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ФАКТОР МИГРАЦИИ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ В РАМКАХ ЭКОВАС
(1980–2025 гг.)

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INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the study on factor of migration in the integration process within ECOWAS lies in the way and manner migration shapes regional cohesion, economic development, and social dynamics in West Africa. A main feature of ECOWAS integration is migration, outlined in the ECOWAS Protocols on Free Movement which is regarded as a top priority for regional growth. West Africa is home to a very mobile population, as millions move within the region due to economic reasons, social changes and displacement due to crisis and climate change.

It is an essential task to understand migration within ECOWAS as it directly influences the success or failure of the region's integration efforts. Migration is central to the facilitation of labour mobility, knowledge transfer, and cultural exchange, which are key for building a harmonised regional market and achieving human capital development. Migration also presents challenges such as policy gaps and structural barriers, recurring xenophobia, irregular migration issues, and difficulties in practical implementation of free movement protocols that can hinder integration and social cohesion.

Migration also helps drive ECOWAS interactions with international partners like the United Nations and European Union through different agencies and these organisations support managing migration, protecting migrants and dealing with refugee matters. The impact of these international partners and their interest in the region is fundamental to understanding their commitment in the region.

The study is particularly relevant in the light of the latest geopolitical transformations in West Africa, following a series of coups d'etat and the formation of the "Alliance of Sahel States" (AES). The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS in 2024-2025 led to an unprecedented institutional crisis in the regional bloc, directly jeopardizing the implementation of the Protocol on Free Movement. This split is fragmenting the single migration space, threatening the resumption of visa and

border barriers between the former member countries and creating risks for millions of migrants whose cross-border economic and social ties are formed within the framework of a single mobility regime. In these circumstances, the analysis of the historical evolution and structural contradictions of ECOWAS migration policy becomes critically important for understanding whether the reintegration of the region is possible on new principles or whether the final erosion of one of the most advanced mobility projects on the African continent will occur.

This study provides insights that are relevant as it examines the many ways migration impacts integration, development and human assets within the ECOWAS region. ECOWAS is one of the most successful regional blocs within the African Union and has built the foundation for a borderless Africa through its operationalisation of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. This study explores how ECOWAS has managed migration as a factor of regional integration. It also offers a view into the European Union externalisation policy, and its reliance on securitisation and border control and how this impacts ECOWAS integration agenda. It is argued that the EU's externalisation policy to some extent undermines ECOWAS regional integration agenda. The thesis examines the historical patterns of migration pre-, during and post colonialism. The thesis climaxes into exploring the factor of migration in the ECOWAS and how it manages its relationship with international actors in what is known as Migration Diplomacy.

Literature review of the research problem is represented by three main groups of works by Russian and foreign researchers.

Russian scholarship on migration processes in West Africa and their interplay with ECOWAS regional integration adopts a structurally oriented and historically grounded analytical framework. Migration is conceptualized not merely as a demographic or humanitarian issue, but as a systemic factor integral to state formation, regional institutionalization, and patterns of global inequality. This perspective facilitates a nuanced examination of migration's role in shaping both the progress and

constraints of ECOWAS integration from the 1979 Free Movement Protocol through 2025.

S.V. Kostelyanets¹ employs a *longue durée* approach to trace precolonial mobility systems in West Africa, structured around trans-Saharan trade routes, kinship networks, and economic interdependencies, which embedded mobility within socio-economic organization. I.O. Abramova² demonstrates how colonial administrations reconfigured these systems through codified legal regimes predicated on administrative and racial differentiation, establishing institutional precedents for postcolonial citizenship policies and border controls.

A.M. Vasiliev³, T.L. Deich⁴, A.D. Savateev⁵, N.A. Dobronravin⁶ and V.A. Shubin⁷ further explore colonial territorial fragmentation and its enduring impacts on political and institutional development in postcolonial Africa. Their analyses highlight how arbitrarily drawn boundaries disrupted interconnected mobility spaces, generating structural tensions that regional bodies like ECOWAS have sought to address. In this view, the 1979 Protocol emerges as a mechanism to restore regional connectivity amid sovereign state frameworks.

¹ Костелянец С.В. Африка в глобальных миграционных потоках. Москва: Институт Африки РАН, 2022. 320 с.

² Абрамова И.О. Африканская трансграничная миграция и проблемы международной безопасности. Москва: Институт Африки РАН, 2015. 280 с.

³ Васильев А.М. Африка: политическое и экономическое развитие. М.: Институт Африки РАН, 2014. 350 с.

⁴ Дейч Т.Л. Политические системы современной Африки. М.: Институт Африки РАН, 2017. 290 с.

⁵ Саватеев А.Д. Этнополитические процессы в Западной Африке. Москва: Институт Африки РАН, 2016. 260 с.

⁶ Добронравин Н.А. Политическая трансформация Тропической Африки. Санкт-Петербург: СПбГУ, 2016. 220 с.

⁷ Шубин В.А. Африка: политическое развитие и конфликты. М.: Институт Африки РАН, 2015. 300 с.

M.M. Agafoshin⁸, S.A. Gorokhov⁹ and I.A. Zakharov¹⁰ scrutinised the operational challenges of ECOWAS migration mechanisms, identifying contradictions between integration objectives and securitization practices. Despite the commitment to free movement, member states often prioritise internal security architecture, thereby impeding implementation. L.M. Issaev¹¹ and A.R. Shishkina¹², elucidate how media discourses and political framing construct migration as a security threat, influencing both national policies and regional decision-making. This is supported by the work of L.L. Fituni¹³, who analysed structural instability, governance fragility, and conflict dynamics in African states, thereby linking securitisation narratives to broader institutional vulnerability.

D.P. Kommegni¹⁴ links forced migration and displacement to governance fragility and conflict dynamics, while S.A. Gorokhov¹⁵ and E.V. Morozenskaya¹⁶ provide complementary demographic and labour-market analyses, underscoring migration's dual role in facilitating regional labour integration and provoking political contestation rooted in sovereignty concerns.

Russian historiography distinctly emphasises external determinants of migration governance. O.A. Morgunova¹⁷ and N.F. Moraru¹⁸ critique the externalisation of EU migration policy, particularly EU-funded border controls in Sahelian states like Niger,

⁸ Агафошин М.М. Миграционные процессы в Западной Африке. М.: РУДН, 2022. 210 с.

⁹ Горохов С.А. Демографические процессы и миграция в Африке. Москва: МГУ, 2021. 250 с.

¹⁰ Захаров И.А. ЭКОВАС и региональная интеграция. Москва: РУДН, 2024. 180 с.

¹¹ Исаев Л.М. Миграция и безопасность в Западной Африке. Москва: ВШЭ, 2023. 240 с.

¹² Шишкина А.Р. Медиа и миграция в Африке. Москва: ВШЭ, 2023. 190 с.

¹³ Фитуни Л.Л. Африка: политическая экономия конфликтов и нестабильности. Москва: Институт Африки РАН, 2019. 310 с.

¹⁴ Коммегни Д.П. Вынужденная миграция в Западной Африке. Москва: РУДН, 2022. 200 с.

¹⁵ Горохов С.А. Демографические процессы и миграция в Африке. Москва: МГУ, 2021. 250 с.

¹⁶ Морозенская Е.В. Трудовая миграция в странах к югу от Сахары. Москва: Институт Африки РАН, 2019. 230 с.

¹⁷ Моргунова О.А. Внешнее миграционное управление ЕС. Москва: ИМЭМО РАН, 2022. 210 с.

¹⁸ Морару Н.Ф. Европейская миграционная политика после 2015 года. Москва: ИМЭМО РАН, 2025. 195 с.

which prioritise European security over regional needs; their work reveals normative asymmetries in post-2015 reforms and refugee treatment. A.A. Gukepshev¹⁹ similarly connects EU regulatory frameworks to forced migration patterns in West Africa.

L.E. Grinin²⁰ and A.V. Korotayev²¹ situate these dynamics within world-systems theory, framing African migration amid global inequalities and demographic pressures, with ECOWAS integration occurring under conditions of structural dependency. A.A. Arkhangelskaya²² and V.V. Naumkin²³ contextualize migration within contemporary international relations and security architectures, noting the increasing role of external geopolitical actors. Russian scholarship offers a cohesive, historically informed interpretation of migration as a multidimensional force shaped by colonial legacies, institutional tensions, securitisation, and global asymmetries that both propels and constrains ECOWAS integration from 1979 to 2025. This body of work enriches predominantly Anglophone literature on West African migration governance and regional cohesion.

Overall, it is worth noting that Russian science offers a holistic, historically grounded interpretation of migration as a multidimensional force shaped by colonial legacy, institutional tensions, securitization, and global asymmetry, which both facilitated and hindered integration into ECOWAS from 1979 to 2025. This work complements the predominantly English-language literature on migration management in West Africa and regional cohesion.

Foundational works of *Western and African scholars* on migration pre-, during and post- colonial migration in the region provide a deep historical background for

¹⁹ Гукепшев А.А. Миграционная политика Европейского союза и Африка. Москва: МГИМО, 2023. 220 с.

²⁰ Гринин Л.Е. Глобальное неравенство и миграция. Волгоград: Учитель, 2024. 280 с.

²¹ Коротаев А. В. Мир-системный анализ и глобальная миграция. Москва: URSS, 2020. 270 с.

²² Архангельская А. А. Африка в современных международных отношениях. Москва: ИМЭМО РАН, 2019. 250 с.

²³ Иссаев Л. М. Миграция и безопасность в Западной Африке. Москва: ВШЭ, 2023. 299 с.

understanding migration patterns in West Africa. S. McIntosh²⁴ attributes earlier movements in the region to the desiccation of the once prosperous and flourishing and green Sahara, causing people to move further to regions of fertile land. He asserts that this movement shaped the culture and demographic makeup of African societies years later. Trade, politics, religion and slavery eventually became the major drivers of migration in precolonial Africa. Works by Michiel de Haas and E. Frankema²⁵ document these intra-regional regular movements in African countries in the 19th century to contemporary times.

The authors H.S. Klein²⁶, P. Lovejoy²⁷, G. Austin²⁸ among others, have looked into how forced migration and slavery in the Atlantic slave trade shaped the way regions in West Africa were organized and how labour mobility was facilitated. These works discuss the background of population movements and how shifts in social structures still affect current migration. Authors G. Austin and M.B. Salau²⁹ discuss how people moved as a result of slavery and the cash-crop system which played a major role in shaping economic integration in the colonial and post-colonial periods. I. Kopytoff and S. Miers³⁰ introduced the concept of integration into their literature on African migration, where they recognised slavery for its role in “assimilating strangers into a

²⁴ McIntosh S.K. *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²⁵ De Haas M., Frankema E. *Migration in Africa: Shifting Patterns of Mobility from the 19th to the 21st Century*. London: Routledge, 2022.

²⁶ Klein H. S. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

²⁷ Lovejoy P. E. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. 3rd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 290 p.; Lovejoy P. E. *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016. 341 p.

²⁸ Austin G. “Migration in the Contexts of Slaving and States in 19th-Century West Africa.” In: De Haas M., Frankema E. (eds.). *Migration in Africa*. London: Routledge, 2022, P. 37–55.

²⁹ Salau M. B. *Plantation Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018.

³⁰ Kopytoff I., Miers S. *Slavery as an Institution of Marginality* in: Miers S., Kopytoff I. (eds.). *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977, pp. 3–81. // Kopytoff I. “The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture.” In: Kopytoff I. (ed.). *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 46–48.

society” but asserted that these slaves are regarded as the lowest in society caste systems. C.H. Perrot³¹ reinforce this concept of assimilation in West African cultures of the Akan of Ghana and Ivoriens.

On Migration and Economic integration, the extensive work of G. Austin³² focused on showing how the development of cash-crop farms and the labour market in colonial and post-colonial West Africa relied greatly on migration. It is clear from Austin’s work that the spread of export agriculture such as cocoa and groundnuts, relied on migration and helped drive both economic growth and stronger connections between regions. In his 2009 article «Cash Crops and Freedom: Export Agriculture and the Decline of Slavery in Colonial West Africa», G. Austin points out that migration increased labour demand and mobility and caused the decline of slavery. Austin evaluated how these changes in agriculture affected domestic economies and broadened them by encouraging migration and integration.

A.G. Hopkins’s contribution – «An Economic History of West Africa»³³ focused on how migration allowed labour and market integration. Hopkins points out that the movement of people across the region helped organize workforce regions and economic activities, laying out the groundwork for economic union in ECOWAS. P. Roessler and others³⁴ explained how colonisation contributed to uneven development among people

³¹ Perrot C.-H. “Introduction.” In: Perrot C.-H. (ed.). *Lignages et territoire en Afrique aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles: Stratégies, compétition, intégration*. Paris: Karthala, 2000, pp. 13–14.

³² Austin G. “The Political Economy of the Natural Environment in West African History: Asante and Its Savanna Neighbours in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.” In: Kuba R., Lentz C. (eds.). *Land and the Politics of Belonging in West Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 187–212.

Austin G. “Cash Crops and Freedom: Export Agriculture and the Decline of Slavery in Colonial West Africa. // *International Review of Social History*. 2009. Vol. 54(1). P. 1–37.

Austin G. “Explaining and Evaluating the Cash Crop Revolution in the ‘Peasant’ Colonies of Tropical Africa, ca. 1890–ca. 1930: Beyond ‘Vent for Surplus.’” In: Akyeampong E. K., Bates R. H., Nunn N., Robinson J. A. (eds.). *Africa's Development in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, P. 295–320.

³³ Hopkins A. G. *An Economic History of West Africa*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2020.

³⁴ Roessler P., Pengl Y., Marty R., Titlow K. S., Van de Walle N. *The Cash Crop Revolution, Colonialism and Legacies of Spatial Inequality: Evidence from Africa*. Working Paper WPS/2020-12. Oxford: Centre for the Study of African Economies, University of Oxford, 2020.

across different places within the region. It can be inferred that differences in development stemming from earlier colonial policies continue to strongly affect migration and economic issues in contemporary times. They claim that migration tries to address these differences, but the legacies of colonialism pose structural barriers that limit the realisation of economic integration in the region.

M. Flahaux and H. de Haas³⁵ in «African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers» and J. Teye³⁶ in «Intraregional migration in the ECOWAS region: Trends and emerging challenges» gave an overview into intra-ECOWAS migration data, stating that migration in the region is mainly catalysed by labour mobility which contributes to regional integration efforts. They however pointed out that informal migration poses policy and structural barriers that limit the full potential of regional and economic integration.

Regional integration in ECOWAS is supported by strong governance and policy frameworks. The works of C. Nwangwu, and S. Gänzle and others³⁷ lend credence to this fact. However, A. Adepoju³⁸, N. Kleist and J. Bjarnesen³⁹ highlight the challenges surrounding the implementation of these frameworks exacerbated by policy gaps,

³⁵Flahaux M.-L., De Haas H. African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers // Comparative Migration Studies, 2016, Vol. 4(1). P. 1–25.

³⁶ Teye J. K., Awumbila M., Benneh Y. “Intraregional Migration in the ECOWAS Region: Trends and Emerging Challenges.” In: Akoutou B., Sohn R., Vogl M., Yeboah D. (eds.). Migration and Civil Society as Development Drivers – A Regional Perspective 2015. Bonn: Zei Centre for European Integration Studies, 2015, P. 125–152.

³⁷ Nwangwu C., Enyiazu C., Nwagwu E. J., Ezeibe C. C. “Interrogating the Relevance of the ECOWAS in Global Political Economy.” Central European Journal of International and Security Studies, 13(2), 2019. // Gänzle S., Trondal J., Kuhn N. S. B. “‘Not So Different After All’: Governance and Behavioral Dynamics in the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).” Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 2018.

³⁸ Adepoju A. “Operationalizing the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons: Prospects for Sub-Regional Trade and Development.” In: Panizzon M., Zürcher G., Fornalé E. (eds.). The Palgrave Handbook of International Labour Migration: Law and Policy Perspectives. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, P. 441–462.

³⁹ Kleist N., Bjarnesen J. “Migration Infrastructures in West Africa and Beyond.” MIASA Working Papers, 2019. No. 3, P. 14-30.

structural barriers and national sovereignty concerns. Scholars M. Djaló⁴⁰ and W. Aleman⁴¹ argue that to succeed economically, ECOWAS needs to pay close attention to peace and security. C. Nwangwu, K. Grütjen⁴² are of the opinion that for integration to work, different national policies should be harmonised and the strength of institutions improved to manage political and practical challenges. These authors showed how intertwined migration is with political stability and security.

The work of M.B. Setrana and N. Kleist⁴³ gave detailed descriptions of West African migration and its related gender issues, while W. Williams⁴⁴ concentrate on events of displacement and refugee conditions in ECOWAS. C. Zickgraf⁴⁵ and B. Schraven⁴⁶ address how climate change and vulnerability in nature contribute to migration, making migration and integration matters more involved.

The way ECOWAS conducts its migration diplomacy is closely influenced by its dealings with the EU and the UN. Studies by H. Moctar⁴⁷, C. Castillejo⁴⁸ have proven

⁴⁰ Djaló, Mashood. *The Evolving Role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Solving Conflict in the Sub-Saharan Region from 2011 to 2021: The Cases of Mali, Burkina-Faso, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau*. MS thesis. ISCTE-Instituto Universitario de Lisboa (Portugal), 2023.

⁴¹ Aleman, W. "The evolution of ECOWAS: How the economic organization transitioned into peace and security." 2018.

⁴² Grütjen, K. *Current developments in West Africa's regional integration – challenges for the future design of foreign and development policy (Policy Brief 6/2024)*. 2024 IDOS.

⁴³ Setrana MB, Kleist N. *Gendered dynamics in west African migration*. In *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader 2022 Jul 5*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. P. 57-76.

⁴⁴ Williams, W. *Shifting Borders: Africa's displacement crisis and its security implications (Research paper no. 8)*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019.

⁴⁵ Zickgraf, C., Vigil, S., de Longueville, F., Ozer, P., & Gemenne, F. *The impact of vulnerability and resilience to environmental changes on mobility patterns in West Africa (KNOMAD working paper 14)* 2016. 102 p.

⁴⁶ Schraven, B., Adaawen, S., Rademacher-Schulz, C., & Segadlo, N. *Climate change impacts on human (im-)mobility in sub-Saharan Africa recent trends and options for policy responses*. Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. 2020

⁴⁷ Moctar, H. *EU Border Externalisation and Uneven Development In West Africa*. 2024. URL: <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2024/12/eu-border-externalisation-and-uneven-development-west> (accessed: 03.03.2026).

⁴⁸ Castillejo, C. *The influence of EU migration policy on regional free movement in the IGAD and ECOWAS regions*. German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). 2019. URL: <https://www.idos-research.de/en/discussion-paper/article/the-influence-of-eu-migration->

that European Union policies of outsourcing border and migration management to countries in West Africa sometimes stop or impede ECOWAS's free movement goal. As a result, there is an uneven development in the region leading to more spatial inequality and undermines ECOWAS migration control efforts.

Authors K. Arhin-Sam⁴⁹ and L. Kandilige with T. Yeboah⁵⁰ pointed out how the EU's externalisation policy complicates refugee protection and encourages more informal ways of migrating to Europe, both of which make regional migration governance difficult and humanitarian frameworks harder to implement. The works of these authors suggest that ECOWAS's regional mobility ambitions continue to face fierce opposition from international migration diplomacy, showing how migration serves as a means to achieve regional integration but also as a polarizing subject for international diplomacy. In exploring the historical, economic, policy and diplomatic dimensions of migration, this thesis attempts to assess how migration has impacted the process of regional integration within ECOWAS between 1979 and 2025.

Thus, summing up the consideration of the historiography of the issues under study, we can conclude that the range of studies on migration processes in the West African region is quite extensive, characterized by a sufficiently in-depth study of individual issues. However, it is worth noting that there is no systematic analysis of the key factors that migration has affected regional integration within ECOWAS, and no assessment of the impact of ECOWAS cooperation with international actors on migration management.

The object of this thesis is cross-border migration in the context of regional integration within ECOWAS.

policy-on-regional-free-movement-in-the-igad-and-ecowas-regions/ (accessed: 03.03.2026).

⁴⁹ Arhin-Sam, K., Bisong, A., Jegen, L., Mounkaila, H. and Zanker, F. The (in) formality of mobility in the ECOWAS region: The paradoxes of free movement // South African Journal of International Affairs. 2022. Vol. 29(2). P. 187-205

⁵⁰ Kandilige, L., Yeboah, T.. Asylum and Protection Mercenarism: Effects of European Externalisation on African Migration Governance. Externalizing Asylum, 2024. URL: <https://externalizingasylum.info/asylum-and-protection-mercenarism/> (accessed: 03.03.2026).

The subject of the study is practices of ECOWAS migration management from 1979 to 2025.

The purpose of the study is to identify the key factors that migration has influenced regional integration within ECOWAS and the impact of ECOWAS cooperation with international actors on migration management.

To achieve the intended goal, it is necessary to solve the following **research tasks**:

- examine patterns and determinants of migration and displacement within West Africa.

- analyse the establishment and objectives of ECOWAS in relation to regional integration and migration.

- assess the implementation and impact of ECOWAS Free Movement Protocols on intra-regional mobility.

- identify policy gaps and structural barriers affecting migrants' settlement and business activities within ECOWAS.

- investigate the challenges posed by xenophobia to free movement and regional integration.

- evaluate the practical enforcement of freedom of movement across ECOWAS member states.

- explore ECOWAS's migration diplomacy and its partnerships with international actors like the UN and the EU.

The chronological scope covers the period from 1979 to 2025. The lower chronological limit is determined by the adoption in 1979 of the ECOWAS Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. This document marked the institutionalisation of migration governance within the Economic Community of West African States and laid the legal foundation for the creation of a regional free movement regime. The year 1979 therefore represents the starting point of the formal integration of migration into the ECOWAS regional agenda and the

beginning of its systematic regulatory development. The upper chronological limit is defined by the year 2025, which reflects the most recent stage in the evolution of ECOWAS migration policy and regional integration processes. At the same time, in accordance with the principle of historicism, the author refers to earlier historical periods in order to analyse long-term trends and structural determinants of migration in West Africa.

The review of the source base. The solution of the tasks set became possible thanks to a thorough analysis of a wide range of published sources. The sources used to develop the topic can be divided by type into: regulatory, clerical, media, statistical.

The first group consists of *regulatory and legislative* sources. These include inter-State treaties such as the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (1967), the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (resolution 2200A (XXI), 1966), the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their families (resolution 45/158, 1990), the African Union Convention on the Protection of and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. The author also referred to the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, the Right to Reside and to be Established (1979), as well as its additional Protocols (1985, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1993). When writing the dissertation, the ECOWAS Convention on Extradition (1994) and the ECOWAS Protocol on the mechanism of prevention were analyzed. conflict resolution, dispute resolution, peace and security (1999 and 2007), ECOWAS humanitarian policy (2012), the ECOWAS general approach to migration⁵¹, as well as the policy document "ECOWAS Vision for the period up to 2050"⁵².

⁵¹ ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration. Economic Community of West African States. Abuja: ECOWAS Commission, 2008.

⁵² ECOWAS Vision 2050: A Community of Peoples Fully Integrated, Peaceful and Prosperous. Economic Community of West African States. Abuja: ECOWAS Commission, 2021.

The author also referred to the national legislative acts of the ECOWAS member countries.: Nigeria's Labor Migration Policy (2010)⁵³, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), the Nigerian Immigration Laws (1963 and 2015)⁵⁴, the Nigerian Anti-Smuggling Law⁵⁵, the Ghanaian Investment Promotion Law (2013), the Ivorian Citizenship Code (1961), the Ivorian Electoral Code (1994), Ivorian Rural Land Law (1998)⁵⁶. In addition, the author applied in his research the Declaration of the Rabat Process (2006), the Rome Declaration of the Khartoum Process (2014)⁵⁷ and the Samoa Agreement (2023)⁵⁸.

The second group, *clerical sources* representing reports of national, regional and international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration, the ECOWAS Commission reports, European Union Commission reports, European Council reports and Presidency conclusions⁵⁹, World Trade Organisation, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Gold Coast Government⁶⁰, International

⁵³ Nigeria Labour Migration Policy (Revised December 2010). Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity, 2010.

⁵⁴ Immigration Act, No. 8, 2015. Federal Republic of Nigeria. Abuja: Government of Nigeria, 2015. // Immigration Act, No. 6 of 1963. Federal Republic of Nigeria. Lagos: Government Printer, 1963.

⁵⁵ Loi n° 2015-036 du 26 mai 2015 relative au trafic illicite de migrants. République du Niger. Niamey: Gouvernement du Niger, 2015.

⁵⁶Loi No. 61-415 du 14 décembre 1961 portant Code de la nationalité ivoirienne modifiée par la Loi No. 72-852 du 21 décembre 1972. République de Côte d'Ivoire. Abidjan: Gouvernement de Côte d'Ivoire, 1972. // Loi No. 94-642 du 13 décembre 1994 portant Code électoral. République de Côte d'Ivoire. Abidjan: Gouvernement de Côte d'Ivoire, 1994. // Loi No. 98-750 du 23 décembre 1998 relative au domaine foncier rural. République de Côte d'Ivoire. Abidjan: Gouvernement de Côte d'Ivoire, 1998.

⁵⁷ Declaration of the Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development (Rabat Declaration). European Union & African Partner Countries. Rabat: European Union, 2006. <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/documentation/declarations> // Rome Declaration on the EU–Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative (Khartoum Process). European Union & African Union. Rome: European Union, 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.khartoumprocess.net>

⁵⁸ The Samoa Agreement. European Union & Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States. Apia: European Union & OACPS, 2023.

⁵⁹ Presidency Conclusions: Tampere European Council, 15 and 16 October 1999. European Council. Brussels: European Union, 1999.

⁶⁰ Report on the Ministry of Labour for the Year 1953–54. Gold Coast Government. Accra: Government Printer, 1955.

Centre for Migration Policy Development, were explored, analysed and cited in the work.

The third group includes *media sources* represented by public statements, media coverage, and expert commentary and speeches/press releases of Heads of States or EU Commission⁶¹, Departmental heads of the ECOWAS⁶², and media perception from news agencies⁶³.

The fourth group of sources are *statistical sources* such as IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)⁶⁴, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development⁶⁵, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs International migration reports and United Nations Global Migration Database⁶⁶. Holistically, these sources served as a robust and interdisciplinary base that supported a thorough investigation of migration's influence on ECOWAS regional integration between 1979-2025.

Thus, the source base of this research is quite representative and well-founded, which allowed the author to carry out a comprehensive and comprehensive analysis of the problem of dissertation research.

⁶¹ EUCAP Sahel Niger to Help Prevent Irregular Migration. Council of the European Union. Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2015; Speech by Nicole Fontaine, President of the European Parliament at the Special Meeting of the European Council in Tampere. European Parliament. Brussels: European Parliament, 1999; Why Aliens Were Expelled – Busia. Daily Times. Lagos: Daily Times Press, 1969.

⁶² Dialogue in Divergence: The Impact of EU Migration Policy on West African Integration. Idrissa, Rahmane. 2000.

⁶³ Border bribery: the price of being a refugee // Refugees International, 22 Sept 2003. URL: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/SKAR-646KEH?OpenDocument> (accessed: 02.03.2026); Permit, Licence Delays Hamper Economy's Formalisation, // The Business & Financial Times. 2020. URL: <https://thebftonline.com/2020/09/11/permit-licence-delays-hamper-economys-formalisation/> (accessed: 23.04.2025).

⁶⁴ The Sahel // Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). URL: <https://acleddata.com/africa/the-sahel/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁶⁵ Economic Development in Africa: Report 2013. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. New York: United Nations, 2013. 65 p.

⁶⁶ International Migration Report 2015: Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/375). United Nations. New York: United Nations, 2015. 103 p.

Research methodology. The theoretical foundation of the research is based on the realist paradigm of international relation supplemented by elements of neorealism and institutional analysis. Within the realist framework, regional integration is understood as a process conditioned primarily by state interests, sovereignty considerations, and power asymmetries rather than normative commitments alone. As H.J. Morgenthau⁶⁷ argues, state behaviour in international politics is driven by the pursuit of national interest defined in terms of power. K.N. Waltz⁶⁸ further conceptualises the international system as anarchic, where institutional cooperation remains constrained by structural limitations. This approach is applicable to ECOWAS, where the principle of free movement coexists with national security priorities and external geopolitical influence.

The methodology reflects the complex nature of migration and integration processes in West Africa. An interdisciplinary approach is employed, combining methods of political science, history, and social analysis. The principle of historicism allows for the examination of migration dynamics and regional integration in their development from 1979 to 2025. Objectivity and scientific reliability are ensured through the use of primary sources, including ECOWAS treaties and official documents, as well as peer-reviewed academic literature.

Methods of the research. A number of general scientific and special interdisciplinary methods were used in the dissertation. General scientific methods include analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, abstraction and generalisation, as well as the principle of the unity of the historical and the logical. These methods made it possible to systematise extensive regulatory, statistical and analytical material, identify causal relationships, and formulate theoretically grounded conclusions regarding the role of migration in the regional integration process within ECOWAS.

⁶⁷ Morgenthau, H.J. *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace.* Second Edition, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1955. 452 p.

⁶⁸ Waltz K.N. *Theory of International Politics.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979. 498 p.

The study is based on an interdisciplinary methodological approach combining methods of history, political science, and international relations theory. Among the special research methods applied in the work are the historical-comparative, historical-genetic, historical-systemic, institutional, and comparative-political methods.

The *historical-comparative method* made it possible to identify common features and differences in migration governance practices of ECOWAS member states at various stages of integration, as well as to compare normative provisions of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol with actual national implementation mechanisms. The *historical-genetic method*, the essence of which consists in the consistent disclosure of the properties and functions of the studied phenomenon in the process of its historical development, allowed the author to examine migration in West Africa as a structurally embedded process shaped by precolonial mobility systems, colonial boundary-making, postcolonial state formation, and contemporary regional institutionalisation.

The *historical-systemic method*, which focuses on the functioning of complex political and institutional systems, was used to examine ECOWAS as a multi-level governance structure interacting with national governments and external actors. The *institutional analysis method* was employed to assess the legal framework of ECOWAS migration governance, including treaties, protocols, supplementary acts, and national legislation. The *comparative-political method* was used to evaluate policy divergence among ECOWAS member states and to analyse the impact of domestic political factors—such as securitisation, xenophobia, and economic protectionism—on regional integration processes.

