suffer from limited access to finance. Efforts to bring inflation within the Central Bank of Nigeria's target range of 6%-9% were constrained by structural and macroeconomic challenges, including rising food prices and delayed payment of public arrears. As a result, inflation rose to 11.3% in 2019 (NBS, 2019), contradicting the expectations that the border closure would ease inflationary pressures and promote economic self-sufficiency as depicted in fig. 1 below:

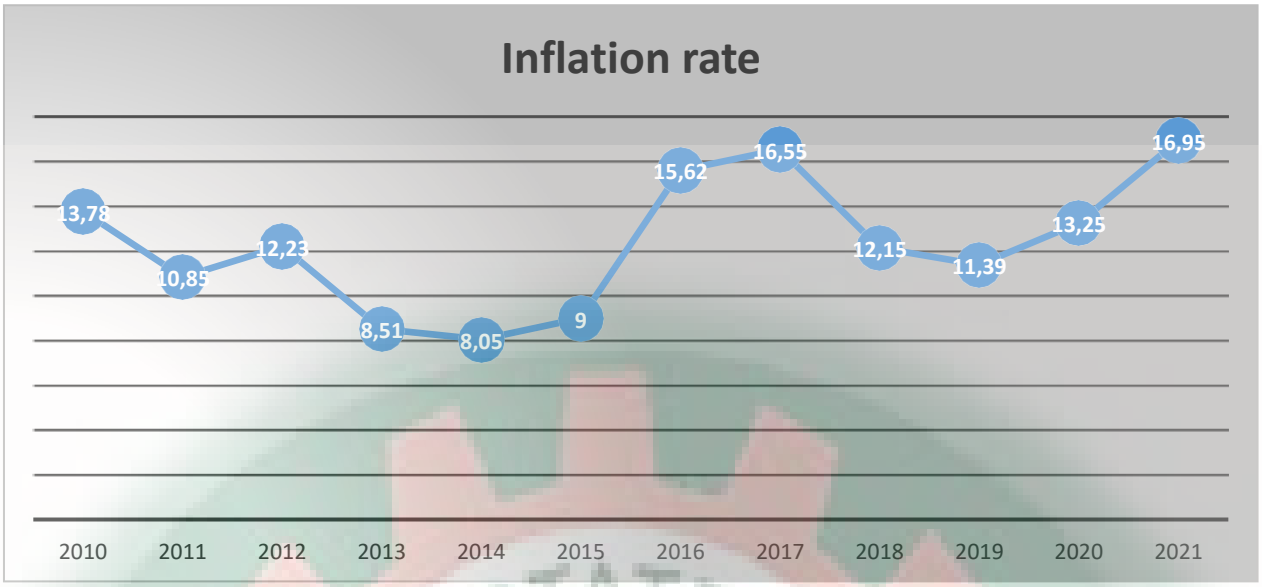


Figure 1: Nigeria's Inflation Rate (2019) – Over 1-Year High at 11.3%
Source: Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (2022)

Figure 1 above shows that, despite the closure of the borders, inflation continued to rise, challenging the assumption that restricting imports would enhance domestic production and stabilise prices. Instead, Udeh et al. (2021) identified two key consequences of the policy: first, rising unemployment as many workers in the manufacturing sector were laid off as companies faced difficulties sourcing raw materials and exporting finished goods. Second, economic hardship for Informal Traders. This is because many Nigerians engaged in cross-border informal trade lost their primary source of livelihood. The resultant economic strain has pushed some into criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, ritual killings, and banditry as a means of survival.