The **scientific novelty** of the obtained research results is as follows:

- for the first time, a comprehensive historical and political analysis of migration as a factor of regional integration within ECOWAS in 1979–2025 has been carried out, based on a wide range of regulatory, statistical, analytical and policy sources, which made it possible to conceptualise migration not merely as a demographic or socio-

economic phenomenon, but as an independent structural variable determining the trajectory, contradictions and sustainability of West African regional integration;

- the evolution of migration governance within ECOWAS has been periodised and scientifically substantiated in correlation with transformations of the international system, regional security dynamics, and the development of 21st century regionalism in West Africa; it is demonstrated that the institutionalisation of free movement was conditioned by historically embedded mobility systems, colonial boundary-making, postcolonial citizenship regimes, and realist considerations of state sovereignty and national interest;

- for the first time in Russian historiography, a systematic analysis of the discrepancy between the normative provisions of the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and the practical regulatory implementation by member states has been conducted, which allowed the identification of structural tensions between supranational integration commitments and national securitisation practices, administrative barriers, and protectionist economic policies;

- xenophobia has been substantiated as a structural governance factor influencing regional integration, rather than solely a socio-cultural phenomenon; the research reveals the mechanisms through which domestic political mobilisation, identity politics, and economic crises transform migration into an object of securitised discourse, thereby limiting the effectiveness of regional free movement regimes;

- the role of ECOWAS migration diplomacy in relations with international actors has been comprehensively analysed; for the first time, the impact of cooperation with the United Nations on refugee protection and humanitarian governance in West Africa has been assessed as a model of multi-level institutional complementarity, while the influence of the European Union's externalisation policy has been critically evaluated as a factor generating normative asymmetry and partial dependence within ECOWAS migration management;

- the interconnection between migration governance and the architecture of West African regionalism (ECOWAS, WAEMU, MRU) has been identified and theoretically generalised; it is demonstrated that migration functions simultaneously as an economic resource, a security concern, and an instrument of regional diplomacy, shaping the balance between sovereignty and supranational coordination in a multi-layered integration system;

- a significant body of legal documents, policy reports, statistical databases and analytical materials from ECOWAS institutions, international organisations and national legislation has been systematised and introduced into integrated scientific analysis, which made it possible to clarify the empirical foundations of migration governance in West Africa and to develop practical recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional coordination, harmonising regulatory frameworks, and enhancing the sustainability of regional integration processes.

Key Points of the Thesis.

1. Migration in West Africa is a historically embedded structural phenomenon – shaped by precolonial mobility systems, colonial boundary-making, and postcolonial citizenship regimes – rather than a contemporary anomaly or security threat, functioning continuously as an adaptive survival strategy through social networks and economic interdependence. This historical logic found contemporary expression in the 1979 ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, which institutionalized centuries-old mobility patterns within a progressive legal framework designed to create a borderless economic space; however, a persistent gap exists between its normative ambitions and practical implementation due to administrative bottlenecks, security concerns, and domestic political pressures, even as the Protocol has significantly enhanced intra-regional mobility, with two-thirds of West African migrants remaining within the region. The securitization of migration – particularly in response to terrorism and political instability – has reshaped the Protocol's interpretation through 2018 revisions

that balance human rights with national security, making it neither a failed project nor fully realized success but an evolving governance instrument. This dynamic reflects the broader character of 21st century West African regionalism as a pragmatic adaptation to global instability rather than purely normative commitment to supranational unity, with institutions like ECOWAS, WAEMU, and the MRU forming a layered governance architecture addressing integration, monetary coordination, peacebuilding, and security.

2. The limited effectiveness of ECOWAS as a driver of regional migration is primarily explained by structural and policy-level contradictions between regional commitments and national practices. The evidence demonstrates that weak institutional capacity, non-harmonisation of laws, protectionist economic policies, and infrastructural deficits collectively undermine the settlement and business activities of community citizens. I therefore defend the position that the challenges facing ECOWAS integration are not due to the absence of legal frameworks, but rather to implementation gaps, conflicting state interests, and structural economic constraints. The study contributes to existing scholarship by showing that meaningful regional integration in West Africa requires institutional strengthening, regulatory alignment, and structural economic transformation beyond formal policy adoption.

3. Xenophobia constitutes a fundamental non-institutional barrier to mobility and regional integration in the ECOWAS region. The findings demonstrate that xenophobic practices are deeply embedded in political, economic, and social structures, where migrants are frequently scapegoated during periods of economic crisis and political instability. By analysing historical and contemporary cases, the study shows that state policies, economic protectionism, and identity politics reinforce exclusionary practices that undermine the principles of free movement and social cohesion. I therefore argue that regional integration cannot be achieved solely through legal frameworks unless socio-political attitudes and state practices that sustain xenophobia are systematically

addressed. This work contributes to the discourse by highlighting xenophobia as a structural governance challenge rather than merely a social phenomenon.

4. Although ECOWAS has established a comprehensive legal regime governing free movement, its practical implementation remains inconsistent due to the tension between national sovereignty and regional commitments. The study demonstrates that selective compliance, administrative limitations, security concerns, and weak enforcement mechanisms create a significant gap between policy objectives and operational realities. I defend the position that the effectiveness of the ECOWAS free movement regime depends not only on legal provisions but also on political will, institutional coordination, and administrative capacity within member states. By exposing the disparity between formal commitments and actual practice, the research advances the argument that successful regional migration governance requires deeper institutional integration and stronger mechanisms for policy enforcement.

5. Intraregional migration within ECOWAS is not only a demographic phenomenon, but also an instrument of regional diplomacy and integration. It is shown that migration diplomacy in West Africa has evolved from traditional forms of mobility to an institutionalized regulatory system established by the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement and subsequent regulatory mechanisms. It has been proven that ECOWAS has formed one of the most advanced models of mobility regulation on the African continent. At the same time, there is a gap between the regulatory framework and the practical implementation of the protocol's provisions. National interests, security issues, economic instability, weak institutional mechanisms, and corrupt practices at borders limit the full realization of the right to reside and carry out economic activities. ECOWAS migration diplomacy operates in a constant balance between the principles of regional integration and State sovereignty, between the objectives of security and the openness of borders. Despite the existing limitations, the ECOWAS model is seen as a benchmark for other regional associations in Africa.

6. ECOWAS–UN cooperation illustrates a model of multi-level governance in migration management. It is maintained that regional and global institutions complement each other in addressing forced displacement, refugee protection, and statelessness. Despite the absence of the original focus of the ECOWAS treaties on regulating the status of refugees, the provisions of the documents developed under the auspices of the United Nations began to be used as an auxiliary tool for the implementation of humanitarian norms in West Africa. At the same time, the author contends that humanitarian diplomacy remains constrained by resource scarcity, protracted conflicts, climate-induced displacement, and uneven national compliance, thereby limiting durable solutions. The effectiveness of the system requires further harmonization of legislation, strengthening institutional capacity and strengthening regional coordination.

7. The migration factor is one of the key elements shaping relations between ECOWAS States and the European Union. Despite the fact that the majority of migration flows in Africa are intraregional in nature, migration to Europe has significant political and strategic importance. The policy of "externalizing" migration control, implemented by the European Union through conditional development mechanisms, readmission agreements, border security strengthening programs and multilateral cooperation processes, creates an asymmetry in the interaction of the parties and in some cases contradicts the goals of ECOWAS regional integration and the principles of free movement. The migration diplomacy between ECOWAS and the EU is twofold: on the one hand, it provides financial and institutional support, on the other, it increases dependence and shifts the priorities of regional policy towards security. Further development of cooperation requires coordination of migration regulation with the objectives of sustainable development and preservation of the principles of regional integration.

The theoretical significance of the research lies in the fact that the totality of the author's analytical conclusions and conceptual generalisations makes a significant contribution to the development of scientific knowledge on regional integration processes in Africa, migration governance, and contemporary international relations in West Africa. The dissertation develops a comprehensive approach to the study of regional integration through the prism of migration as a structural factor. By conceptualising migration not merely as a socio-demographic process but as an independent analytical variable influencing sovereignty practices, institutional coherence, and regional policy implementation, the study expands the theoretical foundations of regionalism studies. The research clarifies the interrelation between realist theoretical premises and supranational cooperation mechanisms, demonstrating how state interests, security considerations, and power asymmetries shape the functioning of the ECOWAS free movement regime.

The thesis provides a systematic historical and institutional analysis of migration governance within ECOWAS between 1979 and 2025, thereby deepening academic understanding of the mechanisms of interaction between national governments and regional organisations in conditions of structural interdependence. The findings contribute to the theory of regionalism by revealing the contradiction between normative integration frameworks and state-centric implementation practices, and by substantiating migration as a core determinant of both integration progress and institutional limitations.

The practical significance is determined by the applicability of its results and conclusions to contemporary migration governance and regional policy formulation in West Africa. The findings of the study may be used in the preparation of analytical and policy materials on regional integration, migration management, humanitarian cooperation, and security in West Africa. The recommendations formulated in the dissertation may be in demand by ECOWAS institutions, migration and border management agencies of member states, as well as international partners engaged in

cooperation with the region, including structures responsible for refugee protection, development assistance, and security sector reform. The study may also be useful for governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in addressing xenophobia, statelessness, labour mobility, and humanitarian crises.

In addition, the materials and analytical conclusions of the dissertation can be used in the preparation and teaching of university courses and specialised modules on international relations, African studies, regional integration, migration governance, and international organisations. The research results may further contribute to expert discussions, academic debates, and the development of training programmes for specialists working in the fields of migration policy and regional cooperation.

Approbation of research results. The main results and conclusions of the dissertation research are reflected in the scientific publications of the dissertation, including four articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals included in the RUDN University List. This demonstrates the scientific contribution and dissemination of the author's research results.

The structure of the dissertation are determined by the range of studied problems and meet the stated goal, objectives, object and subject of the study. The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters and a list of sources and literature.

CHAPTER 1. MIGRATION AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

1.1. Patterns of Migrations and Displacements in West Africa

Migration in West Africa cannot be explained only as the issue of cross-border movement, but rather it is thoroughly embedded in the legal, historical, and political frameworks of the region. The International Organization for Migration's definition of migration as "the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a state"⁶⁹ is being challenged by African realities as there are types of displacement occurring in the region that do not fit into the clear-cut definition of migration.

This is because the meaning of 'belonging' or citizenship has been organised by nationality policies, colonial legacies, and post-independence policy decisions to maintain its definition, who is a citizen, and who is not. These national policies and the long-standing legal legacies that have influenced them need to be reviewed before tracking patterns of migration in precolonial, colonial and contemporary periods. The rights and vulnerability of mobile populations lie in the conceptual and institutional frontiers of citizenship and constitute, therefore, the foundations of comprehending the historical and social trends of migration.

The whole concept of citizenship in West Africa has been historically disputed and unequally built. In precolonial Africa, membership in certain societies were generally determined by family linkages, and by who settled in a land first- not political, ethnic or religion. In others, admission by a Chief, and the grant of land usage rights often served as entry point into integration of late comers. Classes of membership also

⁶⁹Glossary on Migration (2nd ed.). International Organization for Migration. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019. P. 2.

existed as in other continents. These lower or higher classes of belonging is traced to the first comers and late comers who were later integrated into the societies⁷⁰.

Nationality (used interchangeably with citizenship) became a construct in the XIX century after the colonial powers divided Africa among themselves. ‘Belonging’ became a complex concept, not simply tied to ancestry or birthplace or membership of a political group but were forced to become nationals of the territories operated by the colonial powers in charge. Thus, nationality laws depended on the definition of the European power administering a territory.

Instead of erasing the colonial difference between the subjects and citizens, as B. Manby⁷¹ explains, independence shifted the colonial differences into the national dichotomies. The different states received different legal patterns: British colonies inherited nationality legislations founded on descent and loyalty to the Crown, whereas the French colonies developed on the duality of *citoyen francais* and *sujet francais*, and then had to revise the definition of membership made with reference to domiciliation at the time of decolonisation⁷². Racial and cultural hierarchy in the nationality of acquisition was also codified by Portuguese territories through *indignato* system⁷³. It is these colonial differences which formed the basis of historical legal pluralism in the subregion whereby citizenship is still mediated by ancestry, geography and administrative practice⁷⁴.

⁷⁰ Adejumobi S. “Identity, Citizenship and Conflict: The African Experience.” In: Fawole W. A., Ukeje C. (eds.). *The Crisis of the State and Regionalism in West Africa: Identity, Citizenship and Conflict*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 2005. P. 11.

⁷¹ Manby B. *Nationality, Migration and Statelessness in West Africa*. Dakar: UNHCR & IOM, 2015. P. 45.

⁷² Cooper F. *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. P. 33.

⁷³ Clarence-Smith W. G. *The Third Portuguese Empire, 1825–1975: A Study in Economic Imperialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985. P. 12.

⁷⁴ Абрамова И.О. *Африканская трансграничная миграция и проблемы международной безопасности*. Москва: Институт Африки РАН, 2015. С. 34.

The effects of these legacies could be traced in the differences in nationality laws of independent states of West Africa. Although Ghana and Senegal tried with *jus soli* (citizenship by birth) provisions at the beginning of inclusivity, most others used exclusive racial definitions, including Liberia and Sierra Leone. The 1973 Liberian Constitution restricted citizenship to those of Negroid African origin, and Sierra Leone with 1971 amendment to its Constitution came up with similar racialised requirements, which virtually shut out long-established Lebanese communities⁷⁵. These provisions were not simply about nationality, they built structures of belonging that continue to exist in the lives of people, property and the political process. According to Foucher (2019)⁷⁶, these policies created a stratified effect of citizenship in which there are sons of the soil and strangers, a notion that tends to recur when there is either social or political tension.

There is also a rise of gaps in the national policies that govern the citizenship of West African states. Theoretically, most constitutions of West African states expressly state the universal equality of rights but in practice, administrative discretion and the inadequacy of civil registration systems maintain exclusion. The birth registration is low, especially among the pastoralists and displaced and borderland communities and this is the reason why P. Nugent⁷⁷ talks of people who are invisible citizens, people who are there in reality but are not there in law. Even in law inclusive places, bureaucratic obstacles, high cost of obtaining documents, and local gatekeeping institutions lead to *de facto* statelessness⁷⁸. National policy implementation therefore becomes a lived

⁷⁵ Beydoun L. The Complexities of Citizenship among Lebanese Immigrants in Sierra Leone // *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review*, 2013. Vol. 3(2). P. 75–97.

⁷⁶ Foucher V. The Politics of Belonging in West Africa: Citizenship, Autochthony, and Exclusion // *African Affairs*. 2019. Vol. 118(472). P. 18–39.

⁷⁷ Nugent P. *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Life of the Borderlands since 1914*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. P. 87.

⁷⁸ Manby B. *Nationality, Migration and Statelessness in West Africa*. Dakar: UNHCR & IOM, 2015. P. 28.

experience, through the influence of local politics and the daily bargaining of identity, and not entirely legal right.

Gender and inequalities of classes were also intersected with the colonial legacies. Several post-independent legislations deprived women of the same right (given to their male counterparts) to pass nationality to their children or a foreign husband, which also defined belonging not to descent but to the paternal family structure⁷⁹. In Nigeria, Gambia, and Togo, there has been a gradual reform process, but administrative practice is still gender-biased⁸⁰. This gender, race and administrative discretion show that exclusion is not accidental, but it is a manifestation of the negotiation of power, identity and nationhood in postcolonial states⁸¹.

The implications of these national and administrative loopholes are described by B. Manby as the statelessness trap: a scenario in which a person is deprived of nationhood by the state he or she lives in and has no other state to be associated with. Statelessness, as K. Sadiq point out, does not merely consist in the lack of citizenship but the lack of protection, representation and legal identity⁸². It deprives persons of the right to get education, health care, jobs, and justice. Statelessness in West Africa can be inherited and is usually passed down through the generations by unregistered births or discriminatory nationality laws. It creates citizens-in-waiting, persons who are socially and historically part of a community but in legal terms are non-existent.

In Nigeria for instance, A. Targba⁸³ submits that children born on Nigeria soil to foreign parents, foundlings, children adopted without clarification of their national

⁷⁹ Sadiq K. *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. P. 68.

⁸⁰ *Op. Cit.* P. 71.

⁸¹ Adepoju A. *International Migration within, to and from Africa in a Globalised World*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2010. P. 48.

⁸² Sadiq K. *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. P. 102.

⁸³ Targba A. "Forced Displacement, Statelessness and Nationality Issues in Nigeria." *International // Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*. 2023. Vol. 7(71). P. 1355–1369.

status, foreigners married to Nigerian women, marginalised and highly migratory groups such as Almajiris, nomads, and other itinerant communities, are among the most vulnerable to statelessness in Nigeria. They are unable to satisfy the requirement of the National Identity Management Commission of Nigeria and so cannot get a national identity number to access basic services like healthcare, banking, right to vote, travel papers and registration of births. There is no precise legislation on citizenship that is clear on the procedure of obtaining citizenship for this group.

The statelessness that has been evident in the region demonstrates the instability of the postcolonial nation-building. Although the ambitions of nationalist leaders at independence were to build a sense of community of belonging, in many instances, citizenship became a tool of exclusion, a tool of ethnic or regional domination. These legal boundaries, as Adepoju (2010) posits, overlap with the long tradition of mobility in the region: precolonial mobility was an ordinary part of life, and it was embedded in trade, kinship and seasonal patterns. In lieu of fluid movement where communities used to be circulated through kinship and social relations, the colonial and post-colonial state structures carved solid boundaries that disintegrated ethnicities and restricted access to resources, land and cultural networks.

These are the dynamics that should be understood when discussing migration and displacement in the West African region. These driving forces of mobility, be they economic, environmental, or political, are set to work within an architecture of inclusion and exclusion which is founded on the law and history. The migration flows cannot be studied outside the citizenship regimes, which delimitate who is allowed to move, who is allowed to be left behind, and who is made invisible. This section then moves on to the historical development of migration in the region following how the precolonial patterns of mobility, the colonial upheavals, and the present displacements show to endure to repeat the legal and social lines of belonging.

The history of West Africa is characterized by migration. These migratory processes were both voluntary and involuntary, long-distance and short-distance and

they all contributed towards shaping the linguistic, cultural, political and economic identity of the area. The knowledge of such patterns demonstrates how West African societies adapted and how this shaped its history. African migration can be discussed under five important timelines. These include Precolonial, Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Colonial, Post-colonial and Contemporary movements.

Early migrations in the region were mainly attributed to environmental changes, particularly the desiccation of the Sahara Desert after the Africa Humid Period ended in about 3000 BCE⁸⁴. As the formerly green Sahara turned drier and less hospitable, people moved further south to more fertile regions like the Niger River valley where people and crops could prosper⁸⁵. These emigrations formed the basis through which early agrarian societies developed in Africa, and this has had some impacts on the cultural and demographic makeup of the region in the many millenniums henceforth.

For instance, the Bantu speaking people were located along the Nigerian Cameroon border, in the centre of the Benue Valley and in western Cameroon region⁸⁶. They migrated south, spreading their culture and language along Central, East and Southern Africa⁸⁷. Genetics and linguistics prove that they once migrated on the territory of rainforests and then divided into the eastern and southern branches, mixing with the local people on their way⁸⁸. This emigration largely defined the population,

⁸⁴ Wright D. K. "Humans as Agents in the Termination of the African Humid Period // *Frontiers in Earth Science*. 5, 2017. P. 4.

⁸⁵ McIntosh S. K. *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. P. 22.

⁸⁶ Fomine F.L.M. "Population Movements and Gene Flow in the 18th and 19th Century-Cameroon: Synopsis of Cameroon's Demographic History." *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2025. Vol. 5(2), P. 5–15.

⁸⁷ "The Migration History of Bantu-Speaking People: Genomics Reveals the Benefits of Admixture and Sheds New Light on Slave Trade." Institut Pasteur, 13 Jan. 2023, URL: www.pasteur.fr/en/research-journal/press-documents/migration-history-bantu-speaking-people-genomics-reveals-benefits-admixture-and-sheds-new-light?language=fr.

⁸⁸ Patin E., Lopez M., Grollemund R., Verdu P., Harmant C., Quach H., Quintana-Murci L. "Dispersals and Genetic Adaptation of Bantu-Speaking Populations in Africa and North America." *Science*. 2017. Vol. 356(6337). P. 543–546.

cultural and language of sub-Saharan Africa as one of the greatest movements of people ever in Africa.

Although the chronological lower boundary of the dissertation is 1979, marking the adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the institutionalisation of migration governance in West Africa cannot be understood without reference to historically embedded systems of mobility. Contemporary migration regimes in the ECOWAS space represent the formal regulation of long-standing socio-economic interconnections that predate colonial rule and persisted through successive political transformations. From a realist perspective, regional institutions emerge within pre-existing structures of material interdependence and power distribution rather than as purely normative constructs⁸⁹. Historical mobility systems therefore constitute the structural foundation upon which postcolonial states negotiated sovereignty, border control, and regional cooperation.

Precolonial West Africa functioned as an interconnected economic and cultural zone characterised by fluid mobility across ecological regions. Trans-Sahelian trade routes linked the savannah belt with North Africa, facilitating not only commercial exchange but also intellectual and religious circulation⁹⁰. Urban centres such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné developed as nodes within expansive trade networks connecting gold-producing regions, agricultural hinterlands, and Mediterranean markets. These networks fostered patterns of circular migration, merchant diasporas, and cross-community integration that were not constrained by fixed territorial boundaries in the modern sense. Mobility operated as an adaptive mechanism responding to climatic variability, trade opportunities, and political realignments. In

⁸⁹ Waltz, K. N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979. P. 129.

⁹⁰ Manning, P. *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. // Lovejoy, P. E. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. P. 44.

many cases, incorporation into political communities was achieved through systems of social integration that included dependency and servile labour structures⁹¹.

Political transformations reinforced these mobility dynamics. The rise and decline of empires such as Mali and Songhai stimulated population movements through conquest, administrative restructuring, and the relocation of political centres⁹². The consolidation and fragmentation of imperial authority generated shifts in settlement patterns and facilitated the expansion of commercial and military networks across the savannah belt⁹³. Pastoral migrations across the Sahel reflected ecological adaptation to climatic variability as well as political incorporation into expanding state structures⁹⁴. Crucially, mobility during this period was embedded within socio-political systems of incorporation and hierarchy rather than conceptualised as “international migration” in the modern juridical sense⁹⁵.

Colonial intervention fundamentally restructured this mobility regime. The partition of Africa formalised territorial boundaries that divided historically integrated economic spaces. Colonial state formation introduced sovereignty, border control, and administrative categorisation as organising principles of political authority. From a realist standpoint, this transformation marked the consolidation of territorially bounded political units whose primary objective was the maintenance of authority and control.

Simultaneously, colonial economic restructuring intensified labour mobility. The integration of West Africa into the global capitalist economy required the mobilisation of labour for export-oriented production. Groundnut cultivation in Senegambia expanded under colonial administration, attracting migrants from inland

⁹¹ Miers, S., Kopytoff, I. (eds.). *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977. P. 55.

⁹² Herbst, J. *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. P. 11.

⁹³ Boahen, A. A. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. P. 89.

⁹⁴ Op. Cit. P. 93

⁹⁵ Op. Cit. P. 92

Sahelian regions⁹⁶. Similarly, the cocoa boom in the Gold Coast generated sustained inflows of labour migrants from northern Ghana, present-day Burkina Faso, Mali, and northern Côte d'Ivoire. The development of transport infrastructure, including railways, facilitated these flows and reinforced regional economic asymmetries⁹⁷.

By the mid-twentieth century, Côte d'Ivoire had emerged as a principal destination for intra-West African labour migration, a position it retained after independence⁹⁸. These labour corridors were not temporary phenomena; rather, they established enduring cross-border networks and economic complementarities that survived the transition to sovereign statehood.

From a realist perspective, colonial and early postcolonial migration patterns generated structural interdependence without political integration. After independence, West African states inherited borders that divided integrated labour markets while simultaneously relying on migrant labour for economic growth. As realism posits, states prioritise survival, regime stability, and territorial integrity. Consequently, migration became both an economic necessity and a potential security concern.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that intra-African migration remains the dominant form of mobility in West Africa, accounting for approximately 72 percent of total migration stock⁹⁹. Reciprocal migration patterns between neighbouring states such as Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo, and Senegal and Mauritania reflect structural economic complementarities rooted in colonial-era labour systems. These patterns illustrate the persistence of historical mobility systems under conditions of sovereign statehood.

⁹⁶ Austin, G. *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005. P. 31.

⁹⁷ Hobsbawm, E. *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987. P. 13.

⁹⁸ Flahaux, M.-L., De Haas, H. *African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers*. Cham: Springer, 2016. P. 89.

⁹⁹ *International Migration Report 2017: Highlights*. New York: United Nations, 2018. P. 23.

The establishment of ECOWAS in 1975 and the adoption of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in 1979 can therefore be interpreted as strategic institutional responses to structural interdependence. Rather than representing purely liberal normative cooperation, the protocol institutionalised mobility in order to manage economic realities and minimise interstate friction. Realist theory suggests that cooperation emerges when states perceive institutional arrangements as enhancing national interests¹⁰⁰. In this context, free movement formalised pre-existing labour systems while preserving state authority over implementation.

At the same time, the implementation gap between formal commitments and state practice reflects enduring realist constraints. Domestic political pressures, unemployment concerns, and securitisation narratives often limit full compliance with free movement principles. The tension between economic interdependence and sovereignty remains central to the evolution of ECOWAS migration governance.

Thus, migration should be conceptualised not merely as demographic movement but as a structural variable embedded in the political economy of West African regionalism. The historical evolution of labour corridors, colonial restructuring, and post-independence state formation collectively shaped the conditions under which ECOWAS institutionalised free movement. Realism provides the theoretical framework for understanding both the emergence of cooperation and its persistent limitations within the regional integration process.

Different types of cash cropping emerged in Nigeria. These systems were connected with relative labour flexibility within and outside of the interior savanna¹⁰¹. While this region has a long pre-colonial history of migration associated with both free circular mobility and slave raids, the ‘cash-crop revolution’ established new mobility

¹⁰⁰ Waltz, K. N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979. P. 56.

¹⁰¹ Lovejoy P.E., Hogendorn J. *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. // Emiliano T., Williamson T. “What Happened to the Workshop of West Africa? Resilience and Decline of Handicraft Textiles in Colonial Northern Nigeria, 1911–52.” *The Economic History Review*, 2024. P. 63.

patterns, and expanded existing ones, increasing the rate of mobility more than ever. Although many of the migrants went to Ghana, most migrants were used as rural labour in colonial Nigeria where there was an export increase of groundnuts in the north central region, cocoa beans from the south-west and palm oil from the south-east. A total of 190,000 migrants were reported to have been in migration from the north-west region of Nigeria to the south in the dry season of 1952/1953¹⁰². It is therefore conclusive to point that migratory movements were in a north-south pattern.

In the early 1960's and 1970's when most African states gained independence, not much changed in the lives of rural communities in terms of socio-economic conditions. Nation states were just beginning to understand the burden of nationhood and were enacting legal instruments to safeguard their sovereignty. Labour migrations had become a mainstay, but other types of migration began to suffice. The forced displacement of and return migration of persons due to political instability interwoven into economic decline in nation states was one such migration. The civil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, political violence of Togo and Côte d'Ivoire, and most recently Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in the Sahel; Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria¹⁰³. These crises have caused large-scale displacements, and left citizens of member states fleeing for safety, refuge and basic needs- triggering a humanitarian crisis within the sub-region.

Droughts and floods, all climate-related activities have also contributed immensely to the forced displacement of people within the subregion. This is evidenced in the works of Zickgraf *et al.* (2016) and Schraven *et al.* (2020)¹⁰⁴. Floods arising from heavy rainfall, and also from the sea-level rise and coastal erosion have submerged

¹⁰² Prothero R.M. Migration Labour from Sokoto Province, Northern Nigeria. Kaduna: Government Printer, 1959. P. 72.

¹⁰³ Sahel Crisis: Responding to the Urgent Needs of Refugees, Internally Displaced, Returnees and Others of Concern. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Geneva: UNHCR, 2020. P. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Schraven B., Adaawen S., Rademacher-Schulz C., Segadlo N. Climate Change Impacts on Human (Im-)Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recent Trends and Options for Policy Responses. Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), 2020. P. 111.

farmlands, homes and communities, leading to an increase in both internal displacement and crossing into international borders of neighbouring countries. These movements are, however, mostly temporary migration pending when the communities become habitable again.

Climate related migration has also been cited in studies as a major reason for the increase in transhumance movement of Fulani herdsmen across the region, although they have been historically known to be nomadic in nature¹⁰⁵. These climate crises have increased incidences of conflict between farmers and herders who compete for scarce resources such as water and grazing land. The shrinking of the Lake Chad basin has been a source of concern in Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon, as these have worsened tensions as competition for resources continue to trigger a transboundary crisis¹⁰⁶. About 7% of Nigerian and 3% Nigerien respondents attributed their forced migration to reasons that directly involve climate change activities in a recent IOM survey¹⁰⁷.

Traditionally, there were always significant differences in gender composition of migration in West Africa. Seasonal labour migration was dominated by men, who were working actively to provide for their families back home, as males are considered natural ‘bread winners’¹⁰⁸ in the African cultural context. Women played significant part in helping the men source funding for these migratory trips. Melly (2011) also observed that the women also played other emotional roles as they waited for the return of their fathers, husbands, sons, and loved ones. Until the 1980s, females migrated with

¹⁰⁵ Teye J. K. “Environmental Change and Migration in Africa.” In: Awumbila M., Badasu D., Teye J. K. (eds.). *Migration in a Globalizing World: Perspectives from Ghana*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2017, P. 89–106.

¹⁰⁶ Williams W. *Shifting Borders: Africa’s Displacement Crisis and Its Security Implications*. Research Paper No. 8. Washington, D.C.: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019. P. 102.

¹⁰⁷ *Environmental Migration: Disaster Displacement and Planned Relocation in West Africa*. International Organization for Migration. Geneva: IOM, 2021. P. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Melly C. M. “Titanic Tales of Missing Men: Reconfigurations of National Identity and Gendered Presence in Dakar, Senegal.” *American Ethnologist*, 2011, Vol. 38(2), P. 361–376.

their spouses, fathers or children¹⁰⁹. The role of women began to change progressively as women sought for economic opportunities, trade or were fleeing armed conflict.

There are three key areas that impacted on the feminisation of migration. The increased need of care workers intra-regionally and beyond, the involvement of women in regional and international trade (usually soft commodities and food/cosmetic products) and the migration of low skilled female workers to Middle East and Gulf countries. These movements are sometimes long term or temporary, but literature documents that these movements have increased in recent times¹¹⁰.

Beyond skill levels and gender composition, one observed pattern is that people migrated to places where they had strong ethnic network¹¹¹. Home to about 250 distinct ethnic identities that are largely interconnected, Olukoshi¹¹² noted that no country within the subregion is completely homogenous. For instance, the Yoruba is spoken across Nigeria, Benin, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Wollofs are found in Senegal and Gambia. The multiplicity of ethnic groups found in this region can be traced to the scramble for, and partition of Africa during the 1884/85 Berlin conference¹¹³. Languages were spoken across borders and families had relations that resided in neighbouring nation states. These ethnic ties play an instrumental role in the choice country migrants move to. Teye¹¹⁴ documents that Ewes in Togo usually migrate to Ghana's Volta region where their relatives are found, likewise the Kpelle people of

¹⁰⁹ Setrana M. B., Kleist N. "Gendered Dynamics in West African Migration." In: Kleist N., Bjarnesen J. (eds.). *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022, P. 57–76.

¹¹⁰ Op.Cit

¹¹¹ Kostelyanets S. V. (ed.). *Africa in Global Migration Flows*. Moscow: Institute for African Studies RAS, 2022. P. 102.

¹¹² Olukoshi A. *West Africa's Political Economy in the Next Millennium: Retrospect and Prospect*. Dakar & Oxford: CODESRIA & Oxfam, 2001. P. 49.

¹¹³ Eyffinger A. "The Berlin Conference (1884–1885): The Dice-Play for West Africa." In: T.M.C. Asser (1838–1913). Leiden: Brill Nijhoff. 2019. P. 1039–1065.

¹¹⁴ Teye J.K., Awumbila M., Benneh Y. "Intra-Regional Migration in the ECOWAS Region: Trends and Emerging Challenges." In: Akoutou A. B., Sohn R., Vogl M., Yeboah D. (eds.). *Migration and Civil Society as Development Drivers – A Regional Perspective*. Bonn: Zei Centre for European Integration Studies, 2015, P. 97–124.

Liberia and Guinea, as well as members of Kissi ethnic group of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The precolonial politics, history and economy of West Africa have had significant impacts on modern migration in the region. Trans-Saharan slave trade lines that were once used to transport millions of slaves across trans-Atlantic were later modified to accommodate commercial agriculture sector that launched the European industrial revolution. Migration to West Africa has been transformed whereby there were mainly low-skilled and seasonal migration (north-south travelling of labourers) to high-skilled permanent migration of professionals to Europe and North America. This transition represents wider economic changes and universal fusion with foreign labour markets. In addition, migration in precolonial society was mainly dominated by men but in modern times, women have emerged as active participants in the migration process, in search of improved economic lives and realizing foreign remittances, changing gender balances on mobility in the area.

Also, migration in West Africa has manifested itself through complex mobility patterns, such as trade, pastoralism, and pilgrimage, which have the centuries-long history of existences which cross-cut ethnic and colonial borders. This upheaval posed by colonialism shifted these conventional ones but did not destroy them as most of the communities still followed a yearly or permanent migration by economic and social necessity. Cross-border migration to Europe has been enhanced by the fact that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on free movement has been formed, something that shows that patterns of migration in the region are long-established. The modern migration flows can therefore be described as a combination of both historical influences and economic necessities as well as changing social roles hence the dynamic orientation of West African migration.

In conclusion, migration in West Africa is not a recent or purely economic phenomenon, but a deeply historical and structurally embedded process shaped by precolonial mobility systems, colonial boundary-making, postcolonial citizenship

regimes, and contemporary economic and security pressures. The analysis demonstrates that patterns of migration and displacement cannot be separated from evolving definitions of belonging, citizenship, and state authority. Colonial legal legacies institutionalised exclusionary nationality systems, while post-independence states reproduced and reconfigured these frameworks, generating stratified citizenship, administrative invisibility, and, in some cases, statelessness. At the same time, long-standing labour corridors, ethnic networks, trade routes, pastoral movements, and gendered mobility patterns reveal the resilience of regional interdependence. Contemporary displacement driven by conflict, climate change, and economic instability reinforces rather than replaces historical mobility systems. Thus, migration in West Africa should be understood as a structural feature of the region's political economy—simultaneously an adaptive strategy, a survival mechanism, and a source of contestation within sovereignty-bound states.

Ultimately, migration governance in the region reflects a tension between inherited territorial sovereignty and historically fluid social realities. The persistence of mobility despite legal and administrative barriers underscores that regional integration efforts, including those under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), are built upon centuries-old socio-economic interconnections. Migration is therefore not an anomaly to be controlled, but a foundational pillar of West African regional life.

1.2. Regionalism in the 21st century and its development in the West of Africa

The 21st century styled regionalism is an active change in the world of international relations, and it is marked by increased cooperation and integration of states in particular geographical regions. As compared to the previous types of regionalism which were mainly trade liberalization and tariffs-cutting, the modern-day

form of regionalism entails elaborates regulatory frameworks that mirror the complexity of the global production networks¹¹⁵. It goes beyond the economic integration to incorporate the political, security, technological and social aspects hence making it a holistic mode of regional governance¹¹⁶.

The characteristic aspect of the 21st century regionalism is that it is oriented towards the global value chains where the production of goods and services is dispersed across the nations and regions. Such a transformation implicates cooperative mechanisms that promote the free movement of intermediate goods, investment, services, and technology that is supported by harmonization and regulatory standards¹¹⁷. The evolution of international power weights characterised by multipolarity, technological rivalry, and growing protectionism also lead to the urge of states to pursue regional alliances to acquire strategic security and economic sustainability¹¹⁸.

The decline of multilateralism and the uncertainties in global governance have also promoted the expansion of regional efforts as viable measures of coping with the economic and security predicaments¹¹⁹. Regionalism has become increasingly institutionalized, which is all-encompassing, covering trade and investment regulations as well as security assistance and sustainable development objectives¹²⁰.

¹¹⁵ Baldwin R. “21st Century Regionalism: Filling the Gap between 21st Century Trade and 20th Century Trade Rules.” Geneva: World Trade Organization, 2011. P. 56.

¹¹⁶ Staff Working Paper ERSD-2011-08: Regionalism and Trade Governance in the 21st Century. World Trade Organization. Geneva: WTO, 2011. P. 102.

¹¹⁷ Baldwin R. “21st Century Regionalism: Filling the Gap between 21st Century Trade and 20th Century Trade Rules.” Geneva: World Trade Organization, 2011. P. 36.

¹¹⁸ Ravenhill J. The Rise of Regionalism in World Politics: Trends and Implications // Modern Diplomacy. 2021. URL: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/05/07/the-rise-of-regionalism-in-world-politics-trends-and-implications//>

¹¹⁹ Hurrell A. Global Order and the New Regionalism. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2016. P. 21.

¹²⁰ Acharya A. New Regionalism: Reshaping the Future of Globalization. Singapore: World Scientific, 2020. P. 32.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in West Africa presents one of the most successful attempts of the 21st century regionalism in the West Africa region. The ECOWAS was founded in 1975 and over the years it has widened its integration agenda to encompass not only economic integration and the establishment of a common market but also conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and political stability¹²¹. The multidimensional character of contemporary regionalism is evidenced by the activities of the regional bloc in the monetary integration, free movement of individuals, and harmonization of regulations.

C. Nwangwu stated that «regionalism in Africa was partly a consequence of globalisation, citing that African leaders were motivated by the belief that failure to regionalise would lead to further marginalisation of the continent in the international political economy»¹²². Thus, there was a need to provide a united platform or ‘additional layer of governance’ which could compete more favourably in the international political economy, capable of protecting member states from economic storms¹²³.

Open trade policies and regional integration have become essential for economic growth and global relevance, moving away from rigid state sovereignty toward interdependence. This shift «enables better resource utilization, security cooperation, and development opportunities»¹²⁴.

¹²¹ Fawole W. A. *Current Developments in West Africa's Regional Integration: Challenges for the Future Design of Foreign and Development Policy*. Bonn: Institute for Development and Peace (IDOS), 2024. P. 65.

¹²² Nwangwu C., Enyiazu C., Nwagwu E. J., Ezeibe C. C. “Interrogating the Relevance of ECOWAS in the Global Political Economy.” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 2019. Vol. 13(2). P. 23.

¹²³ Ekekwe E. “State and Economic Development in Nigeria.” In: Ake C. (ed.). *Political Economy of Nigeria*. London & Lagos: Longman, 1985. P. 201.

¹²⁴ Nwangwu C., Okoye K. “Management of External Economic Relations and the Crisis of Development in Nigeria.” *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2014. Vol. 2(9). P. 32.

In West Africa, ECOWAS exemplifies this trend, «aiming to boost economic development, GDP, and citizen welfare through border elimination and common external borders modeled after Europe's Schengen system»¹²⁵. Benefits include «cultural exchange, increased investment, talent mobility, urbanization, and access to international support (like EU funding)»¹²⁶.

However, «intra-regional trade in Africa remains lowest globally at just 17% (2015-2022), though research shows increased migration would boost exports»¹²⁷. Migration within ECOWAS has improved dignity and rights post-independence, facilitating knowledge exchange through diaspora networks (like CODESRIA), skill development, and remittances. Communication barriers are reduced by shared languages (English, French, and indigenous languages like Yoruba and Hausa) and cultural similarities.

Overall, deeper integration through ECOWAS «would unlock economic potential, improve resource management, attract investment, and enhance regional influence through mutual development»¹²⁸.

Free mobility between member states has also shown the potential to improve interactions and lead to innovative ventures and development, resulting in the attraction of foreign investment further enriching the region. Free mobility allows knowledge and skill transfer across borders, acting as both a purpose and a means of regional

¹²⁵ Okunade S.K., Ogunnubi O.A. Schengen' Agreement in Africa? African Agency and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement // *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 2021. Vol. 36(1). P. 119–137.

¹²⁶ Olubiyi E., Sunday P.O., Ogunnusi T. Does Intra-African Migration Matter for Intra-African Trade? // *EuroEconomica*, 2023. Vol. 42(1). P. 164–182.

¹²⁷ Karkare P., Odijie M., Ukaoha K., Van Seters J. Nigeria's Trade and Industrial Policy Imperatives. Discussion Paper No. 318. Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2022. P. 34.

¹²⁸ Aniche E.T., Alumona I.M., Iwuoha V.C., Isike C., Nnamani R.G. Your Land or Your Life?! ECOWAS Free Movement Regime, Migration, and Resource Conflicts in West Africa // *Society*. 2023. Vol. 6. P. 1–3.

integration to stimulate collaborative projects that are less likely to emerge in a fragmented market¹²⁹.

Nigerian companies such as Dangote group and Globacom, as well as financial institutions such as Ecobank, Access and United Bank for Africa have established presence in most West African countries¹³⁰. PEG Africa, a leading for-profit organisation financing clean renewable energy in Africa has capitalised on the free movement protocol in the region to build innovative solutions via a Pay-As-You-Go service platform to provide solar mini-grids in Ghana, Senegal, Mali and Ivory Coast¹³¹. These cross-border investments rely heavily on the ease of movement and the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme.

Despite these gains, the issues of mobility show a large gap between the current situation and the established goal. The achievement of the goal must be preceded by the consideration of prevailing issues such as security and infringement of human rights. Threats to free mobility include xenophobia, human trafficking, a lack of opportunities for migrants, insecurity in the destination countries, and spread of diseases. Some states also lack the capacity to accommodate non-indigenes due to increased crime rates or a lack of economic and infrastructural coverage¹³².

The West African Economic and Monetary Union, established by the Treaty of Dakar in 1994, evolved from the earlier West African Monetary Union to create a deeper economic integration framework among eight primarily francophone West

¹²⁹ Arhin P., Erdiaw-Kwasie M. O., Abunyewah M. Displacements and livelihood resilience in Ghana's mining sector: The moderating role of coping behaviour // *Resources Policy*. 2022. Vol. 78. P. 102-120.

¹³⁰ Julius O. "Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement and National Security: A Case Study of Nigeria." *International Journal of Development and Economic Sustainability*, 11(3), 2023. P. 44.

¹³¹ Consolidates its market leading position by acquiring solar energy frontrunner PEG Africa. London: Bboxx Ltd.; 2022 Sep 6 URL: <https://www.bboxx.com/news/bboxx-consolidates-its-market-leading-position-by-acquiring-solar-energy-frontrunner-peg-africa/> (accessed: 07.05.2025).

¹³² Agyei J., Clotey E. Operationalizing ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of People among the Member States: Issues of Convergence, Divergence and Prospects for Sub-Regional Integration. Oxford: International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, 2007. P. 20.

African states, all of which share the CFA franc currency managed by the Central Bank of West African States¹³³. The Union was designed to move beyond mere monetary coordination toward harmonizing economic policies, establishing a common market, and facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people across the region. Its trade integration framework centers on a customs union with a Common External Tariff, the elimination of internal tariffs, and the progressive removal of non-tariff barriers, operating alongside broader initiatives like the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme and the African Continental Free Trade Area¹³⁴.

The most significant achievement of WAEMU remains its monetary integration through the shared CFA franc, which has delivered relatively low and stable inflation, enhanced macroeconomic predictability, and reduced transaction costs while benefiting from a historical convertibility guarantee from the French Treasury that reinforced the regime's credibility. This monetary framework has been accompanied by fiscal coordination mechanisms, including multilateral surveillance and convergence criteria requiring budget deficits below three percent of GDP and sustainable public debt levels, though implementation has been uneven across member states. Despite establishing a customs union in 2004 with harmonized «trade policies and eliminated internal tariffs, real-world challenges persist in the form of sanitary and technical standards, inefficient customs clearance, inadequate infrastructure, and regional insecurity, all of which have kept intra-WAEMU trade flows relatively low compared to other African regional economic communities»¹³⁵.

The introduction of the African Continental Free Trade Area presents significant opportunities for WAEMU members to further integrate their regional economy, with International Monetary Fund estimates suggesting that «properly implemented

¹³³ *Traité de l'Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine*. Dakar: UEMOA, 1994.

¹³⁴ *Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. Addis Ababa: African Union, 2018. P. 21.

¹³⁵ Sylla, N. S. *The CFA Franc: French Monetary Imperialism in Africa*. London: Pluto Press, 2020. P. 54.

AfCFTA protocols combined with infrastructure improvements and trade facilitation reforms could increase intra-member trade volumes by over thirty times, generating substantial income and welfare benefits»¹³⁶. Socioeconomic policies form an integral part of the WAEMU integration agenda, particularly in human capital development through education, where the region faces persistent challenges including low enrolment rates, high dropout rates, gender disparities, and quality gaps that limit economic growth opportunities. «Regional education policies focus on curriculum harmonization, teacher professionalization, and gender equity efforts, with the IMF projecting that enhancing education levels and reducing gender disparities could boost per capita income by up to thirteen percent within a decade»¹³⁷. This human capital development complements fiscal and economic integration objectives by enhancing labor productivity, enabling economic diversification beyond primary commodities, and supporting student mobility and qualification recognition that helps align labor markets while mitigating brain drain risks.

The Mano River Basin Union, established in 1973 by Liberia and Sierra Leone, which was later joined by Guinea in 1980 and Côte d'Ivoire in 2008, is a regional intergovernmental organization aimed at accelerating economic, social and cultural development by expanding cooperation in many sectors. Based on strong historical and cultural ties between its member States, «the Mano River Basin Union strives to establish a customs union, liberalize trade, develop productive capacities, and strengthen political cooperation with a particular focus on regional security and sustainable development»¹³⁸. To achieve these goals, «MRU strives to harmonize trade and customs regulations to facilitate intraregional trade, prioritizes infrastructure

¹³⁶ Hakobyan S., Hesse-Triballi F., Meleshchuk S., Weisfeld H. Unleashing the Benefits of Intra-African Trade Integration for the WAEMU. IMF Selected Issues Paper SIP/2025/071. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, 2025. P. 34.

¹³⁷ Kaboré S., Ouédraogo A., Dao I. Financial inclusion and economic growth in WAEMU: A multiscale analysis. *Journal of Economics and Finance*, 2019. Vol. 6(1). P. 45–59.

¹³⁸ Fragility and Resilience in the Mano River Union Subregion: Consolidating Peace Dividends amid Persistent Challenges. United Nations. New York: United Nations, 2022. P. 16.

development through internationally funded road construction projects that improve connectivity and market access, promotes cooperation in agriculture and energy development, and participates in institutional capacity-building initiatives»¹³⁹.

A notable environmental initiative involves the conservation of transboundary ecosystems and the management of water resources in partnership with the IUCN, linking environmental conservation with community livelihoods and «peace-building goals in the conflict-affected subregion»¹⁴⁰. However, the union has faced serious challenges that have hindered the achievement of its goals, including the devastating effects of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s and early 2000s, which «disrupted regional cooperation and infrastructure, persistent governance gaps and political instability in post-conflict years, undermining policy coordination, and persistent cross-border Security threats, including illegal migration, arms smuggling, and human trafficking, which complicate border management»¹⁴¹. These obstacles, combined with weak health systems and the economic marginalization of vulnerable populations, have created a difficult environment in which coordination of peace-building efforts, governance reforms and socio-economic integration policies remains difficult, despite the multidimensional approach of the Mano River Basin Union.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), and the Mano River Union (MRU) are the major landmarks of 21st century regionalism. As discussed to this point, these unions have specific and overlapping functions in promoting economic integration, political cooperation and development in West Africa.

¹³⁹ Mano River Union Ecosystem Conservation and International Water Resources Management Project: Mid-Term Evaluation. International Union for Conservation of Nature. Gland: IUCN, 2024. P. 17.

¹⁴⁰ Kanyako V. The Economic Community of West African States and the Mano River Union: Conflict, Cooperation and Accommodation. In: The Palgrave Handbook of Democracy, Governance and Justice in Africa. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. P. 121–144.

¹⁴¹ Mano River Union Road Development and Transport Facilitation Project. African Development Bank. Abidjan: AfDB, 2025. URL: <https://liberiaprojects.org/activities/1206>

The ECOWAS is the oldest and the most extensive region group in West Africa comprising of fifteen member states from Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone countries¹⁴². It seeks to promote economic collaboration, political stability, and security, and prioritize the establishment of a single regional market by liberalizing trade, allowing free movement of people, and socio-political alignment of policies. Due to the history of conflicts and political instabilities in the sub-region, the ECOWAS has developed an effective peace and security agenda since the 1990s. The interventionist structures of the union such as the peacekeeping activities have become part of the stability building architecture in the region¹⁴³.

The WAEMU is a complement of the ECOWAS, as it is dedicated to economic and monetary integration of eight Francophone countries that use a common currency CFA franc¹⁴⁴. The fundamental goals of WAEMU are coordinating the economic policies, adopting a common monetary policy, which is under the control of the Central Bank of West African States, and ensuring sustainable development by means of coordinated investment and trade facilitation. The CFA franc peg on the euro offers stability to the currency but also connects the monetary policy of the region with the outside world and this is where constant debates continue on economic sovereignty and the degree of integration¹⁴⁵. The economic integration model of the WAEMU brings significant synergies within ECOWAS, especially to the Francophone countries, but also brings about complexities by having different legal and institutional frameworks.

A more sub-regional project, the Mano River Union, was established in 1973 by Liberia and Sierra Leone, and joined by Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire and is designed to

¹⁴² Türke A.I. The ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) in focus of West African integration efforts. *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies*. 2022. Vol. 2(2). P. 65–85.

¹⁴³ Op. cit

¹⁴⁴ Monetary Union in West Africa (ECOWAS): Is It Desirable and Feasible? International Monetary Fund. Washington, D.C.: IMF, 2001. URL: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/nft/op/204/> (accessed: 27.02.2026).

¹⁴⁵ Op. cit.

enhance cooperation among the states having similar cultural and historical backgrounds¹⁴⁶. The MRU aims to facilitate economic growth, peacebuilding, and security in the region especially in a sub-region that was characterized by violent conflicts in the 1990s. The MRU has focused on real-life cooperation in the areas of harmonization of customs, development of infrastructures, and environmental management such as the transboundary water resource projects¹⁴⁷. Nonetheless, its operational performance is impaired by political weakness and governance issues, which are not the same as the institutional capacity that exists in ECOWAS and WAEMU on a larger scale.

Together, these unions influence the West African regionalism by forming the governance structures, which are layered to address various aspects of integration such as political-military-security (ECOWAS), the economic-monetary (WAEMU), and localized socio-economic-peacebuilding cooperation (MRU). Their co-existence is representative of the diversity of language, colonialism, and socio-political diversity of the region, which makes regionalism in West Africa an enterprise of multi-facets and multi-scales¹⁴⁸.

The unification process in these unions is affected by major challenges such as political instabilities, economic imbalance, poor infrastructure and trade barriers. The involvement of these unions in the development of the African continental projects like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), is a move towards more of a continental integration which is associated with success and experience in the region.

¹⁴⁶ Fragility and Resilience in the Mano River Union Subregion: Consolidating Peace Dividends amid Persistent Challenges. United Nations. New York: United Nations, 2022. P. 11.

¹⁴⁷ Mano River Union Ecosystem Conservation and International Water Resources Management Project: Mid-Term Evaluation. International Union for Conservation of Nature. Gland: IUCN. 2024. URL: https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/mte-report-p01885_mano-river-union.pdf (accessed: 27.02.2026).

¹⁴⁸ Türke A.I. The ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) in focus of West African integration efforts. *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies*. 2022. Vol. 2(2). P. 65–85.

The ECOWAS, WAEMU, and MRU continue play their part, but in a uniquely yet synergistically related manner, in introducing regionalism as a key attribute of West African political economy and governance.

An analysis of the architecture of regionalism in West Africa suggests that modern integration in the region is not so much a linear movement towards economic union as a complex multilevel system of adaptation to global instability. The author's position is that, despite the developed institutional frameworks (ECOWAS, WAEMU, MRU), the effectiveness of these associations is constrained by the fundamental contradiction between supranational ambitions and the real policies of sovereign states.

For example, although the ECOWAS protocol on free movement is often compared to Schengen, statistics on intraregional trade (only 17% in 2015-2022) and the persistence of xenophobia indicate a critical gap between legislative norms and socio-political practice. It seems that regionalism in West Africa today is driven not so much by economic gain as by the imperative of security: As the experience of the MRU and the ECOWAS peacekeeping missions shows, political stability becomes a prerequisite for any economic success.

Moreover, the coexistence of the WAEMU monetary union with the broader ECOWAS creates unique synergies, but at the same time complicates policy harmonization due to differences in economic sovereignty (in particular, the linking of the franc's CFA to the euro). Thus, it can be concluded that regionalism in West Africa should be viewed not as a completed project, but as a dynamic risk management process, where security and social cohesion are often prioritized over pure economic liberalization. The success of further integration, including cooperation with AfCFTA, will depend not on the number of signed agreements, but on the ability of States to overcome infrastructural barriers and ensure real protection of migrants' rights, turning free movement from a source of tension into a driver of human capital development.

1.3. The Objectives of the ECOWAS and the Free Movement Protocol

The Economic Community of West African States was established on May 28, 1975, through the Treaty of Lagos, bringing together «fifteen member states to foster economic integration across the region»¹⁴⁹. This initiative emerged from the shared desire to mitigate the negative effects of globalisation, present a united front against protectionist policies of global economic powers, and address the enduring problems created by decades of colonialism. The bloc reflects its «colonial history through its linguistic composition, comprising five Anglophone countries, eight Francophone countries, and two Lusophone countries, though Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have recently expressed interest in leaving the community despite protocol requiring one-year notice»¹⁵⁰.

The community has evolved significantly from its original mandate, developing institutional mechanisms to defend democratic principles and address regional crises¹⁵¹. The 1999 Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security marked a pivotal shift, followed by the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance that empowered the Commission to intervene in cases of unconstitutional ascension to power and widespread human rights violations. The 2008 ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework «further strengthened this architecture by establishing the ECOWAS Standby Forces to replace ECOMOG and enhance human security»¹⁵².

Economic integration efforts have been advanced through initiatives like the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme, which established common external tariffs,

¹⁴⁹ Yabi, G.O. The role of ECOWAS in managing political crisis and conflict. FES Peace and Security Series, Abuja, 2010. Vol. 57. P.17-32.

¹⁵⁰ Grütjen K. Current developments in West Africa's regional integration – Challenges for the future design of foreign and development policy // IDOS Policy Brief 6/2024. 2024. P. 65.

¹⁵¹ Gänzle, S., Trondal, J., Kuhn, N.S.B. "Not So Different After All": Governance and Behavioral Dynamics in the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) // Journal of African Union Studies. 2018. P. 34-44.

¹⁵² Afolabi B. The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF): Evolution, Challenges and Prospects. OSIWA, 2016. URL: <http://www.osiwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-ECOWAS-conflict-prevention-framework.pdf> (accessed: 28.03.2025).

while the most comprehensive contemporary framework is the ECOWAS Vision 2050 launched in 2018. Titled ECOWAS of the Peoples: «Peace and Prosperity for All, this strategic document rests on five pillars encompassing peace and security, governance and rule of law, economic integration, sustainable development, and social inclusion»¹⁵³. Through these evolving mechanisms, ECOWAS has remained resolute in persuading member states to gradually pool national sovereignties within the context of collective political will, working «toward transformation from an association of states to a community centered on its people by 2050»¹⁵⁴.

The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, adopted in 1979 as a cornerstone of regional integration, was designed to establish a borderless region through a three-phase implementation approach over fifteen years: visa-free entry for up to ninety days, the right of residence, and the right of establishment for community members to do business in any member state. This ambitious framework was complemented by subsequent institutions like the Migration Dialogue in West Africa established in 2001 and supplementary protocols addressing residency permits, non-discrimination, humane treatment of expelled persons, and protection against asset seizure, demonstrating «the regional bloc's commitment to operationalizing free movement as an essential mechanism for development»¹⁵⁵.

Despite representing one of Africa's most advanced regional mobility frameworks, implementation has remained profoundly uneven across the member states. While visa-free entry is widely observed, the rights of residence and establishment continue to be inconsistently applied, and «the protocol's third phase

¹⁵³ ECOWAS Treaty 1993: Article 2, Paragraph 1.

¹⁵⁴ Aning K., Bah S. A. Article 6 and 7 of Chapter II of the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security // ECOWAS and Conflict Prevention in West Africa: Confronting the Triple Threats. New York University, 2009. P. 192.

¹⁵⁵Castillejo, C. The influence of EU migration policy on regional free movement in the IGAD and ECOWAS regions (Discussion paper, no. 11/2019) // Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE). 2019. № 11. P. 12.

intended to empower business establishment never achieved full operationalization»¹⁵⁶. The absence of adequate screening and admission mechanisms within the original framework created gaps that criminals have exploited, transforming a well-intentioned integration tool into a facilitator of transnational criminal activities including money laundering, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and illegal arms proliferation. Security forces have compounded these problems by «turning border management into private enterprise, encouraging commodity smuggling for personal gain rather than enforcing regulations»¹⁵⁷.

The unintended consequences have extended beyond criminal activity to generate social tensions, particularly in areas where migrants «dominate local trade and labor markets, fostering resentment among host communities»¹⁵⁸. Roadblocks and illegal barriers have proliferated, and community members exercising their free movement rights have faced insecurity, harassment, and in tragic cases such as the forty-four Ghanaians killed in 2005 and incidents in The Gambia, have lost their lives. The protocol designed to serve integration has instead contributed to regional insecurity, as «the privileges have been abused and poorly implemented, with security concerns now overshadowing the anticipated boost to regional trade and economic development»¹⁵⁹. The interdependence that encouraged border opening has paradoxically facilitated transnational crime while «the community lacks adequate

¹⁵⁶Garba F, Yeboah T. Free Movement and Regional Integration in the ECOWAS Sub-Region. 2022. Vol. 3. P. 45-47.

¹⁵⁷ Awumbila M., Teye J. K., Yaro J. A. Migration, mobility and emerging urban centres in Ghana // Migration and Development. 2018. Vol. 7(1). P. 1–21.

Yeboah T., Appiah-Twumasi A., Boatemaa S., Amoako C., Osei-Asare Y. B. Migration intentions of youth in Ghana: A livelihood approach // Migration and Development. 2021. Vol. 10(3). P. 391–409.

¹⁵⁸ Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/7/86 on the Code of Conduct for the Implementation of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment. African Legal Information Institute // Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). 1986. URL: <https://africanlii.org/akn/aa-ecowas/act/protocol/1986/7-sp1/eng@1986-07-01> (accessed 25.04.2025).

¹⁵⁹ Igwe, P.A., Chinedu O., Madichie, N.O. "The "Isms" of regional integration: What do underlying interstate preferences hold for the ECOWAS union? // Politics & Policy. 2021. Vol. 49.2. P. 280-308.

institutional mechanisms for checking illegal entry, leaving the ambitious vision of a borderless region increasingly distant from reality»¹⁶⁰. The Free Movement Protocol cannot be said to be solely responsible for the ease of passage of militants and their weapons, but the subversion of security agents has also contributed to the insecurity of the sub-region.

The African Union Protocol 2018 was about how a formally concluded and ratified agreement between states (the treaty) would be implemented.

The 2018 African Union Protocol on Free Movement of Persons builds upon the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community by providing for the progressive implementation of free movement, right of residence, and right of establishment across the continent, guided by principles of non-discrimination, transparency, and respect for national security, public order, and public health. The protocol explicitly prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other status as outlined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, while allowing member states to provide more favorable treatment through reciprocity or deeper integration arrangements¹⁶¹.

Under the framework, nationals of member states have the right to enter, stay, move freely, and exit another member state's territory without a visa for up to ninety days, provided they enter through designated official ports of entry, possess recognized valid travel documents, and are not prohibited entry under national laws protecting security, order, or health. Citizens exercising these rights enjoy protection under host state laws, though member states may impose additional conditions consistent with the protocol and must keep designated entry points operational while sharing information with other member states.

¹⁶⁰ Nebeife, J.C., Chinwuba M.E., Onwuanibe J.O. ECOWAS Regional Integration and Trans-Border Security Management: Challenges and Prospects // Journal of Contemporary International Relations and Diplomacy. 2022. Vol. 3, No. 1. P. 382–393.

¹⁶¹ The ECOWAS Protocol, 2018. URL: <https://etls.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SUP-ACT-FIXING-RULES-ORIGIN-2018-ENG.pdf> (accessed: 20.02.2026).

The African Union Protocol addresses travel documentation by mandating mutual recognition and exchange of valid travel document specimens among member states, while establishing the African Passport as a continental travel document to be issued to citizens based on international standards and continental specifications, with the Commission providing technical support for production and issuance. However, the protocol explicitly acknowledges that existing regional frameworks like ECOWAS lack adequate mechanisms for checking illegal entry, allowing criminals to exploit free movement privileges for money laundering, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and illegal arms proliferation. Rather than serving integration purposes alone, these gaps have contributed to regional insecurity, representing a serious factor necessitating the evolution toward the 2018 protocol provisions designed to address these persistent challenges¹⁶².

The African Union Protocol has commendable goals, but its implementation is complicated by security challenges: porous borders and weak document verification allow terrorists and criminals to operate in the region.

Nevertheless, the Protocol guarantees citizens of member states:

- Freedom of movement for border community residents.
- Rights to education, employment (with qualification recognition), and residence with families.
- Business opportunities and enterprise creation.
- Property protection and the right to transfer earnings (remittances).
- Protection against mass expulsion (deportation is only permissible under law with state notification).

Despite security risks, the document establishes a legal framework for migration and economic integration in the region¹⁶³.

¹⁶² The ECOWAS Protocol, 2018. URL: <https://etls.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SUP-ACT-FIXING-RULES-ORIGIN-2018-ENG.pdf> (accessed: 20.02.2026).