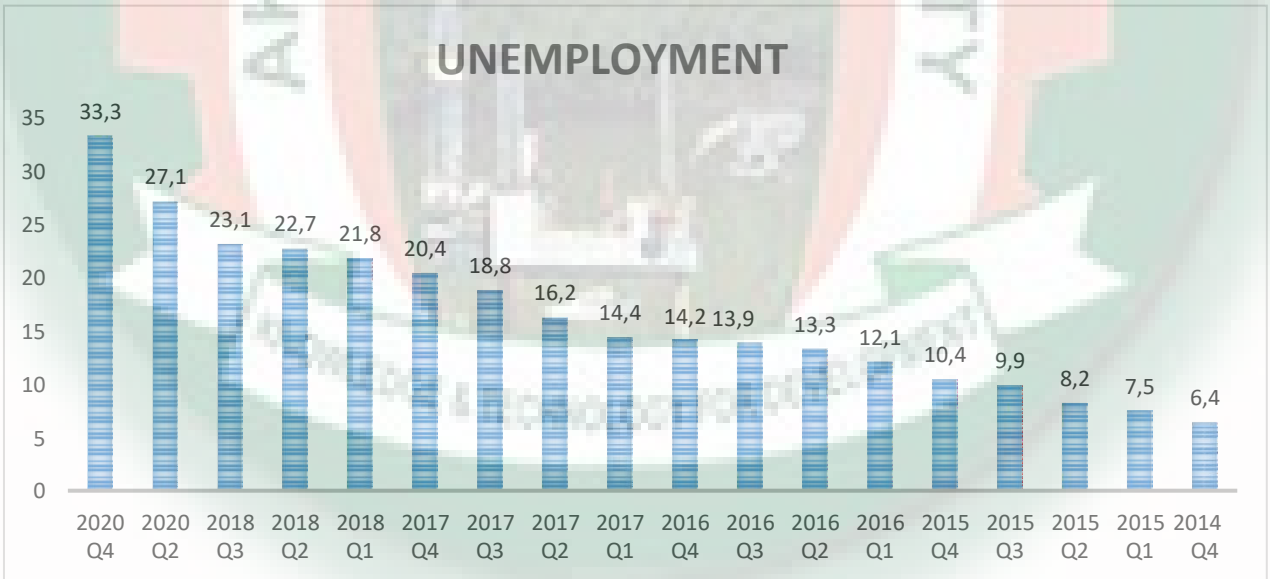


Figure 2: Unemployment Statistics in Nigeria (2019–2020)
Source: TheGlobalEconomy.com (2022)

The figure illustrates the trend of Nigeria's unemployment rate from the fourth quarter of 2014 to the fourth quarter of 2020. It reveals a consistent and sharp increase over the years, rising from 6.4% in Q4 2014 to 33.3% in Q4 2020. Notably, the unemployment rate surged

significantly between 2018 and 2020, with a steep rise observed in 2020, reaching 27.1% in Q2 and peaking at 33.3% in Q4. This dramatic increase aligns with the period of border closures and the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the growing economic hardship and job losses faced by the country during that time.

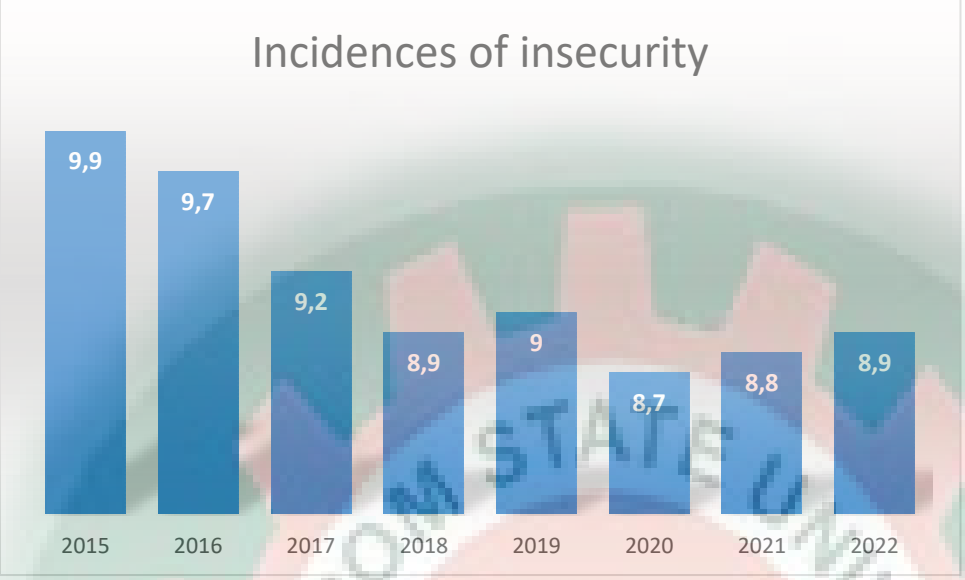


Fig 3: Nigeria Security Statistics

Figure 3 above presents the relationship between border closures and national security remains complex. According to official narratives, the closure of land borders contributed to a temporary decline in cross-border criminal activity. Figure 3 shows a slight drop in the national crime rate from 9.0% in 2019 to 8.7% in 2020. However, this initial decline was not sustained, with crime rates rising again to 8.8% in 2021 and 8.9% in 2022, suggesting a rebound in insecurity.