¹⁶³ The ECOWAS Protocol, 2018. URL: [55](https://etls.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SUP-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Furthermore, concerning the specific vulnerable groups, the Protocol States that Party may in addition to the measures provided for by international, regional and continental instruments, establish specific procedures for the movement of specific vulnerable groups including refugees, victims of human trafficking and smuggled migrants, asylum seekers and pastoralists. Procedures established by a Member State under this article shall be consistent with the obligations of that Member State under the international, regional and continental instruments relating to the protection of each group of persons referred to.

About any dispute or difference arising between States Parties with regard to the interpretation, application and implementation of this Protocol shall be settled by mutual consent between States concerned, including through negotiations, mediation, conciliation or other peaceful means, as provided by the Protocol in the event of failure by the disputing parties to settle the dispute or difference, the disputing Parties may By mutual consent, refer the dispute to an Arbitration Panel of three (3) Arbitrators whose decision shall be binding on the Parties; or Refer the dispute to the African Court of Justice, Human Rights and Peoples' Rights, when operational. The appointment of the Panel of Arbitrators shall be as follows: The Parties to the dispute shall each appoint one arbitrator; and The Chairperson of the Commission shall appoint the third Arbitrator who shall be the President of the Panel. Pending the operationalization of the Court the decision of the Panel of Arbitrators shall be binding, in order to maintain law and order.

According to the Protocol in respect of the suspension and withdrawal of any State Party, it may “suspend, temporarily, the implementation of the provisions of the present Protocol in case of grave threats to national security, public order and public health and at any time after three years from the date of entry into force of this Protocol, a State Party may withdraw by giving written notification to the Depository and

withdrawal shall be effective one year after receipt of notification by the depository, or on such later date as may be specified in the notification, and that withdrawal shall not affect any obligation of the withdrawing State Party prior to the withdrawal”.

The African Union Protocol also beamed its light on how amendment and revision should be made, and stated that, “any State Party may submit proposal(s) for the amendment or revision of this Protocol and such proposal(s) shall be adopted by the Assembly and that proposals for amendment or revision shall be submitted to the Chairperson of the Commission who shall transmit such proposals to the Assembly at least six months before the meeting at which it shall be considered for adoption, and the amendments or revisions shall be adopted by the Assembly by consensus or, failing which, by a two-thirds majority and shall enter into force in accordance with the procedures outlined in Article 33 of this Protocol”¹⁶⁴.

Outcomes of the Free Movement Protocol. The phased implementation of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol has produced distinctly uneven outcomes across the three intended stages. The first phase, ratified by all member states in 1980, established visa-free entry for ninety days through official entry points with valid travel documents, allowing community members to move freely and apply for extensions when necessary¹⁶⁵. However, Article 4 created a significant loophole by empowering host states to deny entry to migrants who do not meet national migration rules, with the inadmissibility clause being exploited by member states to control immigrant numbers and effectively circumvent the protocol's intended openness¹⁶⁶.

The second phase, ratified in 1986, granted residence rights allowing community members to reside in any ECOWAS state for ninety days without a permit, provided

¹⁶⁴ The ECOWAS Protocol, 2018. URL: <https://etls.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SUP-ACT-FIXING-RULES-ORIGIN-2018-ENG.pdf> (accessed: 20.02.2026).

¹⁶⁵ Alabi A. ECOWAS protocol implementation on free movement of persons and trade between Nigeria and Benin Republic: An Overview // Journal of Management and Social Sciences. 2020. Vol. 9. № 2. P. 33-41.

¹⁶⁶ Bolarinwa, J. O. The ECOWAS free movement protocol: Obstacle or driver of regional integration? // Insight on Africa. 2015. Vol. 7(2). P. 154–168.

they respected national laws and sought employment according to existing labour regulations, with «the supplementary protocol barring migrants from civil service employment while granting them court redress rights and legal assistance protections»¹⁶⁷. Despite these provisions, implementation has faltered as work and residence permit procedures in many member states fail to meet protocol standards, with «no separate process for community nationals and officials lacking databases to verify whether local skills are inadequate before granting permits to foreigners»¹⁶⁸.

The third phase, designed to grant nationals the right to establish businesses across member states, has faced significant delays in operationalization due to lack of commitment from national governments, «compounded by the economic difficulties affecting the region throughout the 1980s and the conflicts that engulfed many member states during the 1990s and early 2000s»¹⁶⁹. These delays reflect the broader pattern of uneven commitment that has prevented the full realization of the protocol's ambitious vision.

Despite these implementation challenges, the free movement framework has generated measurable economic and social benefits across the sub-region. The ninety-day visa-free window has facilitated greater ease of travel, supporting trade expansion that has produced important economic gains, with total regional trade reaching approximately 208.1 billion US dollars, though intra-regional trade remains below twenty percent as most commerce continues to be directed toward the United States,

¹⁶⁷ Akindele, R.A. Free movement of persons, right of residence and establishment in ECOWAS for community citizens and in Nigeria for Nigerian citizens. In R. A. Akindele & B. A. Akinterinwa (Eds.), *Cross-border security, cooperation and integration-focus on Nigeria's immediate neighbours in the north-west zone* // Polygraphic Venture. 2011. P. 45–56.

¹⁶⁸ Ukaoha, K., Ukpe, A. *ECOWAS Vanguard: A Practical Review* // National Association of Nigerian Traders (NANTS). 2013. Vol. 2, No. 6, Apr. 2013. URL: <https://sedin-nigeria.net/wp-content/uploads/ECO-VANGUARD-Apr-2013-English-Edition.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2026).

¹⁶⁹ Garba, F., Yeboah, T. "Free movement and regional integration in the ECOWAS sub-region." *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE regional reader*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. P. 19-34.

China, and the European Union¹⁷⁰. Much of the trade between African countries occurs informally within retail and lower productivity sectors, yet cross-border connections strengthened by shared regional languages have enabled farmers from Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria to sell goods directly to buyers across borders.

Migration patterns demonstrate that two-thirds of international migrants within ECOWAS remain in the sub-region, with West Africans six times more likely to travel intra-regionally than to Europe or North America¹⁷¹. Labour-sending countries including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cape Verde, and Sierra Leone show concentrated migration patterns, with nearly all Sierra Leonean migrants residing in Guinea and over 93% of Burkinabe migrants living in Côte d'Ivoire. The remittances flowing from these migration patterns provide essential household income and poverty reduction for families and communities, with World Bank data showing Sierra Leone's remittances increasing from US \$58 million in 2016 to US \$320 million in 2024, and from US \$397 million in 2016 to US \$590 million in 2024 for Burkina Faso¹⁷² over the same period, demonstrating how economic integration is substantially influenced by increased movement of people across the sub-region.

The free movement protocol has enabled ECOWAS community members to operate businesses even without complete documentation, though formal sector workers typically receive permits more easily than those in the informal sector, who «often lack sufficient knowledge of procedures yet are still permitted to conduct business»¹⁷³. Evidence from across the region demonstrates substantial intra-regional

¹⁷⁰ African Development Bank (AfDB). West Africa Economic Outlook 2020: Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic. 2020. P. 3.

¹⁷¹Lücke, M. Remittances: Does human capital follow financial capital? – The development potential of the West African diaspora. In A. B. Akoutou, R. Sohn, M. Vogl, & D. Yeboah (Eds.), Migration and civil society as development drivers – A regional perspective // Zei Centre for European Integration Studies. 2015. P. 125–152.

¹⁷²Personal remittances, received (current US\$) - Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone // World Bank. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=BF-SL> (accessed: 25.02.2026).

¹⁷³Yeboah, T., Kandilige, L., Bisong, A., Garba, F., & Kof Teye, J. The ECOWAS free movement

migration, with Ghana granting residency permits to over 460,000 immigrants in 2019, 68% from neighboring ECOWAS states, the majority being relatively low-skilled workers employed in the informal economy across agriculture, manufacturing, and wholesale and retail trade¹⁷⁴. Similarly, ninety-three percent of Gambia's 215,000 foreign citizens originate from within the region, with 87% employed in the informal sector, while over 60% of Senegal's 275,000 migrant population are regional nationals predominantly involved in retail trade, handicrafts, and transportation, though top-skilled positions in non-governmental organizations and the private sector are mostly filled by migrants from the United States and Europe¹⁷⁵.

The ninety-day visa-free rule, while advancing integration by enabling visa-free travel and informal trade, created barriers to longer-term mobility due to differing national immigration laws and bureaucratic processes that made staying beyond the period and obtaining residency permits difficult. In 2014, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government addressed this by issuing a Communiqué ending residence permits and introducing the Biometric Identity Card for Community citizens, a reform that, «despite continued issuance of residence permits by some member states, demonstrates the commission's commitment to enabling community members to live anywhere in the region without bureaucratic delays and expenses associated with exceeding the 90-day limit»¹⁷⁶.

The ECOWAS has further proposed a Convention on Social Security aimed at harmonizing labour standards and welfare across the region, providing assistance to disabled persons, old-age benefits, survivors' benefits, «compensation for work

protocol and diversity of experiences of different categories of migrants: A qualitative study // *International Migration*, 2021. Vol. 59(3). P. 228–244.

¹⁷⁴ An exploratory study on labour recruitment and migrant worker protection mechanisms in West Africa: The case of Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. IOM. 2020. P. 11.

¹⁷⁵International Migrant Stock 2024 // IOM. URL: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> (accessed: 27.02.2026).

¹⁷⁶Communiqué of the 45th ordinary session of the authority of heads of state and government // ECOWAS, 10–11 July 2014. P. 14.

conditions, family assistance, care for pregnant workers, healthcare, sickness services, and aid for unemployed workers»¹⁷⁷. This Convention addresses the current reality that people living in another country cannot transfer social security benefits when changing jobs, leaving migrants without unemployment protections and other benefits. By proposing a harmonized labour market allowing workers to retain social protection rights regardless of where they work, the Convention aims to lower employer reliance on non-local workers who currently lack protection, prevent illegal labour, and establish aligned labour standards and social welfare across the region.

Designed and implemented in phases, the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol granting entry, residence, and the right of establishment has, despite objectives not being fully realized across member states, fostered regional integration through increased mobility and trade, with supplementary protocols establishing rules preventing foreigners from joining the civil service and providing access to laws addressing human rights violations, demonstrating that while implementation remains uneven, the framework has produced tangible integration outcomes.

An analysis of the evolution of the ECOWAS regulatory framework, from the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement to the updated version of 2018 and the Vision 2050 strategy, reveals a fundamental contradiction in the architecture of West African regionalism. The author's position is that, despite the existence of one of the most progressive migration regimes on the continent, the real integration in the region is not so much due to the institutional efforts of the commissions, as in spite of them — through the mechanisms of the informal economy and survival.

The evidence shows a critical gap between the declared goals and practice: although the visa regime for community citizens has been formally abolished, the rights to reside and do business (the second and third stages of the Protocol) are implemented

¹⁷⁷Garba, F., Yeboah, T. "Free movement and regional integration in the ECOWAS sub-region." *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE regional reader*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. P. 19-34.

in fragments. It seems that the low level of intraregional trade (less than 20% of the total turnover) with a high level of migration indicates that the free movement of people has not yet become a driver of deep economic integration, but remains a tool for adapting the population to local crises. Moreover, the dominance of the informal sector (which employs up to 87% of migrants in some countries) confirms that regionalism from below outstrips integration from above.

The key challenge that can offset the achievements of ECOWAS is prioritizing security over freedom of movement. It can be argued that regionalism in West Africa is currently being transformed from an economic project into a security community. The growth of terrorist threats, the activities of transnational criminal networks and the recent wave of coups d'etat (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) set a precedent when national sovereignty and regime restrictions prevail over supranational obligations. The 2018 Protocol, trying to balance human rights and national security, actually legalizes the possibility of restrictions, which creates risks of a rollback to protectionism.

Thus, it can be concluded that the sustainability of West African regionalism depends not on the number of signed agreements on social security or biometric passports, but on the ability of States to synchronize security policies. Without addressing the "threat to free movement," which is used as a pretext for closing borders, the ambitious goal of transforming ECOWAS from a "Community of States" into a "Community of Peoples" risks remaining a declaration. The success of integration in the future will be determined by whether the region can transform free movement from a source of vulnerability into a tool for strengthening human security and economic growth.

CHAPTER 2. CHALLENGES FOR ECOWAS AS A DRIVER OF REGIONAL MIGRATION

2.1. Policy Gaps and Structural Barriers in Settlement and Business Activities

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa state that the West African subregion is home to about 250 ethnic identities which are interconnected, with no country being completely homogenous¹⁷⁸. Notable ethnic identities in this region are summarised in Table 1. The polarisation of ethnic groups found in this region can be traced to the scramble for, and partition of Africa during the 1884/85 Berlin conference¹⁷⁹. The sociocultural state of West Africa in Table 1 is indicative that, historically, the sub-region was very interrelated. Languages were spoken across borders and families had relations that resided in neighbouring nation states. Achieving unrestricted migration is however an important and excellent feat for the sub-region.

When in 1979, the heads of state of the ECOWAS member states met and enacted the treaty on free movement of people, residence, and establishment, it was intended to provide a supranational legal framework to ensure that citizens of ECOWAS member states have the freedom to come, dwell, and settle themselves in any country in West Africa¹⁸⁰.

¹⁷⁸ Olukoshi, A. *West Africa's Political Economy in the Next Millennium: Retrospect and Prospect*, CODESRIA and OXFAM, Dakar and Oxford, 2001. 345 p.

¹⁷⁹ Eyffinger, A. *The Berlin Conference (1884–1885): The Dice-Play for West Africa*, in *TMC Asser (1838–1913)*, Vols. I–II, Brill Nijhoff, Leiden. 2019. P. 1039–1065.

¹⁸⁰ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), *Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment*, ECOWAS Secretariat, Lagos, 1979. 12 p.

Table 1.**Major ethnic groups in West Africa and Countries they are found in**

Ethnic Identity	Countries Found
Yoruba	Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire
Hausa	Nigeria, Ghana, and Niger
Kanuri	Nigeria, Niger, and Chad
Wollofs	Senegal and Gambia
Shuwa Arabs	Chad, Nigeria, and Niger
Mandigos	Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Liberia
Ewes	Ghana and Togo
Akans	Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire
Tuaregs	Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso
Bono and Nzema	Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana
Mende	Liberia and Sierra Leone
Fulani	Mali, Guinea, Gambia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Guinea Bissau, and Togo
Songhai	Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso

Source: Neuberger, B. Ethnic Groups and the State in Africa, in Ben-Ami, S., Peled, Y., Spektorowski, A. (eds.) in *Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation State*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2000. P. 231.

Historical migration patterns in West Africa have evolved through distinct phases shaped by changing political and economic circumstances. Prior to colonialism, movements were driven by slave trade, inter-ethnic conflict, and unfavorable weather conditions, though migrants faced dangers «from wild animals and inadequate transportation and information systems»¹⁸¹. During the colonial era, «migration became predominantly labor-based, influenced by workforce demands for the colonial economy, tax evasion, compulsory labour avoidance, and the attraction of mining

¹⁸¹ Adeniran, A., *Migration and Regional Integration in West Africa: A Borderless ECOWAS*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014. P. 165.

regions and agricultural industries in Gambia, Ghana, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, which contemporary data shows remain important labor destinations»¹⁸². Following independence, many countries enacted immigration legislation including Nigeria's Immigration Act of 1965 and Sierra Leone's immigration quotas to manage migrant flows.

The period between 1970 and 1979 saw approximately twenty-five percent of West Africa's population living outside their place of origin due to intraregional migration, driven by «economic and political crises that often made migrants scapegoats for stigmatization in fragile states»¹⁸³. Contemporary migration within the sub-region is largely driven by poverty and the search for better opportunities, fueled by declining revenue from primary commodities that most West African countries produce as homogeneous goods for export. Despite significant decreases in primary export commodity prices from the early 1970s to mid-1990s, which might have been expected to enhance intra-regional trade relations, the opposite occurred as «countries maintained greater focus on vertical trade relations with global capitalist economies»¹⁸⁴.

This pattern reflects the enduring legacy of colonialism, where African countries were mandated to produce raw materials for industries in Europe, creating a persistent economic structure characterized by high primary commodity exports and low manufactured goods exports. Most ECOWAS states produce primary goods like cocoa, coffee, and cotton that cannot be refined domestically, necessitating export to industrialized economies and subsequent importation as refined goods. This structural dependence has resulted in poor intra-regional trade performance, exemplified by Nigeria sending only 6% of its exports to ECOWAS member states, primarily oil, while

¹⁸² Teye, J.K., Migration in West Africa: An Introduction, in Teye, J. K. (ed.), Migration in West Africa, IMISCOE Research Series, Springer, Cham, 2022. P. 8-16.

¹⁸³Ouedraogo, D. Migration and Population in West Africa: Political Issues and Perspectives, in Trémolières, M. (ed.), Regional Challenges of West African Migration: African and European Perspectives, OECD/SWAC, Paris. 2009. P. 127–142.

¹⁸⁴ Odularu, G.O., Export Diversification as a Promotion Strategy for Intra-ECOWAS Trade Expansion // African Journal of Business Management, 2009. Vol. 3(2). P. 34–47.

intra-regional trade accounts for merely 2% of Nigeria's total imports, and ECOWAS intraregional trade with non-ECOWAS African states averages only 11%¹⁸⁵.

The low intra-trade relationship stems from member states' dependence on primary goods production and inability to develop manufactured exports for the global market, reinforcing commitment to vertical trade with industrialized nations with whom they share colonial connections. Britain, France, and the United States remain economic superpowers in the region, with France particularly continuing to dominate the economic, political, and military landscape of its former colonies, while the United States, Britain, and Portugal maintain shared interests though with less aggressive foreign policy approaches than their French counterparts.

The crisis in the Middle East has left a significant gap in the supply of energy resources- natural gas and oil¹⁸⁶. This growing instability, largely political, has destabilised global trade with these nations who are big exporters of these natural resources. The United States, European Union, China and other emerging world powers have shifted focus to regions such as West Africa as alternatives in other to meet their energy supplies. Thus, these nations are shaping their foreign policy around these West African states.

There exists an important relationship shared by the West African subregion and the European Union as a result of their shared colonial history. The European Union has been in the fore front of providing foreign aid and serves as a major market for primary goods produced in this region. Perhaps not very profound within the Anglophone countries, Francophone regions enjoy strong military and peacekeeping ties with France. As of 2005, the European Union was the main trading partner of West African countries, accounting for over 40% of international trade volumes in the region.

¹⁸⁵ Alaba, O. B., EU–ECOWAS EPA: Regional Integration, Trade Facilitation and Development in West Africa, Paper presented at the GTAP Conference, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Addis Ababa, 2013. P. 45.

¹⁸⁶ Polaski, R. Rationalisation of Regional Integration Institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa: An Overview of the Current Situation, Report prepared for Global Coalition for Africa, 2004. P. 35.

As noted earlier, ECOWAS states export primary goods, and almost half of these exports to their European Union partners (mainly Britain and France) comprise of agricultural goods and minerals¹⁸⁷. Processed/refined goods such as dairy products, medications, and transportation/electrical equipment are then imported to the region from these trading partners. Whereas the United States and France are the two largest trading partners of the African continent, China comfortably occupies the third position, trading a diverse range of products to the West African market and steadily increasing their influence in the region. China has made significant investments in Nigeria's oil and gas production sector, in an attempt to accelerate its production and export. This can be seen in its long-term investments in state-owned oil and gas infrastructures. Besides this, Okolie¹⁸⁸ reports that China has now positioned itself as a major arms supplier to the West African state.

India and Anglophone West Africa share colonial history in that they were colonised by Great Britain. Bilateral trade relations and interest have continued to soar between Indians and West Africa even after the post-colonial era. India was in the fore front for advocating for an end to colonialism after they gained theirs in 1947. For years, India has remained a major trading partner in the region and is the largest importer of petroleum products in Nigeria. The increasing activities of India in this region can be traced to their foreign policy which aims to strengthen economic relations with the region¹⁸⁹.

The struggle for the economic integration of West Africa with a Common External Tariff (CET) is becoming increasingly difficult as a result of the aforementioned vertical trade relations between the sub-region states and technologically advanced nations. Trade is narrowly directed, with very little volume

¹⁸⁷ Ann-Sofi, R., ECOWAS and West Africa's Future – Problems or Possibilities?, Umeå Working Papers in Political Science, No. 3, Umeå, 2014. P. 55.

¹⁸⁸ Okolie, A. M., Prebendal Politics and Democratic Practice in Nigeria, 1999–2004 // ANSU Journal of Politics and Administration, 2006. Vol. 1(1). P. 201.

¹⁸⁹ Flahaux, M.-L. & De Haas, H., African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers, Comparative Migration Studies, 4(1), 2016, pp. 1–25.

traded within the region¹⁹⁰. As trade with more industrialised and developed nations continue to grow, it hampers trade relations within the region, leading to a decline thus emphasising the point raised here on vertical trade relations. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in its Economic Development Report¹⁹¹ demonstrated this relationship as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Percentages of Intra-regional Exports and Imports, 2020–2024

Region	Exports (% intra-regional)	Imports (% intra-regional)
West Africa (ECOWAS)	2020: ~14%	2020: ~12%
	2021: ~14%	2021: ~12%
	2022: ~14%	2022: ~12%
	2023: ~14%	2023: ~12%
	2024: (data not yet separately reported)	(data not yet separately reported)
Europe	2020: ~68%	~67% (assumed)
	2021: ~68%	~67% (assumed)
	2022: ~68%	~67% (assumed)
	2023: ~67%	~66% (assumed)
	2024: ~67%	~66% (assumed)
Developing Asia	2020: ~55%	~54% (assumed)
	2021: ~57%	~54% (assumed)
	2022: ~58%	~55% (assumed)
	2023: ~59%	~56% (assumed)
	2024: ~59%	~56% (assumed)

Source: World Economic Situation and Prospects: March 2024 Briefing No. 179. New York: United Nations, 2024. URL: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP_2024_Web.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026); Key statistics and trends in international trade 2024. New York: United Nations, 2024. URL: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctab2025d2_en.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026); UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2022. New York: United Nations, 2022. URL: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdstat47_en.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026).

Notes: Asterisked figures are based on the most recent UNCTADstat intra-regional export data. Corresponding import shares are estimated using the closest available official regional statistics, as fully disaggregated annual import data are not consistently published for all regions

¹⁹⁰ Ekekwe, E., State and Economic Development in Nigeria, in Ake, C. (ed.), Political Economy of Nigeria, Longman, London & Lagos, 1985.

¹⁹¹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Economic Development in Africa: Report 2013, United Nations, New York, 2013, p. 13.

Table 2 presents the shares of intra-regional exports and imports for West Africa, Europe, and Developing Asia between 2020 and 2024. The data reveal persistent structural disparities in the depth of regional trade integration and demonstrate that West Africa continues to lag significantly behind more consolidated regional blocs.

Comparative trade data from 2020 to 2024 reveals stark differences in regional integration across global regions, with West Africa demonstrating persistently shallow intra-regional trade despite the operationalisation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme and the African Continental Free Trade Area. Intra-regional exports in West Africa averaged approximately 14% of total exports during this period, while intra-regional imports fluctuated around 12%, reflecting stagnation rather than contraction¹⁹². This limited growth indicates that structural constraints continue to impede deeper integration, including limited industrial diversification, inadequate transport and logistics infrastructure, overlapping regional trade regimes, and persistent non-tariff barriers, confirming that West African economies remain outward-oriented and reliant on extra-regional markets.

In contrast, Europe demonstrates consistently high intra-regional trade integration throughout the same period, with approximately 67-68% of exports directed to countries within the region and intra-regional imports remaining close to 66-67%, illustrating the maturity of the European single market characterised by harmonised regulations, integrated supply chains, and advanced production networks where intra-regional trade dominates external flows¹⁹³. Developing Asia occupies an intermediate but dynamic position, with intra-regional exports increasing from approximately 55% in 2020 to nearly 59% in 2024 and intra-regional imports ranging between 54-56%, indicating continued consolidation of regional value chains particularly in manufacturing and intermediate goods production through functional economic

¹⁹² Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. Addis Ababa: African Union, 2018. P. 34-44.

¹⁹³ Single Market Report 2023. Brussels: European Commission, 2023. P. 12-22.

interdependence and dense supply-chain linkages despite lacking Europe's supranational institutional framework¹⁹⁴.

The comparative divergence is striking: Europe's intra-regional trade share is nearly five times higher than West Africa's, while Developing Asia's share is approximately four times higher, underscoring the limited diversification of West African productive structures and the similarity of export profiles among ECOWAS member states that remain dependent on primary commodities¹⁹⁵. Because member states produce comparable rather than complementary industrial outputs, opportunities for intra-regional trade expansion remain constrained, with vertical trade relations with industrialised and emerging economies continuing to dominate West African trade patterns despite global power shifts and expanded South-South cooperation. These findings empirically demonstrate that while Europe and Developing Asia exhibit deep and dynamic intra-regional trade integration, West Africa's integration remains shallow and largely static, reinforcing the argument that formal regional agreements alone are insufficient to transform trade patterns without accompanying industrial transformation, infrastructure development, and effective implementation of trade facilitation measures¹⁹⁶.

Table 3

Select ECOWAS Member States: Export and Import Destinations (%)
2023–2024

Country	Region – Exports (%)	Region – Imports (%)
Nigeria (2024)	Europe ~48%	North America (USA) – 100%
	Asia ~21%	—
	Americas ~31%	—
Côte d’Ivoire (2024)	Europe 33.6%	Europe 23.4%
	ECOWAS 17.8%	ECOWAS 16.1%

¹⁹⁴ UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2022. Geneva: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 2022. P. 65.

¹⁹⁵ UNCTADstat Data Insights: Intra-regional Trade 2025. Geneva: UNCTAD, 2025. P. 22.

¹⁹⁶ Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. Addis Ababa: African Union, 2018.

	Asia 17.3%	Asia 15.7%
	Americas ~6.7%	Americas ~4.9%
Senegal (2023)	Africa/ECOWAS ~43.7%	Europe ~45.1%
	Europe ~24.6%	Asia ~31.1%
	Asia ~19.4%	Africa ~12.0%
	Americas ~3.8%	Americas ~10.4%

Source: World Economic Situation and Prospects: March 2024 Briefing No. 179. New York: United Nations, 2024. URL: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP_2024_Web.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026); Key statistics and trends in international trade 2024. New York: United Nations, 2024. URL: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctab2025d2_en.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026); UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2022. New York: United Nations, 2022. URL: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdstat47_en.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026).

Table 3 presents updated trade patterns of selected ECOWAS member states in the most recent reporting period (2023–2024), while Table 4 provides a comparative benchmark for the earlier period 1996–2012. The comparison reveals both structural continuity and measurable shifts in the geographical orientation of West African trade.

In the earlier period (1996–2012), as reflected in Table 4, exports of most ECOWAS member states were heavily concentrated toward developed European markets and, to a lesser extent, the Americas. Over time, however, exports to Developing Asia increased significantly, particularly for resource-rich economies¹⁹⁷. At the same time, intra-regional trade within West Africa remained comparatively low, reflecting limited production complementarity and persistent structural constraints¹⁹⁸.

Recent data presented in Table 3 indicate that this pattern has evolved but not fundamentally transformed. Nigeria, for example, has experienced a measurable increase in exports directed toward African markets, particularly ECOWAS partners, reflecting deeper sub-regional commercial linkages¹⁹⁹. Nevertheless, Europe and Asia remain significant destinations for Nigerian crude oil and non-oil exports, confirming

¹⁹⁷ UNCTAD Handbook of Statistics 2022. Geneva: UNCTAD, 2022. P. 44.

¹⁹⁸ World Economic Situation and Prospects: March 2024 Briefing No. 179. New York: United Nations, 2024. P. 56.

¹⁹⁹ National Bureau of Statistics Nigeria. Foreign Trade Statistics Report 2024. Abuja: NBS, 2024. P. 11.

the continued importance of extra-regional markets²⁰⁰. This dual orientation suggests that while regional integration mechanisms have strengthened, they have not displaced global trade dependencies.

Côte d’Ivoire demonstrates a similarly diversified export structure. The European Union remains a primary destination for Ivorian exports, particularly agricultural commodities such as cocoa and processed products, while ECOWAS and Asian markets account for substantial additional shares²⁰¹. Imports into Côte d’Ivoire also reveal a balanced structure, with Europe and Asia supplying a considerable proportion of manufactured and capital goods. When compared with the 1996-2012 period shown in Table 4, the relative share of Asia has expanded, whereas Europe’s dominance has moderately declined.

Senegal’s trade profile further illustrates this evolving pattern. Recent statistics show that African markets account for a growing proportion of Senegalese exports, reflecting improved intra-African trade flows under ECOWAS and AfCFTA frameworks²⁰². However, imports remain largely sourced from Europe and Asia, particularly in industrial inputs and consumer goods. This structure mirrors broader West African trends identified in international trade assessments.

The comparison between Tables 3 and 4 thus demonstrates three central tendencies. First, while exports to Developing Asia have increased since the late 1990s, Europe continues to represent a major trading partner for most ECOWAS states. Second, intra-regional trade has gained relative importance in certain leading economies such as Nigeria and Senegal, but it remains below the levels observed in more integrated regions such as Europe and Developing Asia²⁰³. Third, import

²⁰⁰ UNCTADstat Data Insights: Intra-regional Trade 2025. Geneva: UNCTAD, 2025.P. 3.

²⁰¹ Statistiques du Commerce Extérieur 2024. Abidjan: Gouvernement de Côte d’Ivoire, 2024. P. 2.

²⁰² Note d’Analyse du Commerce Extérieur 2023. Dakar: ANSD, 2023. P. 5.

²⁰³ UNCTADstat Data Insights: Intra-regional Trade 2025. Geneva: UNCTAD, 2025. P. 77.

structures continue to be heavily dependent on extra-regional suppliers, particularly for manufactured goods and technology-intensive products.

This evidence confirms that although regional integration initiatives have produced incremental improvements in intra-African trade, West African economies remain structurally embedded in vertical trade relations with industrialised and emerging economies. The persistence of commodity-based export profiles and limited industrial diversification constrains the expansion of intra-regional trade. Thus, as the comparison with the earlier 1996-2012 period demonstrates, regional integration has progressed gradually but has not yet generated a decisive structural reorientation of trade patterns within ECOWAS.

Table 4

Exports and Imports of selected ECOWAS member states of by Main Destination (%), 1996–2012

Countries	Exports						Imports					
	Developed Europe		Developed Americas		Developing Asia		Developed Europe		Developed Americas		Developing Asia	
	1996-2000	2007-2012	1996-2000	2007-2012	1996-2006	2007-2012	1996-2000	2007-2012	1996-2000	2006-2012	1996-2006	2007-2012
Nigeria	29.1	24.3	39.3	39.1	16.1	14.9	48.2	35.8	12.7	11.0	23.3	33.5
Ghana	64.2	46.6	11.3	6.5	8.4	16.8	45.4	27.7	10.8	9.1	14.2	32.2
Code d'Ivoire	52.2	46.0	8.6	11.6	4.8	6.6	51.2	29.7	5.4	3.0	11.5	20.7
Cape Verde	47.7	83.4	2.2	1.8	2.1	2.2	77.8	80.9	8.0	1.5	4.4	6.0
Liberia	73.3	46.0	3.2	17.1	18.6	24.9	32.0	9.3	1.3	1.2	39.0	72.5
Benin	23.5	9.3	3.6	1.1	31.5	49.0	46.1	23.6	4.3	8.1	25.6	56.1
Gambia	74.2	26.9	1.2	2.1	4.8	53.7	41.1	21.4	3.9	3.9	33.8	44.1
Guinea	55.8	36.4	19.3	10.1	5.1	22.0	50.0	44.9	9.9	5.4	17.4	29.7
Burkina Faso	43.1	38.4	1.1	1.7	21.8	38.1	45.6	34.0	3.6	5.0	6.6	15.2

Niger	24.2	44.0	4.0	15.6	31.2	4.1	40.9	35.6	6.8	5.5	21.2	27.2
Guinea-Bissau	19.3	1.7	0.3	6.2	46.3	91.0	50.7	44.5	2.5	2.0	25.2	17.5

Source: Economic Development in Africa Report 2013: United Nations publication: Intra-African Trade: Unlocking Private Sector Dynamism. New York: United Nations. P. 15-16.

Despite the visa-free protocol's provisions, unofficial payments to customs and immigration officials at borders remain well-documented, with even refugees fleeing crises compelled to make such payments. Member states have additionally imposed residency permit levies ranging from ten to five hundred dollars, with Nigeria charging differential rates based on the strategic importance of applicants' home countries, despite the protocol being silent on such fees. These financial barriers, «combined with entry charges, present significant obstacles to regional and economic integration»²⁰⁴.

The persistence of national sovereignty, particularly through immigration policies enacted at independence, has fundamentally impeded protocol implementation. Member states continue to exert control over their economies and territorial security through the inadmissibility clause enshrined in Article 4 of the 1979 protocol, which reserves «the right of member states to refuse entry to any community citizen falling under categories of inadmissible immigrants defined by national laws»²⁰⁵. This provision effectively negates the foundational principles of non-discrimination, human rights protection, and social cohesion upon which ECOWAS was established.

Most inadmissibility provisions derive from pre-protocol legislation, often containing outdated and discriminatory language at odds with modern United Nations immigration standards. These clauses are typically ambiguous, conferring excessive discretion on immigration officials to refuse entry or residence without following

²⁰⁴ Nigeria charges \$197 for Ivorian Citizens, \$52 for Togolese citizens and \$43 for all other ECOWAS states for resident permits. See: Adepaju, A., Boulton, A., Levin, M. Promoting integration through mobility: Free movement under ECOWAS // Refugee Survey Quarterly. 2010. Vol. 29(3). P. 120-144.

²⁰⁵ Protocol A/P.1/5/79 Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, Chapter IV.

standardised procedures or providing substantive reasons. This ambiguity directly contradicts Article 3 of the 1986 Supplementary Protocol, which limits restrictions to justifications of public order, public security, and public health. The resulting interpretation by border officials leads to arbitrary denials that defeat the protocol's objectives, and even potential interpretations by ECOWAS courts may face enforcement challenges given low compliance levels²⁰⁶.

Mass expulsion of community citizens represents another longstanding impediment predating the protocols, rooted in narratives dating to the 1950s and 1960s that portrayed immigrants as threats to host nations' economic development. These historical patterns of expulsion continue to undermine the free movement framework and regional integration efforts²⁰⁷.

The mass expulsions of ECOWAS citizens by Nigeria in 1983 and 1985 and by Côte d'Ivoire in 1999 directly contravened regional law and the foundational principles of the ECOWAS Treaty. In response, member states incorporated wide-ranging protections into the Revised 1993 ECOWAS Treaty²⁰⁸ and the 1994 ECOWAS Convention on Extradition²⁰⁹, ensuring alignment with international human rights standards including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights²¹⁰, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers²¹¹, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights²¹².

²⁰⁶ 1986 Supplementary Protocol on the Second Phase (Right of Residence) of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, Article 3.

²⁰⁷ Adepoju, A. *Fostering Free Movement of Persons in West Africa: Achievements, Constraints, and Prospects for International Migration*. International Migration, 2002. Vol. 40 (2). P. 3–28.

²⁰⁸ 1993 Revised Treaty of ECOWAS, Articles 3(1) and 3(2)(e), 3(2)(k) Article 4(a) 35, 4(b), 4(e), 4(g).

²⁰⁹ A/PI/8/94. The ECOWAS Convention on Extradition signed by all member states (including Mauritania) in Abuja, Nigeria, on 6 August 1994.

²¹⁰ UN General Assembly Resolution 2200 on 16 December 1966, entered into force on 23 March 1976.

²¹¹ UN General Assembly resolution 45/158 of 18 December 1990, entered into force on 1 July 2003.

²¹² UN General Assembly resolution 2200 on 16 December 1966, entered into force on 3 January 1976.

The 1979 protocol established basic expulsion conditions requiring host countries to bear deportation costs while safeguarding expelled individuals' life and property. The 1985 supplementary protocol recognised the fundamental rights of community members regardless of their immigration status, mandating reasonable time to leave and humane treatment during expulsion. The 1986 supplementary protocol went further by explicitly banning mass expulsions, granting citizens the right to appeal with suspended orders during appeal, and requiring host states to provide at least two days notice to countries of origin before effecting expulsion²¹³. Expulsion was permitted only on grounds of national security threat, public health concern, failure to fulfil essential conditions during permit issuance, or in accordance with domestic migration laws, though these latter grounds remain ambiguous and discretionary.

Despite these progressive frameworks, protectionist national migration laws enacted after independence continue to undermine integration. Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone forbid foreign nationals from civil, judicial, or security service employment, while Ghana's Investment Promotion Act 2013 excludes even ECOWAS citizens from participating in small-scale businesses requiring low start-up capital. The sentiments accompanying implementation of these laws impede healthy human and trade relationships within the regional bloc²¹⁴.

With a combined population of 456 million people in 2024, ECOWAS possesses the market size to lead continental integration, yet decades after formation, ambitious frameworks including the Free Movement Protocol and Trade Liberalisation Scheme face persistent implementation gaps²¹⁵. These include inconsistencies in protocol

²¹³ 1986 Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/7/86 on the Second Phase (Right of Residence) of the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, Article 3

²¹⁴ Teye, J.K., Awumbila, M. & Nikoi, E. Ambiguity and symbolism in the implementation of the ECOWAS free movement protocol: evidence from Ghana and Sierra Leone // *African Human Mobility Review*, 2019, Vol. 5(2), P. 1556–1582.

²¹⁵ Socioeconomic profile of West Africa, 2024: a resilient subregion suffering the adverse socioeconomic effects of multiple crises. ECA/SRO-NA/ICSOE/39/1–ECA/SRO-WA/ICSOE/27/1 // United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. 2024.

implementation, lack of political will, weak institutional enforcement capacity, bureaucratic obstacles, corruption at borders, unofficial fees, infrastructure deficits, limited financial access, and inconsistent national regulations. Weak regional and national institutions lack enforcement power and technical expertise, particularly in harmonisation and identity management, with accountability and compliance often driven only by vested interests, ultimately fragmenting the bloc rather than uniting it.

Key barriers include:

- **Policy Inconsistencies:** Member states interpret and implement the Free Movement Protocol differently, leading to discrimination, entry refusals, and varied treatment of citizens²¹⁶.
- **Non-Harmonisation of Laws:** National laws misaligned with regional protocols create contradictions²¹⁷. Unlike the Schengen area²¹⁸, ECOWAS lacks a shared database to verify traveller identity, resulting in disparate immigration practices.
- **Varied Enforcement:** Countries define "illegal immigration" differently, leading to inconsistent deportation, detention, and regularisation policies²¹⁹. Historical mass deportations (e.g., Nigeria 1983, 1985; Côte d'Ivoire 1999) highlight political misuse²²⁰.

²¹⁶ Teye, J.K., Awumbila, M. & Nikoi, E., Ambiguity and Symbolism in the Implementation of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol: Evidence from Ghana and Sierra Leone // African Human Mobility Review, 2019, Vol. 5(2), P. 1556–1582.

²¹⁷ Guidelines For The Harmonization Of Migration Data Management in the Ecowas Region // IOM GMDAC. 2018. URL: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_ecowas_guidelines_2018.pdf (accessed: 25.04.2025).

²¹⁸ Schengen // Council of EU. 2020. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/66492/20230444_pdf_qc0923008enn_002.pdf (accessed 23.04.2025).

²¹⁹ Jegen, L., Zanker, F. ECOWAS: Migration and the Externalization of the European Border, Migration-Control.info, 2022. URL: <https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/wiki-entry-the-economic-community-of-west-african-states/> (accessed: 23.04.2025).

²²⁰ Agyei, J. & Clotey, E., Operationalizing ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of People among the Member States: Issues of Convergence, Divergence and Prospects for Sub-Regional Integration, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2007. URL: <http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/publications/operationalizing-ecowas-protocol> (accessed: 23.04.2025).

- Weak Reintegration Frameworks: No common approach exists for returning migrants; support depends on host countries, often with external aid (e.g., UNHCR in Sierra Leone)²²¹.
- Border Management Gaps: Lack of centralised systems and information sharing among security agencies, coupled with corruption, undermines regional cooperation²²².
- Humanitarian and Socio-Economic Challenges: Despite policies like the 2008 Common Approach and 2012 Humanitarian Policy, member states struggle to provide aid and integrate immigrants due to limited resources and economic constraints.

These structural and policy failures undermine the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement, slowing economic and regional integration.

West Africa lacks adequate road and rail networks, hindering the seamless movement of goods and services²²³. This infrastructure deficit drives up transportation and production costs. Poor energy supply and limited internet connectivity further undermine businesses and stall economic integration.

Bureaucratic and corruption challenges compound these issues. Lengthy, non-digital processes for permits and registration – often requiring unofficial payments—discourage formalisation, especially for SMEs²²⁴. At borders, rent-seeking and bribery

²²¹ Adepoju, A., Boulton, A., Levin, M. Promoting Integration through Mobility: Free Movement under ECOWAS, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 2010. Vol. 29(3). P. 120–144.

²²² Agyei, J., Clotey, E., *Operationalizing ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of People among the Member States: Issues of Convergence, Divergence and Prospects for Sub-Regional Integration*, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2007. URL: <http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/publications/operationalizing-ecowas-protocol> (accessed: 23.04.2025).

²²³ Engel, J., Jouanjan, M. A., *Political and Economic Constraints to the ECOWAS Regional Economic Integration Process and Opportunities for Donor Engagement*, ODI (EPS-PEAKS), London, 2015. P. 65.

²²⁴ Permit, Licence Delays Hamper Economy's Formalisation, // *The Business & Financial Times*. 2020. URL: <https://thebftonline.com/2020/09/11/permit-licence-delays-hamper-economy-formalisation/> (accessed: 23.04.2025).

allow undocumented goods to pass, raising consumer prices and incentivising informality²²⁵.

These structural barriers persist despite deep-rooted, pre-colonial migration and trade patterns. Labour mobility, economic crises, and cross-border commerce were central to ECOWAS' founding in 1975, but today, weak infrastructure and governance continue to obstruct regional integration²²⁶.

The Protocol for free movement, residency, and establishment have proven to be crucial. However, despite the positive gains of unrestricted mobility there are still many challenges that affect migration in West Africa. To realise the full potential of the free movement protocol and explore its gains, nation states and their institutions have the responsibility of aligning their policy framework with the ECOWAS protocols. As discussed in this section, conflicting authorities between ECOWAS laws and national frameworks on Migration and the rights of migrants show that the states and the intraregional bloc has failed to reach a consensus. The failure of member states to adopt and implement all protocols, especially effective border management systems and abolishing protectionist labour laws will continue to be an impediment for migrants who wish to reside or conduct businesses in host states.

In conclusion, although the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol was designed to promote regional integration, economic cooperation, and unrestricted mobility, its effectiveness remains constrained by persistent policy inconsistencies, structural deficiencies, and weak institutional enforcement. The lack of harmonisation between national and regional laws, protectionist economic policies, infrastructure deficits, and discretionary immigration practices continue to undermine settlement and business

²²⁵ Bassey, M., Etefia, V. & Ebong, V., Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Sub-Regional Integration in West Africa, *European Journal of Political Science Studies*, 2024. Vol. 7(2). P. 45-49.

²²⁶ Kalagbor, S. B. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): A Retrospective Analysis of the Roles and Contributions of Nigeria // *International Journal*, 2024. Vol. 14(1). P. 76-77.

activities across member states. Furthermore, corruption at borders, informal charges, and limited political will weaken compliance and hinder the realization of the protocol's objectives. These structural and policy barriers demonstrate that without stronger institutional coordination, regulatory alignment, and infrastructural development, ECOWAS will continue to struggle to achieve meaningful regional integration and economic transformation.

2.2. Xenophobia as a challenge for mobility in the ECOWAS countries

Xenophobia is derived from two Greek words 'Xenos' which translates to 'stranger' or 'foreigner' and 'Phobia' which means 'fear'. It is best described or explained as prejudice against the foreign other²²⁷. It is a social construct that defines talented and enlightened expatriates (mostly deemed acceptable), or the new immigrants, mostly poor and hungry people, whose hunger for better opportunities can be questionable and should be monitored. The third category of foreign others is the undocumented whose names are unknown, but they certainly exist as real illegals that must be feared because of their supposed corruption and criminality. The latter group are mostly viewed as 'societal pollutants'²²⁸. A scholar, Achille Mbembe postulates that African migrants fall into power and class, and those who lack power and are vulnerable have no power. The former group are revered but the latter are despised²²⁹.

Xenophobia refers to «hatred, hostility, and violence directed at individuals perceived as foreigners or immigrants, manifesting as prejudice, discrimination, and

²²⁷Akinola, A.O. Introduction: Understanding Xenophobia in Africa, in *The Political Economy of Xenophobia in Africa*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2017. P. 1–7.

²²⁸ Cisneros, J.D. Contaminated Communities: The Metaphor of "Immigrant as Pollutant" in *Media Representations of Immigration, Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 2008, Vol. 11, No. 4, P. 569–601.

²²⁹ Mbembe, A. Blacks from Elsewhere and the Right of Abode // *New Frame*, 2019. URL: newframe.com/ruthfirst-memorial-lecture (accessed: 10.02.2025).

intolerance toward non-locals»²³⁰. Afrophobia, a «specific form, involves discrimination by Africans against fellow Africans based on their African identity»²³¹.

Xenophobia stems from perceptions that foreigners compete for limited resources, threaten economic opportunities, or engage in criminal activities, making migrants scapegoats for socio-economic problems in host countries. It has been documented across Africa, including Egypt, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and notably South Africa, where foreign nationals face attacks and displacement. This phenomenon «significantly impedes African regional integration, including ECOWAS objectives, by undermining free movement, social cohesion, and the productive settlement of migrants across the region»²³².

The historical relationship between Nigeria and Ghana, the two largest economies in West Africa, demonstrates how economic downturns and government failures have fueled xenophobic policies that undermine regional integration. During Ghana's economic prosperity from the 1930s to 1960s, «the government actively encouraged immigration, with Nigerian migrants in Ghana reaching approximately 192,000 by 1960, dominating retail trade, mining, and controlling over ninety percent of foreign import firms»²³³. However, when Ghana's economy declined in the mid-1960s due to a 75% drop in cocoa prices, rising unemployment and inflation created resentment against migrants perceived as job competitors²³⁴.

²³⁰Akinola, A.O. Xenophobia, the Media and the West African Integration Agenda, in *Mediating Xenophobia in Africa: Unpacking Discourses of Migration, Belonging and Othering*, 2020, P. 147–166.

²³¹ Mngxitama, A., Long-Lasting Solutions Are Needed to End Afrophobia Scourge, *Mail & Guardian*, 28 May, 2015. URL: <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-05-28-long-lasting-solutions-are-needed-to-end-afrophobia-scourge> (accessed: 10.02.2025).

²³² Quarshie, N.O. Cocoa and Compliance: How Exemptions Made Mass Expulsion in Ghana, *History and Anthropology*, 2024, Vol. 35, No. 5, P. 1098–1116.

²³³Olaniyi, R. The 1969 Ghana Exodus: Memory and Reminiscences of Yoruba Migrants”, SEPHIS Postdoctoral Research Grant ‘Rethinking Migration and Diaspora Identity in West Africa: A Comparative Study of Yoruba in Northern Nigeria and Ghana, 1900-1970.’ Project No. 2849, 2008. P. 45.

²³⁴ McCaskie, T.C. *Recent History of Ghana*, Africa South of the Sahara, Vol. 85, Europa Publications

The Ghanaian government under Kofi Busia responded with the 1969 Aliens Compliance Order, expelling an estimated 1.5 million undocumented foreigners, primarily Nigerians, within two weeks, causing severe economic loss, social displacement, and psychological trauma. This was followed by the Ghanaian Business Promotion Act and the Residence Permits Compliance Order of 1970, which restricted legal migrants' economic participation and mandated constant permit carriage. In retaliation, Nigeria suspended oil exports to Ghana, which depended on Nigerian oil²³⁵.

In a retaliatory move, the Nigerian government suspended oil exports to Ghana. Ghana as at the time depended on Nigerian oil²³⁶. In 1983, the Nigerian government passed an expulsion order that targeted Ghanaians in the infamous 'Ghana Must Go' saga. About 700,000 Ghanaians were asked to leave the country by the Shehu Shagari led government in January, 1983²³⁷. The government had ordered illegal immigrants who did not possess valid residency permits to exit Nigeria within 30 days. This decision was seen as a political move that was instigated by the government to mask its inability to fulfil government obligations to its citizens²³⁸.

ECOWAS citizens and those of Chad and Cameroon came into Nigeria during the oil boom of the 1970s. T. Falola and J. Ihonvbere reported that «the influx of foreign nationals into Nigeria was rising at 10 % annually»²³⁹. This was because Nigeria was at its glory days of oil money. In 1981, the fall in global oil prices began to hit the economy of Nigeria, as the leaders who witnessed the oil boom squandered the resources at an unprecedented rate of embezzlement. Urban unemployment began to

Ltd, 1984, P. 409–410.

²³⁵ Boahen, A. *Ghana: Evolution and Change in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Longman, London, 1975, P. 196.

²³⁶ Ademola, A., *Nigeria-Ghana Trade Relations: Politics, Problems and Possibilities*, 2016. Vol. 6, No. 1, P. 87.

²³⁷ Gary-Toukara, D. A Reappraisal of the Expulsion of Illegal Immigrants from Nigeria in 1983, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)*, 2015, Vol. 9, P. 25–38.

²³⁸ Afolayan, A., *Immigration and Expulsion of ECOWAS Aliens in Nigeria*, *International Migration Review*, 1998, Vol. 22, No. 1, P. 4–27.

²³⁹ Falola, T., Ihonvbere, J., *The Rise and Fall of Nigeria's Second Republic, 1979–84*, Zed Books, London, 1985. P. 47.

rise steadily, and soon about two thirds of Nigerian urban population workers were unemployed. In a blame seeking effort by the Shagari led government seeking re-election, the Shagari government which had lost legitimacy and trust by Nigerians chose to politicise the narrative that unemployment was caused by the over 3 million illegal immigrants of ECOWAS States, Chad and Cameroon²⁴⁰. This was in order to appeal to the Nigeria populace that the government was committed to combating the issue of unemployment, and to take the spotlight away from the mismanagement of oil funds by the government.

The expulsion was largely politically motivated, as President Shagari faced re-election amid economic crisis and loss of legitimacy due to oil revenue mismanagement. By targeting immigrants, he aimed to demonstrate competence on unemployment while potentially disenfranchising Nigerians sharing Ghanaian ancestry in opposition strongholds, consistent with his prior unjust deportation of political rival Shugaba Darman to Chad. The Shagari government was overthrown in a bloodless coup later that year, but the succeeding Buhari military regime expelled another three hundred thousand immigrants in 1984 without notice, following the «Maitatsine crisis linked to a Cameroonian religious leader, and closed borders citing security and economic concerns despite concurrent diplomatic missions to neighboring countries»²⁴¹.

Trade tensions resurfaced in 2005 when President Obasanjo banned importation of ninety-six Ghanaian goods, including textiles and plastics, under the guise of encouraging local production despite their registration under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme²⁴². The ban, renewed in 2012 under President Jonathan, strained

²⁴⁰ Akoeda, J. *The Politics of Trade Disputes in the Fourth Republic: The Case of Ghana and Nigeria*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Ghana, 2022. P. 90.

²⁴¹ Shagari, S., *Shehu Shagari: Beckoned to Serve*, Heinemann Educational Books, Ibadan, 2001. P. 66.

²⁴² Bello, I., Dutse, A. I., Othman, M. F., *Comparative Analysis of Nigeria Foreign Policy under Muhammadu Buhari Administration 1983–1985 and 2015–2017 // Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Sciences*, 2017. Vol. 4, No. 4, P. 43–52.

economic relations and stoked xenophobic sentiments as Ghanaian traders were displaced. Ghana responded in 2013 with the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre Act, requiring one million dollars minimum capital and ten Ghanaian employees for foreign businesses while banning foreigners from retail trade, leading to closure of Nigerian-owned shops²⁴³. These protectionist cycles demonstrate how economic pressures and political calculations perpetuate xenophobic policies that fundamentally undermine ECOWAS integration objectives.

When in 2019, President Muhammadu Buhari was re-elected, he ordered the closure of the land borders on the 20th of August 2019. The policy, Buhari said was to reduce the rate of smuggling of goods into the country, promote local production and to enhance compliance of the Africa Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and ECOWAS trade regulations²⁴⁴. Consequently, every land border with Cameroon, Benin Republic, Chad and Niger Republic were closed. The government also explained that the closure was also to checkmate the illicit smuggling of small and light arms, trafficking of persons, illegal migration and other security breaches that undermined national security architecture.

For one, Nigeria had just survived an economic recession largely due to the fall of oil prices in the global market. The government was shifting attention to the non-oil sector, with special focus on improving agricultural production. Cheap food importation from Ghana and other neighbouring countries was a major stumbling block to achieving local production hence the move to protect local farmers²⁴⁵.

In an interesting turn of events, members of the Ghana Union of Traders Association (GUTA) visited and implemented the closure of about one thousand (1000)

²⁴³ Akoeda, J., Bofo-Arthur, K., Amo-Agyemang, C., Agbodzakey, J., *The Politics of Trade Disputes in the Fourth Republic: The Case of Ghana and Nigeria*, Politics, 2023. Vol. 14, No. 10. P. 77.

²⁴⁴ Ahmed, M., *Continued Border Closure Counterproductive*, Punch Newspaper, 2020. P. 90-91.

²⁴⁵ Liedong, T.A. *Nigeria's Border Closure: Bad Omen for Africa's Economic Integration // The Africa Report*, 28 October 2019. P. 2.

shops that belonged to foreigners, with specific target on Nigerian stores²⁴⁶. GUTA claimed that the owners of the closed stores violated the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) Act. However, it was believed that it was a retaliatory response to the border closure policy of Nigeria, as many Ghanaian products were reportedly stopped from crossing the Seme border.

In the years 2018, 2019 and 2020, the Nigerian government reported that Ghana implemented the closures of 300, 600 and 250 Nigerian owned shops for violating the GIPC Act²⁴⁷. Also, between 2018 and 2019, Ghana deported about 825 Nigerians. The Nigerian Minister of Communications believed it was not unconnected with trade wars that were stoking xenophobia²⁴⁸.

Nigeria's influence in the Ghanaian economy is only second to that of China, in terms of volume of trade and business portfolio²⁴⁹. However, discriminatory trade policies have exacerbated xenophobic tendencies between the two countries.

The Ivory Coast, also known as Côte d'Ivoire, has a long history of immigration for ECOWAS Community members. Historical development attributes this to the colonial plantation sector that thrived there, which needed a huge labour force. As it has been previously established, migration patterns within West African states are heavily labour dependent.

Côte d'Ivoire's treatment of immigrants, particularly Burkinabes who dominated the informal economy, illustrates how economic decline triggers xenophobic policy shifts. When cocoa prices fell and forest resources depleted, the government abandoned

²⁴⁶Ghanaians shut 1,000 Nigerian shops over border closure – Envoy // Punch Newspapers. 2019. URL: <https://punchng.com/ghanians-shut-1000-nigerian-shops-over-border-closure-envoy/> (accessed: 22.01.2026).

²⁴⁷Yemisi, O., Nigerian Migrants' Vulnerability under ECOWAS Migration Framework in Ghana, Discover Global Society, 2024. Vol. 2, No. 1, P. 65.

²⁴⁸Gbadeyanke, M., Harassment of Nigerians: FG Gives Ghana Last Warning // Business Post, 2020. URL: <https://businesspost.ng/general/harassment-of-nigerians-fg-gives-ghana-last-warning/> (accessed: 22.01.2026).

²⁴⁹ Costa, K. (n.d). "Nigeria, Ghana Chambers of Commerce to be revived". 2020. URL: <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/daily/old/index.php/news/49159-nigeria-ghana-chambers-of-commerce-to-be-revived> (accessed: 22.01.2026).

its earlier integrationist land policies, enacting Law No. 98-750 that restricted «rural land ownership to Ivorian nationals, creating crisis for migrants who had worked those lands for generations»²⁵⁰. The concept of Ivoirité emerged in the late 1990s, promoting ethnic purity by distinguishing between real and false Ivorians, with political elites using restrictive citizenship criteria to disqualify northern candidates like Alassane Ouattara by requiring both parents to be Ivorian-born²⁵¹. This ideology intensified under President Gbagbo, who accused Burkinabes of coup plots and fueled xenophobic violence. The 1972 nationality code compounded these tensions by denying citizenship to persons born in Côte d'Ivoire to immigrant parents and making naturalization extremely difficult²⁵². During the 2010 post-election violence, foreign nationals comprising approximately twenty-six percent of the population became easy targets, contributing to the country's civil war.

In Sierra Leone, xenophobic violence erupted in 2002 when Nigerian businessmen were attacked following the murder of a local businessman allegedly linked to Nigerian fraudsters, requiring UN mission intervention to restore order. These cases demonstrate that immigrants across ECOWAS become targets during political uncertainty, economic downturn, unemployment crises, and social decay²⁵³. The recurring pattern indicates that while ECOWAS protocols provide adequate frameworks, implementation failures persist as member states struggle to balance community obligations with national security concerns and domestic pressures.

The Community leaders should understand that every state need peace and security to achieve economic prosperity. In their attempt to achieve political security,

²⁵⁰ Loi No. 98-750 du 23 décembre 1998 relative au domaine foncier rural.

²⁵¹ Devillard, A., Bacchi, A., Noack, M., A Survey on Migration Policies in West Africa, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 2016. P. 7.

²⁵² Loi No. 61-415 du 14 décembre 1961 portant code de la nationalité ivoirienne modifiée par la loi No. 72-852 du 21 décembre 1972.

²⁵³ IRIN-WA Weekly Roundup 133 covering the period 13 - 19 Jul 2002 // TNH. 19 Jul 2002. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sierra-leone/irin-wa-weekly-roundup-133-covering-period-13-19-jul-2002> (accessed: 22.01.2026).

the red line of human rights abuses and xenophobia is not one to be crossed. The state has the most important responsibility of ensuring the security of lives and property of all who live within its territory without resorting to any form of ethnic or national and racial considerations. State sponsored xenophobia and impunity for violence against immigrants should be condemned by the supranational organisation and member states. The case of Ivory Coast, where President Gbagbo used xenophobia as a political strategy for mass mobilisation in elections, leading to the politicisation of migration is a condemnable act. Such acts are capable of stoking insurgency and armed militancy, thus creating a humanitarian crisis²⁵⁴.

Whereas genuine reasons exist for local citizens to express concerns over some activities of immigrants, it is only fair that leaders within the region must act to condemn xenophobic tendencies. States must lead multisectoral action to provide orientation and promote awareness and conscience among the community members of ECOWAS states. One way to do this is by using civil society organisations that have established community influence to raise awareness.

In order to achieve the purported regional integration, member states must tackle the big elephant in the room, which is the issue pertaining to violations and non-compliance of some member states to the ECOWAS Treaty. States should also concentrate political effort towards enacting policies that address the obstacles that hinder regional integration and economic growth.

Achieving a uniform and complementary regulatory framework should be pursued by the individual member states. This has been explored by Ghana and Nigeria in recent times to ensure an ease of doing business between the two nations²⁵⁵. Nation states must work towards the goal of collaborating to establish seamless and borderless commercial ties, improvement in employment and living conditions as a primary need

²⁵⁴ Jimam, T., *Free Movement, Migration and Xenophobia in ECOWAS: A Call for More Attention, Perspectives on West Africa's Future*, 2008, P. 23.

²⁵⁵ Akoeda, J., Bofo-Arthur, K., Amo-Agyemang, C., Agbodzakey, J., *The Politics of Trade Disputes in the Fourth Republic: The Case of Ghana and Nigeria, Politics*, 2023. Vol. 14, No. 10. P. 6.

to address the different factors that lead to illegal migration, trafficking and economic woes in the West African subregion.

In conclusion, xenophobia remains a significant social and political obstacle to the realization of free movement and regional integration within ECOWAS. Rooted in economic competition, political manipulation, and identity-based tensions, xenophobic attitudes and policies have historically led to expulsions, discriminatory regulations, and strained diplomatic relations among member states. These practices undermine the principles of non-discrimination, social cohesion, and mutual cooperation that underpin the ECOWAS framework. As migrants are frequently scapegoated for socio-economic challenges, xenophobia not only restricts mobility but also weakens economic productivity and regional solidarity. Addressing this challenge therefore requires stronger institutional safeguards, public awareness initiatives, and policy reforms that promote tolerance, protect migrants' rights, and reinforce the commitment to regional unity.

2.3. Practical Implementation of Freedom of Movement in the ECOWAS region

The formalisation of the protocol on free movement in the ECOWAS region began in 1979, setting up a legal framework of the core vision of ECOWAS when it was set up in 1975. These series of protocols among the original sixteen member states comprised of the right to entry, right to establishment and residency²⁵⁶. The protocols specified for short term stay of 90 days and long-term migration within the region.

²⁵⁶The protocols include Protocol A/P.1/5/79 relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment as well as Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/7/85, Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/7/86, Supplementary Protocol A/SP.1/6/89 and Supplementary Protocol A/SP.2/5/90.