Despite government claims of improved border control, the broader security situation has deteriorated. Mass abductions by armed groups, often referred to as bandits, have become more widespread. According to reports by SBM Intelligence, 2,371 Nigerians were kidnapped in the first half of 2021, compared to 2,860 in the entirety of 2020. Moreover, the number of Nigerians killed by violent attacks rose to 10,366 in 2021 from 7,063 in 2020. The security crisis has had far-reaching implications, including on education. Over 1.3 million students were affected by school closures in 2021 due to increasing insecurity. UNICEF reports that 11,536 schools were shut down that year as a result of mass abductions, forcing many children to stay at home. This surge in out-of-school children, combined with a high unemployment rate, is likely to further fuel insecurity in the short to medium term, while dampening investment and economic productivity in the longer term.

Nigeria's worsening insecurity has also contributed to rising food inflation. As of March 2022, the food inflation rate stood at 17.2%, largely driven by persistent violence and instability in the Northern region. Communal clashes, banditry, and farmer-herder conflicts have raged across the North-Central zone and have spread to neighbouring areas, including parts of the South-West, thereby exacerbating food scarcity and inflationary pressures. According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, Nigeria ranked third in Sub-Saharan Africa and sixth globally among countries most affected by terrorism (Agusto et al., 2021). This grim ranking underscores the need for a more holistic approach to border and security management, one that integrates economic inclusion, social safety nets, and improved intelligence-led responses.

Conclusion

The debate over the consequences of border closures among African countries remains highly polarised. On one hand, proponents argue that such policies protect national economies by curbing the influx of substandard goods, stemming illegal immigration, combating human trafficking, and addressing security threats such as insurgency and cross-border crime. On the other hand, critics highlight the violation of regional and international trade agreements, the disruption of economic integration efforts, and the negative impacts on trade volumes, consumer prices, and livelihoods, especially in border communities and among informal traders.

This paper finds that border closure policies are indeed a double-edged sword. While they may offer temporary protection to domestic industries and bolster national security in the short term, they often produce unintended and far-reaching economic and social consequences. These include inflationary pressures, rising unemployment, disruption of supply chains, and increased hardship for vulnerable populations. Notably, Nigeria's experience during the 2019–2020 border closures revealed that the intended outcomes, such as self-sufficiency and reduced smuggling, were not fully achieved. Smuggling of prohibited items like rice continued, often through unofficial routes, highlighting the limitations of enforcement-focused approaches (Hameed, 2019).

Moreover, security challenges persisted and, in some areas, worsened, while inflation and unemployment surged, and food insecurity deepened, particularly in northern Nigeria. These outcomes underscore the limitations of unilateral border closures as a sustainable policy tool for economic and security governance.

In light of these findings, this paper supports the view that border closures are not the most effective strategy for African economies. Rather than resorting to restrictive trade policies, governments should adopt a more integrated approach that includes strengthening border infrastructure, enhancing intelligence and surveillance capabilities, fostering regional cooperation, and promoting inclusive economic policies. These measures would better address illegal activities while preserving the benefits of free trade and regional integration, in line with the aspirations of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and broader economic development goals across the continent.

Recommendations

Based on the data and analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the economic and security consequences of the Nigeria-Benin border closure policy:

1. The Nigerian government and other African states should invest in modern surveillance technologies to enhance border security and monitoring. This includes the deployment of advanced scanners, radar systems, AI-enabled camera-mounted drones, biometric lie detectors, CCTV networks, and automated license plate readers. These tools should be installed at both legal and illegal border entry points to detect and deter smuggling and unauthorised movement more effectively than full border closures.
2. Governments should prioritise improved conditions of service, adequate remuneration, and welfare packages for border security personnel to reduce the temptation for corruption. In addition, structured and periodic training and retraining on ethics, intelligence gathering, and the use of modern surveillance tools should be institutionalised. These measures will help curb the complicity of security operatives in illegal cross-border activities, including the smuggling of petroleum products, second-hand vehicles, arms, and contraband goods.

3. There should be robust and institutionalised collaboration between border management agencies of African countries, particularly those within regional blocs such as ECOWAS. This collaboration should focus on real-time intelligence gathering, data sharing, harmonised border patrol operations, and joint use of technological tools. Regional frameworks should also be established to coordinate responses to emerging threats and ensure collective security and economic prosperity across borders.
4. To reduce dependence on imports and enhance food security, targeted investments should be made in local agricultural production, processing, and distribution. This includes improving access to inputs, irrigation infrastructure, rural roads, extension services, and storage facilities. Such support will not only boost domestic production but also help cushion the inflationary impact of restricted imports.
5. Governments should invest in building robust data collection, monitoring, and early warning systems for border activities. Reliable data on trade flows, border crime, and cross-border movement of goods and people will enhance policy responsiveness and accountability. This will also support evidence-based decision-making and reduce the reliance on blunt instruments like border closures.

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