Long before the formation of the ECOWAS and subsequent frameworks for free movement, migration history has it that over 84% of West Africans migrate to and within member states²⁵⁷. These migrations are mostly influenced by labour and economic reasons and is mostly seasonal. Aniche²⁵⁸ posits that artificial borders, a product of colonialism and their porosity did not deter the movement of people who had family and business ties in other West African states post-independence. It was therefore necessary to develop an effective system that could document and control migration.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) reported that there were about three hundred million (300,000,000) migrants in the world in 2023²⁵⁹. Sub-Saharan Africa reportedly accounted for the region with the second highest intra-regional migration (63%) in 2020²⁶⁰. The International Organization for Migration reported that majority of migrations in West, North Africa and across the Mediterranean were intra-regional, with over 21 million (or 53.2%) of the 39.4 million migrants who were born in Africa reside on the continent.²⁶¹ Between the year 2000 and 2019, foreign migrants increased from 15.1 million to 26.6 million

²⁵⁷ Adepoju, A. Migration in West Africa // *Development* 46, 2003. No. 3. P. 37–41

²⁵⁸ Aniche, E.T. Integration, Borders and Migration in West Africa: Lessons from the European Schengen Area, in Moyo, I., Laine, J., Nshimbi, C. (eds.), *Intra-Africa Migrations: Reimagining Borders and Migration Management*, Routledge, London, 2021. P. 56.

²⁵⁹Data accessed via the Migration Data Portal on September 9, 2025. URL: https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020&m=2&sm49=11 (accessed: 02.03.2026).

²⁶⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). *International Migration 2020 Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/452)*

²⁶¹ Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean: Trends, Risks, Development and Governance. Geneva: IOM. 2020. URL: <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-west-and-north-africa-and-across-mediterranean> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

in Africa, and 28% of these international migrants are said to reside in West Africa²⁶². West African citizens are therefore among the most migratory populations in the world.

The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, adopted in 1979, establishes the fundamental right of community citizens to enter, reside and conduct business in the territory of the member States without a visa in three consecutive stages: visa-free entry, the right to residence and the right to establishment²⁶³. Despite these ambitious frameworks designed to remove barriers to movement and promote regional integration and economic growth, gaps remain in their implementation. The difficulties of practical application, including harassment, discrimination and abuse against migrants, indicate a significant discrepancy between the ideas of free movement and the reality on the ground, as the interests of a sovereign State, economic instability and socio-political forces continue to hinder the full implementation of the protocol.

An example of such tension is the relationship between Ghana and Nigeria. Ghana's Investment Promotion Law prohibits foreigners, including Nigerians, from engaging in retail trade, which is in direct contradiction to the ECOWAS Protocol. Instead of seeking compliance, ECOWAS responded by calling for bilateral diplomatic solutions, demonstrating that Member States prioritize national interests over regional benefits when conflicts arise and that ECOWAS does not have the authority to repeal national laws. Such selective compliance by powerful countries further hinders unhindered movement and trade in the region²⁶⁴.

²⁶² Abebe T.K., Mugabo J. Migration and security in Africa: Implications for the free movement of persons agenda. In *Africa Migration Report: Challenging the Narrative*, edited by A. Adepoju, C. Fumagalliand and N. Nyabola. Addis Ababa: International Organisation for Migration, 2020. P. 145–154.

²⁶³ Protocol relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. ECOWAS. 1982. P.2.

²⁶⁴ Awumbila, M., Teye, J. K., Nikoi, E. Migration and development in Ghana: The case of the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol // *Journal of Migration Studies*. 2018. Vol. 12(2). P. 45-60.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 highlighted the critical importance of free movement. The closure of borders disrupted informal trade, supply chains, led to higher prices, reduced remittances, and family separation, demonstrating the fragility of regional supply chains and the inadequacy of emergency response mechanisms²⁶⁵. The crisis has demonstrated that unrestricted movement is a fundamental foundation for West Africa's economic growth, social connections, and emergency preparedness.

Implementation difficulties are related to the inconsistency of national legislation with the requirements of the protocol. The Nigerian Immigration Act of 1963 and the Nigerian Labor Act of 1990²⁶⁶ contain provisions that contradict the ECOWAS protocols²⁶⁷. Although unofficial visa cancellation is carried out using ECOWAS passports, the Immigration Law remains unreformed. The provisions of section 18, which allows for denial of entry based on lack of visible means of livelihood, and section 38, which limits the duration of foreign contracts to two years, limit the goals of integration. Despite these inconsistencies, Nigeria has demonstrated its commitment to community principles by constitutionally recognizing fundamental rights, cooperating with IOM on reintegration, and accepting stranded Nigerians from Niger in 2023 as part of a voluntary return program, indicating progress along with ongoing structural challenges²⁶⁸.

Nigeria has commitments through the ECOWAS Regional Network of National Focal Institutions Against Trafficking in Persons Plus (RNNI-TIP+) to share

²⁶⁵ Arhin-Sam, K., Bisong, A., Jegen, L., Mounkaila, H., Zanker, F., The (In)Formality of Mobility in the ECOWAS Region: The Paradoxes of Free Movement // South African Journal of International Affairs. 2022. Vol. 29, No. 2. P. 187–205.

²⁶⁶ Labour Migration Policy for Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity, 2010. P. 2.

²⁶⁷ Review of Nigerian Legislation and Policy in View of the Ecowas Protocol On Free Movement Of Persons, Residence and Establishment // IOM. 2020. URL: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/ecowas_protocol.pdf (accessed: 05.05.2025).

²⁶⁸ Nigerian Government cooperates with ECOWAS and IOM to return 150 migrants voluntarily back to Nigeria. ReliefWeb; 2022 Feb 20 (accessed 04.04.2025). URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigerian-government-cooperates-ecowas-and-iom-return-150-migrants-voluntarily-back-nigeria> (accessed: 05.05.2025).

intelligence and combat human trafficking and related offences²⁶⁹. Nigeria has been on the fore front of this mission, as many Nigerians turn out to be victims of human trafficking. The Nigerian National Policy on Labour Migration is also keen on the monitoring of private employment and recruitment agencies in order to reduce or prevent human trafficking, and issues that pertain to forced labour. This aligns with Article 2.3 of the 1985 ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol. Despite these commitments, there is no provisions on the explicit protection of, and equality of treatment for seasonal migrant workers, frontier workers and itinerant migrant workers in line with the 1986 Supplementary Protocol Articles 10 to 12.

Ghana has adopted and ratified the Immigration and Emigration Form of ECOWAS Member States. In 2000, Ghana began to use the ECOWAS common passport in order to ease cross-border movements in the sub-region. While the ECOWAS protocols allows for a means of valid identification at the point of entry, Ghana only allows the use of the passport. This has created challenges for community members across the region who do not possess the ECOWAS common passport, or any valid means of identification at all²⁷⁰. The issue of extortion by immigration officials at the borders is also an impediment that militates against free movement, as some Ghanaian officials have been accused of demanding payments that are not officially prescribed²⁷¹.

Ghana focuses its labour migration policy on skilled labourers, and a number of community members have established businesses in Ghana. It also participates in the Intra-African Talent Mobility Programme in order to promote skills transfer within the

²⁶⁹ ECOWAS Member States Experts Commit to Increased Collaboration, Cooperation and Partnership in the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons and Other Related Crimes in the Region. (26.04.2025). URL: <https://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-member-states-experts-commit-to-increased-collaboration-cooperation-and-partnership-in-the-fight-against-trafficking-in-persons-and-other-related-crimes-in-the-region/?lang=fr> (accessed: 05.05.2025).

²⁷⁰ Awumbila, M., Teye, J. K., *Diaspora and Migration Policy and Institutional Frameworks: Ghana Country Report*, 2014. P. 51.

²⁷¹ Teye, J. K., Yeboah, T., Atuahene, F., *Migration Policy, Practice and Flows in West Africa*, International Migration. 2019. Vol. 57, No. 4. P. 153–169.

sub-region. However, stringent protectionist policies enacted by the government of Ghana has contributed negatively to the ideology of regional integration in Ghana. To begin with, Ghana issues discretionary work permits to migrant workers, including ECOWAS community members, based on the ability of the migrant to reasonably prove that the skill he/she possesses cannot be locally sourced²⁷². This is extended to formal employment, as there are certain sectors of the public service that migrant workers are not permitted to work in except through some form of special arrangements²⁷³.

Ghana's refusal to allow community members participate in petty trading may also be considered as a human rights violation, being that the economic rights of all ECOWAS community members is denied.

Varied levels of cooperation and compliance with protocols among the ECOWAS member states has been widely reported. The lack of conformity to protocols can be attributed to the intention of the member states to protect their citizens. In 1983 and 1985, just when the first phase of the Free Movement Protocol had just become operational, Nigeria revoked part of the protocol to expel foreign nationals, mostly Ghanaians. The Nigerian government explained that it was in the interest of economic security, and to create job opportunities for its citizens²⁷⁴. The decision of the Nigerian government was largely political. Reports show that the President Shehu Shagari was using the expulsion as a political tool to weaken the base of his rival, as he believed that undocumented immigrants in the Southwestern states could flip the elections in favour of Obafemi Awolowo²⁷⁵.

²⁷² Op.cit.

²⁷³ Teye, J. K., Awumbila, M., Benneh, Y., *Intra-Regional Migration in the ECOWAS Region: Trends and Emerging Challenges*, 2015. P. 101.

²⁷⁴ Akhigbe A. *The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement and Implications for Border Security Management of the Nigeria-Republic of Benin Borders*. *Afr. J. Int'l Aff. & Dev.* 2021. Vol. 25. P. 131.

²⁷⁵ Gary-Tounkara, D., *A Reappraisal of the Expulsion of Illegal Immigrants from Nigeria in 1983 // International Journal of Conflict and Violence*. 2015. Vol. 9. P. 25–38.

There is a trust deficit that exist between ECOWAS member states, due to the rise of insecurity, the smuggling of goods, and political instability. Insurgency and banditry in the region have made certain member states to tighten their border control measures. The implication of this in border control points is that migrants are often subjected to rigorous security checks and inhumane treatments²⁷⁶. Borders are increasingly becoming securitised and fast becoming extortion points for border patrol officers who either do not understand the protocols fully or are just corrupt. Thus, they are unable to comply to the protocols.

The non-implementation of certain policies also occurs due to the lack of administrative competence and technical know-how by member states who face inadequate manpower, infrastructural deficit and are saddled with so much bureaucracy. Some countries have multiple passport processing procedures and requirements at different border points, reflecting a lack of synergy in administration. Most borders within the region are also unmanned and/or porous. For instance, out of over 400 entry points, Sierra Leone has only 33 officially manned border patrol stations²⁷⁷. This further highlights the problems of compliance with regional protocol. An unmanned border is a doorway for undocumented and illegal migration in the region.

A major barrier to compliance within ECOWAS is the conflicting motives of member states for joining the bloc, which range from economic gain to political and security objectives. When a country's specific goals are unmet, it tends to disengage from regional commitments. Compliance levels vary widely across the community. The only measures with full implementation are visa-free entry and the ninety-day

²⁷⁶ Egbuta, U. The migrant crisis in Libya and the Nigeria experience // Conflict Trends. 2019. No 1. URL: <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-migrant-crisis-in-libya-and-the-nigeria-experience/> (accessed: 04.04.2025).

²⁷⁷ DFAT Thematic Report – Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Canberra: DFAT. URL: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-thematic-report-ecowas-3-december-2020.pdf> (accessed: 04.04.2025).

residence rule²⁷⁸. The ECOWAS Brown Card scheme has been established in all member states except Liberia, while no country has introduced harmonised immigration forms. The ECOWAS travel certificate exists in only six states, namely Burkina Faso, Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, and just five countries have set up national committees to monitor the free movement of persons and vehicles. On a positive note, import duties have been successfully removed for unprocessed foods, traditional crafts, and local industrial goods²⁷⁹.

Nigeria dominates the region as the hegemonic power, contributing 63 % of ECOWAS GDP and attracting the bulk of foreign investment. This economic weight grants it significant influence but also creates imbalances within the bloc²⁸⁰. While Nigeria has shifted from a protective stance toward cooperation, its internal challenges continue to shape regional migration dynamics. Historically, Nigeria's oil wealth made it a magnet for West African migrants during the 1970s, but economic crises in the following decade led to rising crime, xenophobia, and mass deportations. In response, Nigeria introduced the National Identification Number as a means of distinguishing citizens from foreigners. Today, the country faces high emigration driven by unemployment and instability, internal insecurity from terrorism and banditry that discourages both immigration and smooth intra-regional movement, and ongoing economic volatility including currency devaluation and environmental damage from oil spills²⁸¹.

²⁷⁸ Porter, J. K., Osei-Hwedie, B. Z., Regionalism as a Tool for Promoting Economic and Regional Development: A Case Study of ECOWAS, *Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings*, 2015. Vol. 25, P. 43.

²⁷⁹ Ojukwu, E.C., Chukwuma, N.A., Nwagbo, S.N. ECOWAS Treaty on migration, and challenges of internal security in Nigeria // *Journal of Conflict Transformation and Nation Building*. 2020. Vol. 2(1). P. 32-50.

²⁸⁰ Karkare, P., Odijie, M., Ukaoha, K., van Seters, J., *Inconsistent Policies or Political Realities? Nigeria's Trade and Industrial Policy Imperatives*, Discussion Paper No. 318 // European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2022. P. 65.

²⁸¹ Aniche, E. T., Alumona, I. M., Iwuoha, V. C., Isike, C., Nnamani, R. G., 'Your Land or Your Life'! ECOWAS Free Movement Regime, Migration, and Resource Conflicts in West Africa // *Society*, 2023, Vol. 6. P. 1-3.

The unilateral closure of Nigeria's land borders between August 2019 and December 2020 exemplified how national interest can override regional integration when hegemonic states act independently. The decision, intended to boost local rice production, directly contravened ECOWAS treaties and disrupted regional trade, particularly affecting neighbouring Benin as the major transit country for rice imports. The move hurt neighbouring economies, led to inflation without significantly boosting local output, and demonstrated the fragility of regional commitments when confronted with domestic political and economic pressures²⁸².

Ghana stands as one of West Africa's top receiving states, with over 476,000 immigrants recorded by the UN in 2021 and more than 300,000 registered as eligible to work, demonstrating commendable migration diplomacy²⁸³. The country's migration trajectory has undergone significant shifts across distinct phases. Pre-independence, Ghanaians dispersed widely due to low economic potential, but the early 1960s saw high immigration rates until economic crisis beginning in 1965 reversed this trend. By 1980, approximately three hundred Ghanaians daily migrated to Nigeria, many later facing expulsion in the 1980s. The 1990s brought steady economic growth driven by cocoa exports and gold mining, creating worker shortages that attracted immigrants and prompted return migration, resulting in brain gain as skilled and unskilled returnees contributed to national development²⁸⁴. Despite these gains, one-fifth of Ghanaian citizens remain in diaspora, and low migration of skilled workers to other ECOWAS states persists due to similar regional economic conditions, leading to employment preference for citizens over immigrants.

²⁸² Karkare, P., Odijie, M., Ukaoha, K., van Seters, J., *Inconsistent Policies or Political Realities? Nigeria's Trade and Industrial Policy Imperatives*, Discussion Paper No. 318 // European Centre for Development Policy Management, 2022. P. 68.

²⁸³ Teye, J. K., *Migration in West Africa: An Introduction*, in *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader*, Springer, Cham, 2022, P. 3–17.

²⁸⁴ Anarfi, J., Kwankye, S., Ababio, O. M., Tiemoko, R., *Migration from and to Ghana: A Background Paper // Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty*, University of Sussex, 2003. P. 60.

Ghana demonstrates mixed compliance with ECOWAS treaties, recognizing the ECOWAS passport and brown card in operations while maintaining national policies that create implementation gaps. Foreigners staying beyond ninety days must obtain work permits through employer sponsorship, and employers must prove no appropriately qualified Ghanaian citizen exists for the position through labor market testing, effectively restricting ECOWAS citizens' access to skilled and unskilled employment²⁸⁵. Skilled foreign workers face additional regulation from professional boards requiring registration before practice. The Investment Act imposes capital requirements excluding foreigners from low-capital activities like petty trading and transportation services commonly pursued by unskilled and semi-skilled migrants. These restrictions have generated persistent conflicts, particularly between Ghanaian and Nigerian traders, demonstrating how national policy barriers impede grassroots economic integration despite Ghana's overall progressive migration record²⁸⁶.

Although ECOWAS protocols waive visa obligation for short visits and focus on non-discrimination, Ghana national migration laws, put in place barriers to ECOWAS citizens crossing its borders, which hinders the spirit of free movement within the region. In addition, implementation is characterized by uncertainty and clashes between regional commitments and national labour market protectionism, which is a common trend throughout the ECOWAS states²⁸⁷.

A comparative examination of ECOWAS member states reveals that despite the regional framework guaranteeing free movement, each country maintains distinct national barriers that collectively impede the protocol's full realization. Nigeria employs an expatriate quota regime and work-permit system requiring government approval for all foreign recruitment, including ECOWAS citizens, supplemented by

²⁸⁵ Okunade, S.K., Ogunnubi, O.A. "Schengen" Agreement in Africa? African Agency and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement // *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. 2021. Vol. 36, No. 1. P. 119–137.

²⁸⁶ Teye et al. (2019). *Op. cit.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

sector-specific laws like the Oil and Gas Industry Content Development Act of 2010 that reserve low- and middle-level jobs for Nigerians while restricting expatriate roles to management positions. These administrative bottlenecks, complicated permit procedures, and selective enforcement limit practical economic opportunities for ECOWAS citizens, achieving similar restriction outcomes as Ghana's business bans but through regulatory rather than prohibitory mechanisms²⁸⁸.

Côte d'Ivoire presents a different pattern where formal sector access is relatively open, but unskilled migrants face significant barriers in the informal economy through local licensing policies, proof-of-residence requirements, and selective enforcement targeting street vending and small-scale trade²⁸⁹. These measures effectively block livelihood creation despite formal sector accessibility, demonstrating how implementation practices can circumvent protocol rights. Senegal maintains relatively liberal border practices supporting short-term cross-border mobility, yet formal employment remains constrained by residence and work permit requirements, labour market regulations excluding foreigners from public sector and controlled professions, and business registration hurdles. This creates a situation where migrants experience mobility without meaningful economic integration²⁹⁰.

The experiences of Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal together illustrate varying but convergent ways through which the ECOWAS member states limit the achievement of free movement. Ghana has used deportations and tight business regulations to help in curtailing the involvement of foreign traders in the local economy²⁹¹. Nigeria on the other hand has implemented expatriate quota system and

²⁸⁸ Handbook on expatriate quota administration. Federal Ministry of Interior. Abuja: Government of Nigeria. 2017. P. 12.

²⁸⁹ Okafor, E.E. Local Content Policy and Employment in the Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry: Implications for Skills Development and Utilization // African Journal of Economic Policy. 2019. Vol. 26, No. 2, P. 55–78.

²⁹⁰ Teye, J. K., Yeboah, T., & Atuahene, F. Migration policy, practice and flows in West Africa // International Migration. 2019. Vol. 57(4). P. 153–169.

²⁹¹ Bob-Milliar, G.M. Rescuing migrants? The Ghanaian state and its citizens abroad // Diaspora

local content laws that in essence disqualify foreign nationals to hold low skilled jobs, while Cote d'Ivoire takes a relatively permissive approach to formal sector workers of ECOWAS countries but restricts unskilled migrants in the pursuit of access to the informal sector, and the process is further complicated by the complexity of the procedures used to establish their rights²⁹². Although Senegal typically allows a fairly easy entry through the border, the country has stringent requirements in terms of residence and work permits and has labour policies that limit the access of ECOWAS nationals to regulated jobs²⁹³. Though there may be differences in approach and intensity, a strand of common thread can be traced through these cases: national governments prefer to protect jobs and economic control to their own nationals rather than fully comply with regional integration procedures, undermining the broader vision of the ECOWAS of free movement.

All these similarities highlight the regional issues with the full realization of the ECOWAS free movement protocol. National states give their sovereign labour protections and social-economic realities more weight than abstract integration objectives and end up enforcing only selectively, benefiting nationals and inhibiting the mobility and economic inclusion of other ECOWAS citizens. Awumbila posits therefore, that the restrictions of ECOWAS nationals in Ghana, which are supposedly explained by legal and economic justifications, are a manifestation of the West African aversion to supranational labour mobility.

The ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) is based on a five-band tariff classification framework aimed at harmonizing the import duties among member states and promote regional trade integration by developing a customs union. It is divided into

Studies. 2012. Vol. 5(2). P. 175–193.

²⁹²Okeke-Uzodike, U., Isike, C. Regional hegemony: Nigerian power and contemporary challenges // *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*. 2019. Vol. 1(1). P. 93–110.

²⁹³ Teye, J. K., Yeboah, T., & Atuahene, F. Migration policy, practice and flows in West Africa // *International Migration*. 2019. Vol. 57(4). P. 153–169.

five bands (bands of goods) according to developmental and economic significance: Category 0 (0%), the most necessary social items such as staple foods and medicines; Category 1 (5%), the most important needs and capital items; Category 2 (10%), intermediate goods; Category 3 (20%), finished consumer goods; and Category 4 (35%), the products that should be given extra attention to support emerging industries²⁹⁴. The 35 percent tariff band is an indication of the attempts by the member states, especially the efforts of Nigeria, to protect vulnerable agricultural and manufacturing sectors that are vital in diversifying national economies and competing in industries.

Although Ghana and Nigeria have formally committed to the CET and its five-band tariff structure, with Ghana doing so in 2016 and Nigeria doing so already in 2015, the application of these bands in practice has suffered implementation hurdles as noted by the World Trade Organisation and the Nigeria Investment Promotion Council²⁹⁵. Ghana's delay to domesticate the necessary subsidiary laws and the tendency to rely on national exemptions have led to inconsistent application of tariffs, which has detracted the effectiveness of the band structure on the ground. Variable rates, selective exemption, and heavy licensing systems put a strain on trade and make it more expensive and difficult to do, especially by small-scale operators according to the World Bank and World Trade Organisation²⁹⁶. Nigeria has to a great extent shown a higher compliance in implementing the CET bands. However, this compliance is

²⁹⁴ European Centre for Development Policy Management. Focus on the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (Discussion Paper No. 154). 2015. P. 5.

²⁹⁵ Nigeria Investment Promotion Commission. Assessment of Nigeria's alignment with the ECOWAS CET 2016. URL: <https://nipc.gov.ng/> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

²⁹⁶ Implementing the ECOWAS Common External Tariff: Challenges and Opportunities // WTO. 2016. URL: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/456741468298475824/implementing-the-ecowas-common-external-tariff-challenges-and-opportunities-for-nigeria> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

disrupted by the continued use of import bans, levies, and transitional measures eroding tariff uniformity, promoting smuggling, and expanding informal cross-border trade²⁹⁷.

The five-band classification system therefore explains how governments of various nations find ways of balancing the objectives of regional integration with the protectionist objectives of the nation. States can create policy space through selective application of given bands to protect vulnerable sectors and retain fiscal revenue, and this pattern of national protection despite CET on paper is endemic across ECOWAS. This duplicity in its structure underlines how intricate the interplay of supranational commitments and national economic demands in the context of the ECOWAS customs union is.

The case study of Nigeria and Ghana is a pointer to the issues surrounding the implementation of the Protocol in the region. In countries like Niger and other francophone speaking countries, the influence of France and the EU is a major militating factor against compliance to ECOWAS Protocols. For instance, the EU sponsored ‘Anti- Smuggling Law’ in 2015 was antithetical to the principle of free movement in the region. The law saw to the tightening of border control systems that were alien to the spirit of free movement in the region²⁹⁸. This is one incidence among others that show how external factors influence compliance of the Free movement protocol. This is succinctly discussed in the subheading on ECOWAS-EU relations. For 50 years, ECOWAS has worked tirelessly to make the Protocol functional, championing the cause for a borderless Africa. The progress made is an indication that the future of Intra-African migration lies in the success of ECOWAS.

²⁹⁷ Implementing the ECOWAS Common External Tariff: Challenges and Opportunities // World Bank, 2016. P. 4.

²⁹⁸ Loi N° 2015–36 Relative au Trafic Illicite de Migrants (Translation: Law against Illegal Migrant Smuggling) // UNODC. URL: https://www.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/ner/2015/loi_relative_au_trafic_illicite_de_migran_ts_html/Loi_N2015-36_relative_au_trafic_illicite_de_migrants.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026).

In conclusion, while ECOWAS has established an ambitious legal framework for the free movement of persons, residence, and establishment, its practical implementation remains uneven and incomplete. Persistent challenges such as selective enforcement of protocols, inconsistent national policies, inadequate border management systems, and limited institutional capacity continue to hinder effective mobility across the region. Infrastructure deficits, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and weak reintegration mechanisms further constrain the practical realization of regional migration governance. These limitations highlight the gap between policy commitments and operational realities, suggesting that the success of the free movement agenda depends on stronger political commitment, improved institutional coordination, and sustained investment in infrastructure and administrative reforms.

Beyond the institutional and policy challenges discussed in this chapter, the analysis further reveals that regional migration in West Africa is fundamentally stimulated by persistent structural inequalities and socio-economic disparities across ECOWAS member states. Economic instability, unemployment, poverty, uneven development, political insecurity, and limited access to opportunities remain the primary forces driving individuals to move across borders in search of improved livelihoods. Historical labour migration patterns, declining revenues from primary commodities, weak industrial diversification, and limited intra-regional economic opportunities continue to shape mobility dynamics within the region. These structural conditions create strong push and pull factors that sustain migration regardless of the effectiveness or limitations of existing regional governance frameworks.

The chapter demonstrates that migration in the ECOWAS region should not be understood merely as a policy outcome or a legal phenomenon but as a structural response to deeper socio-economic and political realities. While ECOWAS was established to manage and facilitate mobility, the persistence of development gaps, economic vulnerabilities, and governance challenges continues to generate migration pressures that regional policies alone cannot adequately regulate. Xenophobia,

protectionist policies, and inconsistent implementation of free movement protocols therefore emerge not only as barriers to migration but also as reactions to underlying structural tensions associated with competition over scarce resources and opportunities.

The author therefore maintains that migration within ECOWAS is both a consequence of structural underdevelopment and an adaptive strategy adopted by individuals seeking economic security and social advancement. From this perspective, migration should not be viewed solely as a challenge to regional governance but also as an indicator of unresolved structural imbalances within the region's political economy. Addressing migration challenges consequently requires more than strengthening legal frameworks; it demands comprehensive socio-economic transformation, inclusive development policies, and greater economic convergence among member states.

In this regard, the chapter advances the position that ECOWAS can only effectively function as a driver of regional migration and integration if it addresses the root causes that stimulate migration, including economic inequality, weak institutional governance, and uneven distribution of opportunities. Without tackling these fundamental drivers, efforts to promote free movement will remain constrained, and migration will continue to reflect structural necessity rather than policy success. This position underscores the need for a more holistic approach to regional integration that combines mobility governance with sustainable development, economic diversification, and social inclusion.

The chapter demonstrated that colonial rule fundamentally altered the governance of mobility by imposing territorial borders and rigid citizenship regimes upon historically fluid societies. These colonial legal legacies were not dismantled at independence; rather, they were internalised and reproduced by postcolonial states. As a result, questions of nationality, belonging, and citizenship continue to shape migration governance, often producing administrative exclusion, vulnerability, and even

statelessness. Migration patterns in West Africa therefore operate within an architecture of inclusion and exclusion that is deeply rooted in law, history, and political power.

At the same time, the persistence of cross-border labour flows, ethnic networks, informal trade systems, and climate-induced displacement highlights the resilience of regional interdependence. Contemporary migration flows are not departures from historical practice but continuations of long-standing mobility systems, now operating within sovereign state structures. This tension between historically embedded mobility and territorially bounded sovereignty forms the conceptual bridge between migration and regional integration.

The chapter further analysed the emergence of modern regionalism in West Africa as a strategic response to this structural interdependence. Institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU/UEMOA), and the Mano River Union (MRU) represent layered efforts to manage economic integration, monetary coordination, security cooperation, and socio-political stability. However, the analysis revealed that regionalism in West Africa is not a linear march toward supranational unity. Rather, it is a pragmatic and evolving process constrained by political instability, economic asymmetries, security threats, and uneven implementation of agreed frameworks.

Particular attention was given to the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol as a cornerstone of regional integration. While the Protocol institutionalised visa-free entry and sought to guarantee rights of residence and establishment, its implementation has been uneven. The gap between normative commitments and domestic enforcement reflects the enduring tension between state sovereignty and regional obligations. Security concerns, administrative capacity limitations, and socio-economic disparities continue to challenge the full realisation of a borderless regional community.

CHAPTER 3. MIGRATION FACTOR IN THE RELATIONS OF ECOWAS WITH INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

3.1. Intra-African Migration and ECOWAS Migration Diplomacy

Movements into and out of a country have existed since time immemorial and the rate of travel has been reported as being dependent on the desire and capacity of the individuals carrying out such movements. However, in situations where the process involved in this movement is stringent or less demanding, there is a corresponding discouragement or enablement of travelling decisions. Borders exist as demarcations between countries to show the area of one territory as it differs from another, usually defended by relevant authorities to avoid illegitimate activities such as entry, escape, and illegal business²⁹⁹. While these borders protect a country from the illegal inflow of people, diplomatic strategies such as dual citizenship, trade policies, and free-movement policies help to circumvent the need for migration procedures such as visa approval for a more flexible desired movement³⁰⁰.

Laws surrounding this movement do not solely represent its policies, but they are elements of migration diplomacy. Basically, migration policies and issues such as trading and seeking refuge do not automatically translate to diplomacy except, they play roles in achieving the migration-related goals of a country³⁰¹. It typically involves bargaining to find a compromise between the interests of the regions involved classified as either the receiving, sending, or transit states³⁰². Migration in this context involves

²⁹⁹ Odhiambo P. Interregional mechanisms for protection of African migrants in the Gulf Region: What prospects for Africa? Bogotá: OASIS: Observatorio de Análisis de los Sistemas Internacionales, 2022. P. 2.

³⁰⁰ Wihtol de Wenden C. "Migration Diplomacy and Multi-Actor Governance." In: Migration and International Relations: IMISCOE Short Reader. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023, P. 59–73.

³⁰¹ Adamson F.B., Tsourapas G. Migration diplomacy in world politics. *International Studies Perspectives*, 2019, Vol. 20, No. 2, P. 113–128.

³⁰² Maru M.T. The future of African migration and mobility: continent on the move, or contained?

more than one country, with one being recognised as the sending state and the other recognised as the receiving state and could involve treaties and the relaxation of migration rules. Complex states are those that function in more than one capacity of migration, either as both sending and receiving or as sending and transit state or receiving and transit state³⁰³. For example, Nigeria functions as both a sending and receiving country in intra-African migration and Senegal is mostly a transit state for people who desire to travel to other continents³⁰⁴. This diplomacy has been one of the tools used to achieve international relations aims surrounding migration³⁰⁵.

While many scholars seem to be more interested in the migration of Africans to other continents as is seen in major cases, this movement still happens within the continent. This is a result of its perceived potential benefits in the present and future. In fact, evidence suggests that migration within Africa supersedes that occurring between Africa and other continents³⁰⁶. Therefore, this chapter unravels the concept of migration diplomacy regarding the migration of Africans to and from other African countries in the ECOWAS region.

Africa is a continent recognised for its high migration rate, especially in terms of emigration due to the high percentage of unemployment, insecurity, and poverty³⁰⁷. As a result, the quest to improve personal standards of living and quality of life propels the outward movement of most African indigenes. For some, the migration out of their

Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2022. P. 47.

³⁰³Adamson F.B., Tsourapas G. Migration diplomacy in world politics // *International Studies Perspectives*, 2019, Vol. 20, No. 2, P. 113–128.

³⁰⁴ Adepou A. Migration management in West Africa within the context of ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Common Approach on Migration: Challenges and Prospects. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2009. P. 2.

³⁰⁵ Tolay J. Interrogating and broadening the emerging narrative on migration diplomacy: a critical assessment. *Millennium*, 2022. P. 4.

³⁰⁶ Flahaux, M.L., De Haas, H. African migration: trends, patterns, drivers // *Comparative Migration Studies*. 2016. Vol. 4. P. 1–25.

³⁰⁷ Flahaux M.L., De Haas H. African migration: Trends, patterns, drivers. *Comparative Migration Studies*. 2016. Vol. 4. P. 1–25; Kerubo J. Diaspora diplomacy: Opportunities and challenges for African countries // *Nokoko*. 2021. Vol. 8(9). P. 36–52. █

home countries is temporary³⁰⁸. However, in other cases, some of these immigrants become diasporas and spend most of their lives outside their countries of origin. Africa has a large record of diasporas, and the African Union (AU) recognises their role in developing their homelands, therefore introducing diaspora diplomacy as a part of migration diplomacy³⁰⁹.

The pursuit of fertile land, food security, and seasonal labour were the primary factors behind the migration of people in the West African region before independence. The early literature and colonial records show that individuals were moving across permeable boundaries in search of arable land to work in cocoa and groundnut plantations, particularly in Ghana and Nigeria, as documented by International Labour Organisation³¹⁰. This trend was replicated after independence but changed to more structured labour movements which included mining, commercial agriculture and civil service jobs in the emerging national economies³¹¹. In the late 1970s, there was a diversification of migration with not only agricultural workers or migrants but also skilled workers, students and traders taking advantage of the prospects in other countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Ghana³¹². These established migration patterns found institutionalization in the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement which introduced legal rights to residence and establishment throughout the region³¹³.

³⁰⁸ Odhiambo P. Interregional mechanisms for protection of African migrants in the Gulf Region: What prospects for Africa? // OASIS: Observatorio de Análisis de los Sistemas Internacionales, 2022, Vol. 36. P. 181–202.

³⁰⁹ Kerubo J. Diaspora diplomacy: Opportunities and challenges for African countries // Nokoko. 2021. Vol. 8(9). P. 36–52. █

³¹⁰ International Labour Office (ILO). African labour survey: Labour force, employment and migration in West Africa. Geneva: International Labour Office, 1965. P. 2.

³¹¹ Olubiyi, E., Sunday, P.O., Ogunnusi, T. Does intra-African migration matter for intra-African trade? // EuroEconomica. 2023. Vol. 42(1). P. 164–182.

³¹² Bohning W. R. Studies in international migration. Geneva: International Labour Office, 1975. P. 3.

³¹³ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Protocol on free movement of persons, residence and establishment. Lagos: ECOWAS Secretariat, 1979. P. 5.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, (UN DESA) statistical trend on intra-African migration, reported an estimate of 6,176,385 cross-migration as of 1960, 7,966,359 in 1980, and 10,500,000 in 2000³¹⁴. The World Migration Report showed that, in 2020, an estimated 21 million Africans resided in other African regions than their countries of origin, recording a migration rate of 88% between 2010 and 2022, and 80% of African migrants are not interested in moving to another continent³¹⁵. West Africans visit other West African states seven times more than other international countries³¹⁶. This showed a progression in the rate of travel and even more in West Africa, partly attributed to the short distances between the countries and close similarities in culture and language.

ECOWAS migration diplomacy has been used to balance regional integration objectives and national sovereignty, and offers a cooperative model, although the actual realization of free movement is usually determined by the domestic policies and economic priorities of individual states.

Prior to the formation of the ECOWAS and the advent of migration diplomacy, attempts were made to strengthen West African states after gaining independence via interregional collaborations, a concept now termed ‘old regionalism’³¹⁷. These interregional collaborations aimed at easing the divide conferred by the diverse colonisation of the member states by the English, French, or Portuguese colonisers. This ‘new regionalism’, beyond the three levels of the treaty provisions outlined as the freedom of entry and settlement into any member state, the freedom to seek and take

³¹⁴ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. United Nations Global Migration Database. New York: United Nations, 2008. P. 3.

³¹⁵International Organization for Migration (IOM). World Migration Report. McAuliffe M., Triandafyllidou A. (eds.), Geneva: IOM, 2022. P. 2.

³¹⁶ Aniche, E.T., Alumona, I.M., Iwuoha, V.C., Isike, C., Nnamani, R.G. Your Land or Your Life? ECOWAS free movement regime, migration, and resource conflicts in West Africa // Society. 2023. Vol. 6. P. 1–3.

³¹⁷ Arinze, A.I., Eke, R.E., Temitope, B.S., Moses, I.K. Nigeria and ECOWAS: The challenges of internal unity and external conspiracy // African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies (AJPAS), 2021. Vol. 14(1). P. 4-5.

on employment, and the freedom to engage in economic activities³¹⁸, further involves interactions with foreign organisations such as the World Bank Group and the European Union (EU), featuring even more actors and neo-liberalism. On one hand, this introduces complexities due to conflicts of interest but, on the other hand, provides more opportunities for support from international relations³¹⁹.

The visa-free policy during cross-migration among the member states has been recognised as a major driver of this reality³²⁰. In addition, the ECOWAS brown card was brought into existence in 1982 as a means to ensure free vehicle movement across borders with its possession, serving as an insurance to reduce the cost of crossing regional borders such as is seen in the Schengen countries³²¹. Such free movement encourages interregional business activities as the possibility of market expansion across borders becomes evident and shows a potential to boost economies as a result. This brown card further provides for arbitration during accidents as the bearer is entitled to a session of arbitration for a due process of resolution³²². This brown card has however not been fully in use in some member states while others have achieved full compliance. For example, the Togo government placed the card among the compulsory papers required during the insurance process in 2018, a policy that stands till this moment of study. Bénin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and the Gambia implemented the law as well, leaving Nigeria and eight other countries³²³.

³¹⁸ Urso, G., Hakami, A. Regional Migration Governance in Africa: AU and RECs. EUR 29325 EN. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. 2018. P. 74-75.

³¹⁹ Porter, J.K., Osei-Hwedie, B.Z. Regionalism as a Tool for Promoting Economic and Regional Development: A Case Study of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) // Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings. 2015. Vol. 31. P. 13.

³²⁰ Flahaux, M.-L., De Haas, H., African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers // Comparative Migration Studies. 2016. Vol. 4(1). P. 1–25.

³²¹ Dodzi, W.K. The ECOWAS Brown Card Scheme: A Catalyst for Economic Integration and Poverty Eradication in West Africa // B&FT Online. 2023. P. 34.

³²² Porter, J.K., Osei-Hwedie, B.Z. Regionalism as a Tool for Promoting Economic and Regional Development: A Case Study of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) // Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings. 2015. Vol. 31. P. 15.

³²³ Khaliq, Z. ECOWAS Council Charges Nigeria, 8 Others On Brown Card Automation // Leadership.

Following the establishment of the treaty, in 1985 and 2000 respectively, a travel certificate and ECOWAS passport were introduced as means of achieving the said ease of movement³²⁴. The ECOWAS passport is recognised as being the only requirement for movement into any of the member states and the rights of the holders are protected as a result. This no-visa movement across the states has shown immense impact as the statistics reported by Kramo (2022) showed that 90% of migration into West African countries are from other members of the ECOWAS, leaving 10% to places outside the regions³²⁵. Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria fall in the category of both the leading sending and leading receiving countries. Another peculiar concept is the almost equal percentage of cross-migration within countries. For example, the highest number of migrants to Nigeria comes from Ghana and vice versa³²⁶.

ECOWAS is Africa's most advanced region in the field of migration diplomacy, hosting the continent's most mobile population³²⁷. Its concept is based on integration theory, which requires member states to compromise national policies for mutual benefit, creating what scholars call the benefit/hero concept, in which both sending and receiving States benefit from regional cooperation. In addition to economic integration, the community has developed institutional mechanisms, including military monitoring groups formed after the Liberian civil war, trade facilitation through organizations such as UEMOA, cultural institutions such as the West African Festival of Arts and Culture,

2023. P. 45.

³²⁴ Urso, G., Hakami, A., Regional Migration Governance in Africa: AU and RECs. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018. P. 65.

³²⁵ Aniche, E.T., Alumona, I.M., Iwuoha, V.C., Isike, C., Nnamani, R.G. Your Land or Your Life? ECOWAS Free Movement Regime, Migration, and Resource Conflicts in West Africa // Society. 2023. Vol. 6. P. 1–3.

³²⁶ Bisong, A. Assessing Gender Inclusion in the Migration Policies of ECOWAS // Africa Portal. 2019. P. 32.

³²⁷ Adaawen, S. Challenges to Intra-Regional Migration and Economic Integration in West Africa: A Focus on Ghana and Nigeria // UNU-WIDER Development Conference “Migration and Mobility”. 2017. P. 4.

the West African Football Union, and the ECOWAS Court, established in 2001, all of which demonstrate multifaceted approaches to regional integration³²⁸.

Despite these achievements, migration diplomacy faces serious difficulties in implementation. Although the first two stages of the Protocol on Free Movement — visa-free ninety-day entry and the right to stay - have been implemented, the third stage, which guarantees the full right to settle, remains unfulfilled. Member States continue to use borders as security barriers rather than bridges, maintaining more than two coordinated checkpoints, while immigrants face victimization and extortion by customs authorities. Countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia have introduced national identity cards and residence permits that distinguish indigenous people from migrants, effectively undermining the spirit of the protocol³²⁹. Internal disunity in the Member States distracts attention from the goals of regional cooperation.

Restrictions on dual citizenship prevent the appointment of representatives of the diaspora to key government positions due to alleged loyalty conflicts, while the regional court faces accusations of bias, limited trust and consultation. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused serious problems due to border closures and travel restrictions, disruptions to intraregional trade, resource sharing, and increased poverty and economic instability, although migration policies have since begun to ease.

«Political and economic instability in all Member States poses fundamental problems»³³⁰. Insurgent groups such as IPOB in Nigeria, terrorist organizations including Boko Haram and the Fulani Shepherds, as well as political crises in Mali and

³²⁸ Kramo, N., *Toward an Afrocentric Perspective on Migration: An Analysis of Scholarly Works on Intra-African Migration Narratives (2015–2022)*, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2022. URL: <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/44829/1/Naomi%20Kramo%20FINAL%20MRP.pdf> (accessed: 22.02.2026).

³²⁹ Kramo, N., *Toward an Afrocentric Perspective on Migration: An Analysis of Scholarly Works on Intra-African Migration Narratives (2015–2022)*, 2022. URL: <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/44829/1/Naomi%20Kramo%20FINAL%20MRP.pdf> (accessed: 22.02.2026).

³³⁰ Maru, M.T. *The Future of African Migration and Mobility: Continent on the Move, or Contained?* // European Union Institute for Security Studies. 2022. P. 32.

Côte d'Ivoire are leading to forced displacement and security challenges that hinder cross-border movement. While the Nigerian government links terrorist attacks to border permeability, researchers note that «the rise in illegal migration across porous borders has facilitated the smuggling of drugs and firearms without appropriate regulatory measures to curb these crimes»³³¹. Labeling ECOWAS protocols as responsible for security issues further exacerbates implementation failures, creating a cycle in which security concerns justify non-compliance, which in turn undermines the integration that the protocols were designed to achieve³³².

ECOWAS faces fundamental structural challenges that impede regional integration beyond the implementation gaps already discussed. The community consists of developing low- and middle-income countries burdened with high foreign debts, collectively labelled among the poorest regions globally despite abundant natural resources³³³. This economic reality aligns with the migration hump theory, where underdeveloped nations experience high emigration while struggling to attract immigrants. Niger exemplifies this pattern, functioning primarily as a transit country between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa with a poverty rate of 47,3% in 2023 driving rising emigration. Scholars argue that true economic integration remains unattainable without significant economic breakthrough, further complicated by trade dishonesty involving counterfeit and substandard products that erode trust and distort regional markets³³⁴.

³³¹ Kramo, N., *Toward an Afrocentric Perspective on Migration: An Analysis of Scholarly Works on Intra-African Migration Narratives (2015–2022)*, 2022. URL: <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/44829/1/Naomi%20Kramo%20FINAL%20MRP.pdf> (accessed: 22.02.2026).

³³² Aniche, E.T., Alumona, I.M., Iwuoha, V.C., Isike, C., Nnamani, R.G. 'Your Land or Your Life!' ECOWAS Free Movement Regime, Migration, and Resource Conflicts in West Africa // *Society*, 2023, Vol. 6, P. 1–3.

³³³ Teye, J. K., Awumbila, M., Benneh, Y., *Intra-Regional Migration in the ECOWAS Region: Trends and Emerging Challenges*, 2015. P. 101.

³³⁴ Azeez, G. *Niger as a Transit Country for Nigerian and Other West African Migrants*, 2020. // Mamman-Daura, F., *Forced Migration in Nigeria is a Development Issue*, OECD Development Matters, Paris, 2022. P. 22.

Neocolonial relationships with external powers create competing interests that challenge intra-regional cohesion. The Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and ECOWAS illustrates this tension, as Nigeria and other member states refused to sign foreseeing economic oppression, while Ghana's signing led to poultry industry challenges despite benefiting from exporting 28,5% of its products to Europe in 2022³³⁵. These intercontinental relationships often conflict with regional integration objectives, forcing member states to navigate competing priorities³³⁶.

Migration data inadequacy severely undermines policy formulation and implementation. Despite low migration requirements, irregular migration proliferates, with women and children trafficked for sex work and exploitative labour, crossing borders through unofficial routes or bribery without passports, rendering them invisible in official statistics³³⁷. Although guidelines for migration reporting exist and the ECOWAS trade information system was developed, regional data remains inconsistent due to negligence and political influence, forcing reliance on United Nations databases. Unlike EU practices, border officers lack proper training, enabling corruption and oppression at entry points³³⁸.

Political tensions among member states further fragment the community. Nigeria's demographic and economic dominance generates resistance from smaller states unwilling to relax border restrictions, fearing loss of sovereign control—a tension absent in the Schengen system. Multiple memberships in overlapping regional organisations like the Senegal River Development Organization, Lake Chad Basin

³³⁵Ghana trade fact sheet. URL: <https://www.tradeunionsinafcfta.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Ghana-Trade-Fact-Sheet-1.pdf> (accessed: 03.03.2026).

³³⁶ Arinze, A.I., Eke, R.E., Temitope, B.S., Moses, I.K. Nigeria and ECOWAS: The Challenges of Internal Unity and External Conspiracy // *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*. 2021. Vol. 14. No. 1. P. 47.

³³⁷ Arinze, A.I., Eke, R.E., Temitope, B.S., Moses, I.K. Nigeria and ECOWAS: The Challenges of Internal Unity and External Conspiracy // *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*. 2021. Vol. 14. No. 1. P. 49.

³³⁸ Okunade, S. K., Ogunnubi, O. A., “Schengen” Agreement in Africa? African Agency and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement // *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. 2021. Vol. 36, No. 1, P. 119–137.

Commission, and Mano River Union create conflicting objectives that dilute commitment to ECOWAS priorities. These intertwined «economic, institutional, and political challenges collectively constrain the realization of ECOWAS integration objectives despite the community's advanced policy frameworks»³³⁹.

ECOWAS is the most advanced model of regional integration and migration diplomacy in Africa, and its Protocol on Free Movement serves as a model for other regional economic communities, including SADC and EAC. The African Union has asked ECOWAS for its experience in implementing its continental Protocol on Freedom of movement, «positioning the community as a strategic leader in sharing best practices and fostering dialogue on migration policy issues across Africa»³⁴⁰. This influence extends beyond West Africa, demonstrating how migration diplomacy shapes interactions not only between Member States, but also with the entire continent³⁴¹.

Security and illegal migration remain constant challenges for migration diplomacy. Border transparency, compounded by corruption and weak law enforcement, allows terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, bandits, and criminals to operate beyond national borders, with attacks often linked to foreigners from neighboring States. The arrest of fifty-seven foreign criminals who illegally entered Lagos is an example of security threats that fuel diplomatic hesitation and unwillingness to further liberalize migration policy. Human trafficking is another important aspect: in 2013, about eight hundred cases were documented, and NAPTIP estimates that about one hundred thousand cases of deception, labor exploitation, and sexual violence are

³³⁹ Okunade, S. K., Ogunnubi, O. A., “Schengen” Agreement in Africa? African Agency and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement // *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. 2021. Vol. 36, No. 1, P. 119–137.

³⁴⁰ Protocol on the Facilitation of Movement of Persons. Gaborone: SADC Secretariat. 2005. URL: <https://www.sadc.int/document/protocol-facilitation-movement-persons-2005> (accessed: 08.05.2025).

³⁴¹ Моргунова О.А., Морару Н.-Ф. Управление миграцией в Западной Африке: роль ЕС и внутренние риски для стран региона на примере Нигера // *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения*. 2025. Т. 25, № 1. С. 121–132.

reported annually, facilitated by borders that restrict the movement of vehicles but allow people to move freely³⁴².

These transnational issues require multilateral cooperation beyond ECOWAS borders. The Community cooperates with the Sahel and North African countries, including Libya and Algeria, which serve as important transit points for illegal migration and human trafficking. Joint initiatives such as the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya and the Capacity-building Mission in Niger facilitate information exchange and technical infrastructure development³⁴³. Algeria and Libya played a mediating role between ECOWAS and the military leadership of Niger, warning against foreign military intervention that could destabilize their borders, emphasizing the strategic role of ECOWAS linking the western and North African corridors³⁴⁴.

In addition to providing security, ECOWAS is engaged in labor migration diplomacy to protect citizens working in South and Central Africa through money transfer mechanisms and bilateral labor agreements. Participation in the Joint Labor Migration Management Program with SADC, EAC, and international partners demonstrates a commitment to addressing social security issues, labor needs, and secure money transfer systems³⁴⁵. Humanitarian diplomacy is becoming increasingly important as Islamic terrorism and insurgencies in Mali, Niger, the Republic of Nigeria and Burkina Faso, exacerbated by climate change, lead to internal and cross-border

³⁴² Aniche, E.T., Alumona, I.M., Iwuoha, V.C., Isike, C., Nnamani, R.G. ‘Your Land or Your Life’! ECOWAS Free Movement Regime, Migration, and Resource Conflicts in West Africa // *Society*, 2023, Vol. 6, P. 1–3.

³⁴³ Obikaeze, V.C., Inah, E.M., Efanodor-Obeten, O.H. Border Security and Challenges of Human Trafficking in Nigeria in the 21st Century // *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy*, 2021. Vol. 11, No. 2. P. 51.

³⁴⁴ Libya Urges Neighbors, ECOWAS to Cooperate for Niger’s Stability, London: Middle East Monitor, 2023. P. 12.

³⁴⁵ Labour Migration Governance: Gaps and Challenges in Selected Member States in ECOWAS, EAC and SADC, Geneva: IOM. 2022. P. 31.

displacement of people, which requires coordination with the Sahel States, Chad, Cameroon and Sudan to resolve regional humanitarian crises³⁴⁶.

The UNHCR in 2023 reported that West and Central African states have a combined 11.8 million displaced and stateless people³⁴⁷. Chad played host to 1.3 million refugees from Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon and Central African Republic. Report also shows that Cameroon hosted about 500,000 refugees in 2023, 26% of whom are of Nigerian descent³⁴⁸. These large unplanned influx of people into any nation can overwhelm local resources.

The ECOWAS does not directly intervene in humanitarian crisis either in Chad or Cameroon as highlighted above but allows member states to intervene through bilateral diplomatic pathways. For instance, Nigeria is a member of a joint border commission with both Chad and Cameroon (Lake Chad Basin Commission), and shares intelligence/security resources through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat insurgency and respond to humanitarian crisis³⁴⁹.

Tripartite agreements between Nigeria, Cameroon and the UNHCR on Voluntary Repatriation of Refugees, and similar ones between Nigeria, Chad and UNHCR are structured mechanisms developed to ensure the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees who fled the Boko Haram insurgency. These frameworks narrow down the individual roles of parties, from distribution of relief materials to biometric capture and border management processes³⁵⁰. Bilateral agreements like this highlight regional efforts to foster diplomatic ties and manage migration in the region.

³⁴⁶ Коммегни, D.P. Вынужденная миграция в странах Африки южнее Сахары // Vestnik RUDN. International Relations. 2019. Vol. 19. No. 2. P. 264–273.

³⁴⁷ Global Report 2023: West and Central Africa Regional Overview, UNHCR, Geneva, 2024. P. 3.

³⁴⁸ Annual Results Report 2023: Cameroon Multi-Country Office, UNHCR, Geneva, 2024. P. 10.

³⁴⁹ Bariledum, K., Udeoji, E.A. Nigeria-Cameroon Diplomatic Relations: Dynamics, Challenges and Strategic Options // NIU Journal of Social Sciences. 2020. Vol. 6. No. 3. P. 127–134.

³⁵⁰ Tripartite Agreement for the Voluntary Repatriation of Nigerian Refugees Living in Cameroon, UNHCR, Geneva, 2017. P. 32.

The efforts of the community in advancing migration diplomacy in intra-African migration cannot be overemphasised. ECOWAS has placed itself both internally and in its relationship with its neighbours as a trailblazer in intra-African migration. This is demonstrated in how it has handled cases on Migration management and crisis response in Libya/Algeria, Transit migration and border diplomacy in Niger as well as Labour migration with Southern African countries.

When reports about the maltreatment and human rights violations of ECOWAS citizens arose in Libya, ECOWAS response was swift and decisive. Relationship between ECOWAS and Libya on migration management accelerated after the crisis of 2011, which made thousands of the West African migrant, especially from Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and Gambia vulnerable to detention, abuse, and trafficking in Libya. ECOWAS called for emergency meetings with the African Union, UN and the IOM on reports in 2017 of slave markets and acute human rights violations. They coordinated the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of stranded migrants. Joint task forces between Libya and ECOWAS nations allowed the return of more than 10,000 migrants while ECOWAS used diplomacy to call for the improvement of treatment and access for humanitarian agencies to detention centers. This crisis response strengthened AU-ECOWAS cooperation over migration governance, triggered ECOWAS's Strategic Action Plan against Trafficking in Persons (2018–2022) and boosted the bloc's regional credibility as an advocate of migrant rights in the face of existing challenges in the detention and border management systems in Libya³⁵¹.

Niger is a country of significant interest as it serves as a transit point for West African migrants going to North Africa and Europe. ECOWAS and Niger relations are built mainly on transit migration and border diplomacy, as Niger's city of Agadez is an infamous migrant smuggling zone. There is also the influence of external factors, as

³⁵¹ African Union, Joint AU–EU–UN Taskforce Meeting to Address the Migrant Situation in Libya // African Union, 2017. P. 12.

EU-funded policies force Niger to criminalise smuggling and normal mobility patterns and created conflicts as Niger started arresting and detaining ECOWAS people who were crossing towards Libya and Algeria³⁵². ECOWAS responded by entering dialogue with Niger to strike a balance between security concerns and the implementing the free movement protocol. The ECOWAS-Niger Migration Dialogue Platform which includes representatives of civil society/NGOs, border authorities, and the ECOWAS Commission resolved to identify traffickers from regular migrants and enhance diplomatic cooperation with Sahelian and North African countries to strengthen border control and migration flows. Commissioner Fatou Sow Sarr of the ECOWAS led a high-level humanitarian mission to Niamey to assess the conditions of migrants, coordinate with Nigerien Authorities, and build recovery and reintegration plans. ECOWAS also partnered with IOM to carry out voluntary repatriation, providing logistical and financial support to airlift stranded migrants. This move highlighted its commitment to migrant welfare and regional cooperation³⁵³.

These initiatives, whether entered into as bilateral agreements or multilateral agreements are in line with ECOWAS's bigger migration-governance agenda with the help of EU funded platforms such as the Migration Dialogue in West Africa and Free Movement of Persons and Migration in West Africa (FMMM), focusing on the rights of persons in movement and data sharing as well as collective border management to harmonize migrations policies in West Africa and Maghreb region.

In conclusion, intra-African migration within the ECOWAS region demonstrates that mobility is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a strategic diplomatic instrument. Through the 1979 Free Movement Protocol and subsequent frameworks such as the ECOWAS passport and brown card scheme, the region has institutionalised migration as a vehicle for economic integration, political cooperation, and regional

³⁵² ECOWAS and Its Partners Rally to Find a Long-Lasting Solution to the Plight of Stranded Migrants in Niger // Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). 2022. P. 43.

³⁵³ ECOWAS' Comprehensive Commitment to Safeguarding the Well-Being of Stranded Migrants // Abuja: ECOWAS. 2023. P. 31.

solidarity. However, despite being one of the most advanced regional mobility regimes in Africa, the practical implementation of these policies remains constrained by national sovereignty concerns, security threats, economic fragility, irregular migration, and weak institutional capacity. The tension between integration and protectionism continues to shape the trajectory of ECOWAS migration diplomacy. Nevertheless, ECOWAS remains a continental model, influencing other regional blocs and reinforcing the idea that migration, when effectively governed, can strengthen regional unity, promote labour mobility, enhance security cooperation, and deepen diplomatic engagement both within and beyond West Africa.

3.2. ECOWAS Partnership with the UN in Solving Refugees Problem

Asylum-seekers flee their countries due to war or persecution but haven't yet gained refugee status. The UN defines a refugee as someone outside their country, unable to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group³⁵⁴.

In West Africa, the ECOWAS region faces major challenges managing refugees. Host countries are responsible for their safety, but most are under-resourced and unable to police porous borders or handle security threats in camps. Refugees often become entangled in political and security dynamics, losing impartiality³⁵⁵. Key examples include:

³⁵⁴ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees // United Nations Treaty Series, 1951.Vol. 189. P. 3.

³⁵⁵ Opaye C. Refugee Camp Security in West Africa: An ECOWAS Priority. KAIPTC Paper No. 11, 2005. P. 4.

- Côte d'Ivoire: Instability from economic decline and civil wars drove refugees to Ghana, which shares cultural ties, easing movement. By 2006, 610,800 had returned³⁵⁶.
- Niger: Crises in Libya, Nigeria (Boko Haram), and Côte d'Ivoire led to 302,137 refugees by 2023³⁵⁷.
- Mali: Armed conflict since 2012 pushed 185,144 people abroad, while 176,144 refugees from elsewhere also fled Mali³⁵⁸.

Under International Law, the concept of internally displaced persons are persons who are forcefully displaced but have not crossed any international border. In the ECOWAS region, this distinction is difficult to make. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol is the international framework that protects refugees. Once a person fleeing forced displacement crosses an international border and begins to seek asylum, they are under the protection of the host state per UN convention³⁵⁹. On the other hand, an IDP is protected by the non-binding UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998)³⁶⁰. The African Union's Kampala Convention (2009) is an African context specific convention that protects displaced persons in the region and mandates national governments to provide durable solutions³⁶¹.

The United Nations Guiding Principle on Internal Displacement clarifies the role that national governments must take to ensure the rights of IDPs are protected. It

³⁵⁶ Bah T.M. Addressing Côte d'Ivoire's Deeper Crisis // Africa Security Brief. 2012. No. 19. P. 13.

³⁵⁷ Niger: Refugee Policy Review Framework Update as at 30th June, 2023. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/unhcr/2024> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁵⁸ N'Faly S. ECOWAS Migrants Crisis Context in the ECOWAS Region // Presentation Paper, Rabat Process, 2014. URL: <https://www.rabat-process.org/images/RabatProcess/Documents/presentation-ecowas-migrants-crisis-context-ecowas-region-NFaly-thematic-meeting-2014-paris-rabat-process.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁵⁹ Internally Displaced People // UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-protect/internally-displaced-people> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁶⁰ El-Bushra J., Fish K. "Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons." In: Inclusive Security, Sustainable Peace: A Toolkit for Advocacy and Action. London: International Alert & Women Waging Peace, 2004, P. 1–17.

³⁶¹ African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention). African Union, 2009.

includes principles relating to protection from displacement, protection during displacement, humanitarian assistance and durable solutions. The Kampala Convention outlines the legal framework for prevention, protection and assistance to IDPs, the obligations of; states, armed groups, non-state actors, civil society organisations and humanitarian agencies³⁶².

The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol blurs the legal distinction between refugees and IDPs in the sense that many persons fleeing conflict move to neighbouring states under the provisions of the protocol, which may not require community members to seek asylum status within member states. Internally displaced persons are able to move freely to other nation states without requiring registering or continue to tag themselves as IDPs and this complicates the work and efforts of the UNHCR³⁶³. For instance, many IDPs fleeing the insurgency in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states fled into the Niger, Cameroon and Chad. Although Chad and Cameroon are not ECOWAS states and have a tripartite agreement with Nigeria and UNHCR on refugee management³⁶⁴, many Nigerian IDPs move freely into Niger³⁶⁵ undocumented and unregistered as refugees. This situation is also played out during the Côte d'Ivoire crisis post-election crisis in 2010-2011 and Malian crisis of 2012³⁶⁶. Within the ECOWAS

³⁶² African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa:(Kampala Convention). African Union, 2009.

³⁶³ Elumelu, T. L. ECOWAS Free Movement Across Sectors: Issues and Experiences. ECOWAS Commission // International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa). 2017. URL: https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/ecowas_free_movement_across_sectors_-_issues_and_experiences.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁶⁴ Chad, Nigeria, and UNHCR Sign Tripartite Agreement to Establish a Framework for Voluntary Repatriation // United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/chad-nigeria-and-unhcr-sign-tripartite-agreement-establish-framework-voluntary> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁶⁵ '394,000 Nigerian IDPs stranded in Niger, Cameroon, Chad – UN' // The Punch. 11 January 2025. URL: <https://punchng.com/394000-nigerian-idps-stranded-in-niger-cameroon-chad-un/> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁶⁶ Shelter from the storm: a real-time evaluation of UNHCR's response to the emergency in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. Policy Development and Evaluation Service, PDES/2011/07, URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4e04982c9.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

member states, there are over 6 million internally displaced persons, 3.5 million of which live in Northeast Nigeria³⁶⁷.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the UN agency that is responsible for handling refugees and asylum issues. The UNHCR partners with ECOWAS through formal agreements such as Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Joint Action plans that spell the roles and responsibilities of each entity in the partnership and areas of collaboration to ensure that the multifaceted challenges of refugees in migration and displacement are addressed.

ECOWAS and the UNHCR signed the first MoU in 2001, laying the foundation for the partnership on forced displacement, statelessness, and refugee protection in the region. It consolidated on the UN Convention Relating to the status of the refugee and aimed to address the various needs of vulnerable groups such as women and children fleeing conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone as at then. It sought to create a political solution, bringing stability to the region and to mitigate the impact of large population migration to hosting countries. The MoU also promoted refugee law among member states of ECOWAS and Civil society organisations³⁶⁸. Although the 2001 memorandum leveraged on ECOWAS political and economic influence and UNHCR technical expertise to address statelessness and the challenges of refugees, emerging concerns on terrorism and insurgency, climate change migration, and increasing complexities in migration flow mandated a revision of the MoU in subsequent years.

In 2022, the UN Refugee Agency and ECOWAS revised their agreement to expand the scope and objectives of their collaboration. The revised memorandum, and further revision in 2023 saw the two bodies address the issues of refugee and asylum

³⁶⁷ECOWAS and UNHCR Signed Agreement to Strengthen Refugee Protection and Address Internal Displacements in West Africa. UNHCR, 2023. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/ng/news/press-releases/ecowas-and-unhcr-signed-agreement-strengthen-refugee-protection-and-address> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁶⁸ ECOWAS, UNHCR sign memorandum of understanding to protect displaced persons. UNHCR 2024. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/ecowas-unhcr-memorandum-understanding> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

protection, the increasing needs of internally displaced persons and the promotion of durable solutions in the context of voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration³⁶⁹. The revised framework also covered frameworks on the identification and assistance to stateless persons, and emergency responses to humanitarian crises.

In order to make the MoUs operational, ECOWAS and UNHCR developed detailed workplans that specified the commitment of resources, the timelines and activities needed to make it fully functional. Joint workplans saw the increased technical support of UNHCR to ECOWAS institutions such as the ECOWAS Court of Justice³⁷⁰, ECOWAS Parliament and the ECOWAS Commission. The International Labour Organisation ILO-UNHCR Joint action plan of 2023-2025, addressing commitment to labour migrations in the region also forms part of the commitment to the operationalisation of the ECOWAS-UNHCR MoU³⁷¹.

Despite the MoUs, member states have shown varied operationalisation of the UN Conventions and those of the African Union. This reflects in their refugee and asylum policies which are sometimes influenced by external bodies. Country specific context is cited below.

The volume of migration in the subregion is mostly influenced by socio-economic reasons and political instability. These has led to migration crisis and increased the number of refugees who are fleeing for their safety. Refugee and Asylum policies are country specific, allowing member states the liberty to decide what framework works for them within the context of international humanitarian efforts. Some examples are cited forthwith.

³⁶⁹ECOWAS and UNHCR Signed an Agreement to Strengthen Refugee Protection and Address Forced Displacement in West Africa // United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2023. URL: www.unhcr.org/ng/news/press-releases/ecowas-and-unhcr-signed-agreement-strengthen-refugee-protection-and-address (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷⁰ UNHCR, ECOWAS Court Sign Partnership Agreement, 2023. URL: <http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/unhcr-ecowas-court-sign-partnership-agreement/> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷¹ ILO-UNHCR Joint Action Plan 2023-2025. International Labour Organization & UNHCR, 2023. P. 3.

Niger's Law No. 97-016 of 1997³⁷² stipulates the conditions that establishes the status of a refugee while its implementing Decree No 98-382/PRN/MI/ AT of 1998³⁷³ guarantees the rights of refugees, as well as establish the national asylum procedures for asylum-seekers. The National Eligibility Commission (CNE) is responsible for the registration of refugees and asylum seekers and gives an identification card based on a *prima facie* assessment approach.

The UNHCR in its Niger Refugee Policy Review Framework for 2020-2023 stated that refugees and asylum seekers in Niger enjoy a legal stay arrangements and access to civil status documentation for events including birth, marriage and death in Niger. The process for obtaining asylum status is more thorough, and asylum seekers are able to appeal a negative decision of the CNE if they are denied asylum status in the Gracious Appeal Committee³⁷⁴.

Under the Refugee Law, Refugees and Asylum seekers have equal access to justice and security services as Nigeriens, guarantees equal rights to freedom of movement and residence, freedom to work and labour laws. ECOWAS refugees enjoy the rights that come with the ECOWAS treaties. However, in practice, refugees are required to enrol under the Ministry of Labour to obtain clearance for formal employment. This enables them to be registered and captured under the *Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale*³⁷⁵.

In supporting host communities with refugees, the Nigerien government through its «Plan de Développement Économique et Social (PDES) for 2022-2026, The Food Crisis Prevention and Management Strategy 2021-2025» and the Government's World

³⁷² Niger: Loi No. 97-016 du 1997 portant statuts des réfugiés, 20 June 1997, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1997/fr/67763> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷³ Niger: Décret No. 98-382/PRN/MI/AT du 1998 déterminant les modalités d'application de la Loi No. 97-016 du 1997 portant statut des réfugiés, 24 December 1998, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/1998/fr/65784> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷⁴ Niger: Arrêté No. 127/MI/D/DEC-R5 du 2006 portant création, attributions, composition et fonctionnement d'un Comité de Recours Gracieux, 28 March 2006, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2006/fr/67793> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷⁵ Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale du Niger. URL: <https://cnss.ne/> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

Bank Funded PARCA (*Projet d'Appui aux Réfugiés et aux Communautés d'Accueil*) has continued to provide valuable support to the most vulnerable persons in host communities and refugees. The PARCA project reportedly impacted 217,892 refugees³⁷⁶.

Social cohesion projects such as the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) has continued to engage youth and women in peacebuilding processes, and conflict prevention mechanisms in Diffa region of Niger where host communities and refugee populations reside.

Two International instruments and the Nigeria Refugee Act of 1989 guide the definition and operationalisation of Refugees in Nigeria. This includes the 1951 UN Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees (which was later modified in 1967 protocol to remove the restrictions on time and place) and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa³⁷⁷. These protocols set certain criteria that must be made in order to obtain Refugee Status in Nigeria.

A Federal Commissioner, appointed by the President oversees the affairs of the Refugee Commission in Nigeria. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees or the nearest officer of the Commissioner writes to the Federal Commissioner to seek refugee status for a candidate. Upon receiving the notice, an Eligibility Committee recognised by the Act conducts an assessment to determine if the applicant is eligible. The applicant who is denied status on first assessment has the right to appeal within thirty (30) days of the communication of refusal. While awaiting status, the refugee is guaranteed a stay until determination of status. The applicant is also given reasonable time of stay to apply to another country if status is not granted by Nigeria³⁷⁸.

³⁷⁶ Niger: Refugee Policy Review Framework Update as at 30th June, 2023. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/unhcr/2024> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷⁷ Convention relating to the status of refugees // United Nations Treaty Series, 1951. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1951/en/39821> (accessed: 02.03.2026); OAU convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa. Addis Ababa: Organization of African Unity, 1969. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab9.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁷⁸ Anyogu, F., Ozioko, M. An appraisal of the laws regulating refugee and asylum status in Nigeria

The National Commission for Refugees Act, now known as the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons Act, 2022³⁷⁹ also prohibits the expulsion, refusal of entry, extradition or return of refugees regardless of the legality of their entry into the nation. However, a refugee who is a threat to national security can have his status revoked and expelled, but not to a country where there is reasonable fear of persecution against his life. Under Section 23 of the Act, members of the family of a refugee are entitled to the same rights and treatment as the principal applicant and can remain or enter Nigeria as long as the latter's refugee status is still recognised under the act. In the event of change of civil status (such as marriage, separation, deaths, or attainment of legal age), the refugee status of such a family remains unchanged.

The Act in Section 24 also stipulates that a refugee with full status enjoys the rights and duties as contained in all extant conventions and protocols in which Nigeria is a signatory. Refugees and family members are granted residence permits, identification cards and travel documents in accordance with Article 28 of the United Nations Refugees Convention.

In 2021, the UNHCR Nigeria reported that there were 69,159 refugees and asylum seekers in Nigerian soil, 63,333 of which are Cameroonians and 2,939 are asylum seekers³⁸⁰. The reason for the high number of Cameroonian refugees is not unconnected with the recent Anglophone Crisis in the region, which has caused displacements.

// International Journal of Business & Law Research. 2019. Vol. 7(3). P. 42-47.

³⁷⁹ Nigeria: National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons Act, 2022, 28 December 2022. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2022/en/147560> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁸⁰ 'Refugees and asylum seekers in Nigeria as of 28 February 2021' <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Nigeria%20-%20Population%20Statistics%20February%202021.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

The UNHCR coordinated multi-sectoral response with government agencies, international organisations and local partners to identify, analyse and provide capacity training for refugees as well as humanitarian aid in Benue, Cross River and Taraba States³⁸¹. These ranged from registration and issuing of identity cards, provision of food items, capacity training for sexual and gender-based violence as well as livelihood supports. Specifically, the UNHCR report recorded they provided of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene resources and technical support to health facilities and donations of kits and medications. Advocacy efforts led to the enrolment of students in schools, and capacity training and empowerment were provided to farmers. Refugees also received cash for food items implemented by the World Health Organisation as part of COVID 19 prevention programs.

The State Emergency Management Agencies and UNHCR managed refugee camps in Benue and Cross River states. Through community engagement and/or negotiations, partners were able to resolve host community and refugee conflict issues³⁸².

Ghana's refugee policies are guided by the ratification of the international instruments of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and its subsequent amendments, and the 1969 Organisation of African Union Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa³⁸³. The 1992 Refugee Act of Ghana is the legislation in place that provides the legal framework that confers protection on asylum seekers and refugees in Ghana³⁸⁴.

³⁸¹ 'Operational Update: Cameroonian Refugees in Nigeria', 2. February 2021c, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Operational%20Update%20Cameroonian%20Refugees%20in%20Nigeria%20February%202021.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁸² Oluduro O., Ayooluwa S.E. Realising the Socio-Economic Rights of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Africa: The Nigerian Situation in: Durojaye E., Nanima R. D., Idowu-Ojo A., Mirugi-Mukundi G. (eds.). Realising Socio-Economic Rights of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Africa. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. P. 301.

³⁸³ Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, 10 September 1969, 1001 U.N.T.S. 45. URL: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36018.html> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁸⁴ Ghana: Refugee Law of 1992 [Ghana], 27 August 1993. URL:

The Law is similar to those of Nigeria and Niger earlier cited in this work. The Act makes provision for the establishment of a Refugee Board, empowered by law to oversee the registration of refugee and asylum seekers on first instance using the *prima facie* approach. The board also has powers to receive appeals and adjudicate, coordinate efforts for sourcing humanitarian aid to refugees as well as education, employment opportunities and basic support.

The distinction between the Ghana Refugee Law and Nigerian Refugee Act is that while Ghana provides that an immigration officer, a police officer or a UNHCR representative can receive applications for refugee status and forward same, the Nigerian Refugee Law states that any competent officer can notify the immigration or UNHCR representative. Ghana gives a period of three (3) months after an applicant has exhausted appeal while the Nigerian law only specifies “a reasonable time”. The law does not specify what constitutes a reasonable time.

A person ceases to be a refugee in Ghana if he/she becomes a citizen by naturalisation, has re-availed themselves under the protection of their nationality or another nationality, or has his/her refugee status revoked in the interest of national security or owing to the fact that the condition that necessitated their refugee status no longer exists. The Refugee Law Article 17 exempts Refugees from the restrictive policies of the Aliens Act that bars foreign nationals from participating in certain sectors of the Ghanaian labour market economy upon attaining the status of a refugee. Freedom of movement within Ghana as refugees is regulated as contained in the Alien Compliance Order, as well as self-employment, housing, and education order than elementary education.

Ghana experienced a surge in refugee populations in 2011 following the crisis in neighbouring Ivory Coast. In 2016, the UNHCR reported that Ghana was playing host to some 13,236 refugees. These included persons of Ivorien nationals, Togolese,

Liberians among others. There were also 1,371 people seeking asylum in the country. These refugees lived in government and UNHCR run refugee camps and host communities.

Kwarteng³⁸⁵ in his study acknowledged that some refugees in Egyeikrom camp were in possession of the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) cards, that gave them access to free medical treatment. He stated that there were efforts made to cater for education, but this was largely limited. Kwarteng's study also showed that majority of the participants agreed that they had access to food in the camp, but there was implementation gap in access to quality education, security of lives and property in camp and not enough shelter for the refugees.

Whereas the UNHCR handles refugee related issues, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) is responsible for developing policy and coordinating response to the humanitarian challenges that IDPs face. Unlike the UNHCR which can directly intervene in humanitarian emergencies, the UN-OCHA chairs the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC), providing policy direction and overseeing the work of other UN humanitarian agencies, prominent international development partners and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The work of the UN-OCHA is deeply rooted in the UN Guiding Principle on Internal Displacement. Through the operationalisation of strategic frameworks and policies such as Accountability to Affected Persons (AAP), protection policies, inclusion policies and the Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (PSEAH) strategy, the UNOCHA commits to ensuring that development partners are meeting their commitments in the countries they work³⁸⁶.

³⁸⁵ Kwarteng A. The Application and Practice of International Refugee Laws in Ghana: A Case Study of Egyeikrom Refugee Camp // *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 2018. Vol. 5(3). P. 1–11.

³⁸⁶ Key Operational IASC Guidance: Executive and Operational Summaries // Inter-Agency Standing Committee. 2022. URL: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/key-operational-iasc-guidance> (accessed: 02.03.2026); IASC Vision and Strategy: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PSEAH) 2022–2026 // Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). URL:

Other United Nations agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the World Food Program (WFP) work closely with the UNHCR to intervene in humanitarian crisis, whether it is refugees or internal displacement.

The IOM is the UN Agency that is responsible for coordinating and tracking migration data. Through the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), the IOM provides complex real time data that specifies how populations are moving, what vulnerabilities exist in these movements and what needs are crucial for an effective and robust humanitarian response. IOM has designated flow monitoring points (FMP) in West and Central Africa. At the flow monitoring points which are usually transit regions with high migratory flow, a flow monitoring register that collects information at a group level and a flow monitoring survey (individual) are used to understand migratory patterns and trends³⁸⁷. IOM DTM data monitors forced displacement in the Lake Chad Basin region and how these affect countries like Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The data is used to support governments and humanitarian/development partners in data-driven decision making and interventions³⁸⁸.

In Nigeria, IOM started implementing its Displacement Monitoring Matrix in 2014 at the height of the Boko Haram insurgency. Through the 'Support to Free Movement of Persons and Migration in West Africa (FMM West Africa)' project, the IOM Nigeria office provided capacity building for ECOWAS Commission during a technical meeting on Migration Data management in 2015³⁸⁹. The IOM has provided technical assistance on policy and operations to ECOWAS officials, member states and

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-champion-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment/iasc-vision-and-strategy-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment-pseah-2022> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁸⁷ Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) West and Central Africa: Quarterly Regional Report // IOM. January–March 2018. URL: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/dtm/west_and_central_africa_dtm_201801-03.pdf (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁸⁸ Regional Migration Report West and Central Africa January-March 2017. P. 32.

³⁸⁹ ECOWAS, with Support from FMM West Africa Project, Holds Technical Meeting on Migration Data Management // IOM. 2015. URL: <https://nigeria.iom.int/news/ecowas-support-fmm-west-africa-project-holds-technical-meeting-migration-data-management> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

protection organisations via projects such as the Migration Crisis Operational Framework (MCOF), and Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM)³⁹⁰.

Through the “Implementing Global Policies on Environmental Migration and Disaster Displacement in West Africa” project implemented between 2020-2023, IOM collaborated with UNHCR, ECOWAS and the World Bank to support ECOWAS member states in policy dialogue, community action, communication and data sharing to minimise displacement occasioned by climate migration³⁹¹.

The World Food Programme (WFP) is the primary United Nations Agency that coordinates humanitarian affairs that address the issue of zero hunger and food security. It is a central humanitarian actor during displacement crisis. In West Africa, WFP works closely with IOM, UNHCR and the ECOWAS to facilitate emergency food assistance and nutrition support to displaced populations. Over the years, WFP has used the Global Commodity Management facility, and the Africa Risk Capacity to target smallholder producers, reducing their risks and increasing their access to credit facilities in the region thus increasing capacity for sustainable food production³⁹². During the Ebola outbreak in 2014, WFP supported 22,000 survivors with emergency food assistance working alongside humanitarian partners³⁹³.

ECOWAS has worked with governments in member states to implement nutrition programs, cash transfers and school-based feeding to keep children in school in the most vulnerable populations³⁹⁴. ECOWAS donated \$1 million to the World Food

³⁹⁰ Strengthening ECOWAS Capacities on Population Displacement Management. IOM. URL: <https://www.iom.int/project/strengthening-ecowas-capacities-population-displacement-management> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁹¹ Implementing Global Policies on Environmental Migration and Disaster Displacement in West Africa. Environmental Migration Portal, n.d., URL: <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/implementing-global-policies-environmental-migration-and-disaster-displacement-west-africa> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁹² Resilient Food Systems in Western Africa: WFP Contribution to Food Systems Transformation in Western Africa. World Food Programme, 2023. URL: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2023-resilient-food-systems-western-africa-wfp-contribution-food-systems> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁹³ History. World Food Programme, n.d. URL: <https://www.wfp.org/history> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁹⁴ Partners' Support Plans for Governments' National Commitments on School Meals Programmes

Program to assist with emergency food distribution in Northwest Nigeria during the height of the insecurity occasioned by banditry. In communities such as Sokoto and Katsina, it became unsafe as bandits terrorised farmers and made it impossible for them to produce food. This necessitated cash-based transfers and livelihood support for vulnerable populations in this region³⁹⁵.

The critical roles that United Nations agencies and the ECOWAS play are all in a bid to restore stability in the region. From joint collaborations, peacebuilding to technical support and humanitarian aid, the question of durable solutions for refugees and IDPs have always been in the conversation. Through the instrumentality of the conventions that guide Refugees and IDPs, durable solutions are discussed as henceforth.

There are three solutions that have been proposed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) known as Durable Solutions to the problem of Refugees and Migration. These include Repatriation, Resettlement and Local Integration. In Repatriation, the refugee in question decides to voluntarily return to his/her country of origin, maybe because the situation that led to them fleeing the country has been ended or tensions have calmed down. It is normally facilitated by the UNHCR with the support of the host government and the home government. In practice, the UNHCR has facilitated the return of 6,343 Liberian refugees in Ghana between 2004 and 2012³⁹⁶.

Resettlement involves resettling refugees mostly in developed countries. Resettlement became less popular after the cold world war as most countries changed

in West Africa // World Food Programme, 2024. URL: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2025-partners-support-plans-governments-national-commitments-school-meals-programmes>. (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁹⁵ ECOWAS, WFP Provide \$1.6m to Fight Malnutrition, Poverty in N'west // THISDAYLIVE, 30 August 2024. URL: <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2024/08/30/ecowas-wfp-provide-1-6m-to-fight-malnutrition-poverty-in-nwest/>. (accessed: 02.03.2026).

³⁹⁶ Voluntary Repatriation of Liberian Refugees // IOM. 2014. URL: <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/country/docs/ghana/IOM-Ghana-Voluntary-Repatriation-of-Liberian-Refugees.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2026).

their asylum policies and implemented tighter migration policies³⁹⁷. Consequently, refugees resettled more in third world countries. Resettlement plans have been successful by African nations in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. On record, only about 118 refugees from the Buduburam camp in Ghana have been resettled³⁹⁸.

Local integration involves the process of naturalisation, where refugees receive a permanent solution and are conferred with all rights and privileges as a citizen of the host country. This is usually in the country where they first sought asylum. Harrell-Bond³⁹⁹ defined integration as “a situation in which host and refugee communities are able to coexist, sharing the same resources (both economic and social) with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host community”. This means that for successful integration programs, all socio-cultural and economic dimensions is met.

In times past, the local integration strategy was considered the best option but this is fast becoming unpopular. Both the refugees and the host countries rarely support the idea of local integration. In the case of Ghana and Liberian refugees, the Liberian refugees who had lost their refugee status as a result of cessation by the United Nations in 2012 and unable to return to Liberia refused integration efforts citing the dearth of economic opportunities in Ghana⁴⁰⁰. The reality on the side of the government remains that most ECOWAS states are battling with rising unemployment and economic decline. They are thus, unable to meet their social contracts with their citizens let alone the refugees.

³⁹⁷ Rutinwa B. The End of Asylum? The Changing Nature of Refugee Policies in Africa Refugee // Survey Quarterly. 2002. Vol. 21(1–2). P. 12–41.

³⁹⁸ The State of the World's Refugees 2006 - Human displacement in the new millennium - Chapter 6: Rethinking durable solutions // UNHCR. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/state-worlds-refugees-2006-human-displacement-new-millennium-chapter-6-rethinking-durable>

³⁹⁹ Harrell-Bond B. Are Refugee Camps Good for Children? in Dryden-Peterson S., Hovil L. A Remaining Hope for Durable Solutions: Local Integration of Refugees and Their Hosts in the Case of Uganda. Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees. 2004. Vol. 22(1). P. 32.

⁴⁰⁰ Omata N. Forgotten People: Former Liberian Refugees in Ghana // Forced Migration Review, 2016. No. 52. P. 3.

Upon the cessation of Refugee statuses of Liberia and Sierra Leone citizens by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there was a need for a solution to the problem of slow repatriation process. In Ghana for instance, over 7,000 Liberian refugees were yet to be repatriated as at when the Cessation Clause went into effect were left in a dilemma. The UNHCR relied on the ECOWAS provisions of the Protocol relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment as a durable solution. Although the protocols were not refugee instruments, they served as valuable frameworks to resolve the issue of residence and work permits, and nationality⁴⁰¹. Host nations, through the coordination of the UNHCR offered ECOWAS passports, and two years' work and residence permit to these refugees. This was in an effort to further the regional integration agenda of the ECOWAS and to trigger the principle of reciprocity by member states⁴⁰².

The action for local integration was targeted towards seven countries; The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone which held most Liberian and Sierra Leone refugees. The initiative granted secured legal status, promoted support for capacity building for refugees and improvement of welfare and livelihood support for beneficiaries.

However, many challenges have been encountered in the program. Whereas Nigeria agreed to grant renewable work permits to refugees of Sierra Leone and Liberia, refugees acknowledged that upon receipts of passports by their home countries, they were not under international protection anymore. This means that Nigeria can trigger the framework of non-admissibility on their new status. The fear of xenophobic attacks as cited by some refugees is also a valid concern, especially in Ghana owing to the implication of their restrictive policies on labour migration⁴⁰³. Omata argued that living

⁴⁰¹ Boulton A. Local Integration in West Africa // *Forced Migration Review*. 2009. No. 33. P. 32.

⁴⁰² This meant that the refugees in the home country and host countries will enjoy the entitlements, strengthening regional integration efforts.

⁴⁰³ Omata N. Forgotten People: Former Liberian Refugees in Ghana // *Forced Migration Review*, 2016. No. 52. P. 3.

conditions became unbearable for the refugees who remained in Ghana, despite ECOWAS agreement in place. Also, the barrier of language and lack of respect for local cultures and norms have impeded the success of integration programs in the region⁴⁰⁴.

Migration within the ECOWAS sub-region is one of the highest in the world. It has been established that factors such as political instability, economic crisis and/or the free movement protocol in West Africa has greatly influenced migration in this region. The United Nations 1951 Convention regarding the Status of Refugees place the protection of the life of a refugee under the host government in which an asylum seeker seeks refuge. However, the capacity of host nations to recognise and implement the provisions of the UN Refugees Convention has been hindered by the availability of resources. This is the case in the West African sub-region as host nations are under-resourced to protect the lives and offer quality welfare to their citizens and refugees.

The ECOWAS Treaties and Protocols, although not Refugee instruments, have been invoked by the UNHCR with several member states such as Nigeria, Ghana, Niger, Ivory Coast and Liberia in order to offer integration as a durable solution to the issue of refugees and also statelessness. The implementation of this solution has been made with some resistance and little success both on the side of the refugees themselves and on the side of the governments. Refugees cite the dearth of economic activities, xenophobic tendencies and protectionist laws as reasons for non-acceptance of integration. The noncompliance to regional frameworks has hindered the regional integration efforts. International organisations such as the European Union and the International Organisation for Migration have also been partly blamed for their role in pushing for the securitisation of borders and weakening regional civil society organisations.

⁴⁰⁴ Kwarteng A. The Application and Practice of International Refugee Laws in Ghana: A Case Study of Egyeikrom Refugee Camp // Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences. 2018.Vol. 5(3). P. 1–11.

Although member states have not lived up to their full responsibility of the UN Refugee Convention in terms of welfare, employment and education, they have, however, through the coordination of the UNHCR and the instrumentality of the Free Mobility Protocols opened up their borders to receive asylum seekers and internally displaced persons.

The States of West Africa, accepting refugees, do not provide them with full-fledged social protection. The region's stateless population is a consequence of its colonial heritage, legislative defects, and historical mobility. The dominance of the "right of blood" principle deprives the citizenship of migrant children, and complex naturalization procedures block integration. Borders drawn without taking into account ethnic settlement excluded labor communities (Mosi, Hausa) and nomads (Fulani, Tuareg) from the legal systems of postcolonial states, whose way of life is incompatible with settled legislation. Nationalist laws, like in Côte d'Ivoire, discriminate against historical diasporas, including Lebanese. Residents of disputed territories, descendants of repatriates and victims of trafficking also remain undocumented. As a result, millions of people find themselves in "legal invisibility," deprived of access to education, medicine, and civil rights.

The recurring issue of statelessness negates human rights and regional integration. The stateless have no formal jobs, education, property rights and political rights, and these cycles of poverty and marginalisation are strengthened. Poor documentation also increases the vulnerability to abuse, arbitrary detention or forced displacement in situations of insecurity.

In the case of ECOWAS, statelessness contradicts the conception of regional citizenship and free movement that is represented by Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment of 1979. Although the protocol allows free movement within the region, it does not confer rights of nationality to long-time residents or descendants of migrants. This disparity brings out a major paradox between the regional vision of integration and the national structures that promote exclusion.

The lack of coherent national and regional mechanisms of identifying and safeguarding stateless individuals is also another contributor to the crisis.

To resolve statelessness the laws of nationality have to be aligned with international conventions, the legal naturalisation process made easy and regional identification systems introduced. There is also the need to have heightened awareness of the migrations that took place during the colonial period, comprehensive birth registration and cross-border collaboration among the nomadic peoples. More than just legal changes, it requires political commitment to recognize that citizenship in West Africa, historically defined by mobility and interconnectedness needs to adapt to the region's actual experiences.

In summary, the partnership between ECOWAS and the United Nations, particularly through agencies such as the UNHCR, IOM, WFP, and UNOCHA, reflects a multidimensional response to forced displacement and refugee protection in West Africa. While ECOWAS treaties were not originally designed as refugee instruments, they have been strategically invoked to complement international refugee frameworks and offer alternative durable solutions such as voluntary repatriation, local integration, and temporary residence arrangements. Despite notable achievements—including coordinated humanitarian interventions, joint action plans, and legal harmonisation—significant challenges persist. Limited resources, political instability, statelessness, inconsistent policy implementation, and socio-economic constraints undermine long-term sustainability. The ECOWAS–UN collaboration therefore represents both progress and paradox: a region committed to open mobility and humanitarian principles, yet constrained by structural vulnerabilities. Strengthening institutional capacity, harmonising nationality laws, and reinforcing durable solutions remain essential for transforming humanitarian responses into lasting regional stability.

3.3 Migration factor in the relation between ECOWAS countries and the EU

Since the beginning of the century, the subject of West African migration to Europe has received significant attention by scholars and the media. This is against the fact that over 80% of movements are intra-regional⁴⁰⁵. The major drivers of migration within and outside the region are forced displacements and labour migration. The search for greener pastures to escape poverty and unemployment⁴⁰⁶, increasing climate induced migration/displacements⁴⁰⁷ and conflicts in the Sahel⁴⁰⁸ have necessitated the movement of many West Africans towards Europe every year. These movements are often undertaken in very hazardous terrains, and the use of transit cities towards North Africa. Within West African states, the free movement protocol makes these irregular movements easier by removing barriers to mobility⁴⁰⁹.

Europe and North America has been a top destination for migrants, with Europe receiving over 92 million international migrants in the previous year. Although West Africa and in a larger extend Africans are not the most migratory race to Europe⁴¹⁰, they are some of the poorest. Internal policies have failed to provide an appropriate solution to the problems of irregular and illegal immigrants in the region, intensifying the Europe's political anxiety, and reshaping their foreign policy priorities to the point of shifting this responsibility to the supranational organisation⁴¹¹.

⁴⁰⁵ Teye, J.K. Migration in West Africa: An Introduction, in Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2022, P. 3–17.

⁴⁰⁶Czaika M., Reinprecht C. Migration Drivers: Why Do People Migrate? // IMISCOE Research Series. 2022. P. 49–82; World Migration Report 2024: Chapter 3 – Africa. IOM, 2024. URL: <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-3/africa> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴⁰⁷Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. URL: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴⁰⁸ The Sahel // Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). URL: <https://acleddata.com/africa/the-sahel/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴⁰⁹ Teye, J.K. Migration in West Africa: An Introduction, in Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2022, P. 3–17.

⁴¹⁰International Migrant Stock 2024. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs // Population Division, 2024, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴¹¹Lavenex S. Shifting Up and Out: The Foreign Policy of European Immigration Control // West

In 2015, at the peak of the Arab uprising, Europe had entered a migration crisis. The UNHCR reported that 1,032,408 had either crossed the Mediterranean Sea or used land borders to enter Europe⁴¹². The International Organization for Migration reported that over 39% of all illegal arrivals to Europe were from West and Central Africa. Migrants from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal accounted for 54%. These figures underscore the strategic importance of EU's policy responses in this region⁴¹³.

The EU's response, reinforced in 2015 saw the increased funding of initiatives and agencies to operationalise external border control. This strategy came into limelight in 1998 when the Austrian Government leading the council of the EU classified migration control of the EU into layers. EU and European Economic Areas were considered safe, while countries seeking for membership of the EU were asked to tighten border controls. For transit countries such as Russia and Turkey, their position was that they would be offered better trade deals if they stopped migrants from coming into Europe or agreed to receive back migrants. Finally, the last layer of countries such as China and African countries was to receive development aid on the condition that they prevent their citizens from entering Europe and accept deportees⁴¹⁴. This position has not changed but has rather undergone several revisions that point to the goal of what is now known as the Externalisation of border control.

The Externalisation of border control is a policy approach that puts immigration management in the hands of countries other than the EU, especially transit and originating countries. This is achieved using bilateral agreements either with regional bodies or her member states in exchange for foreign development aid and security

European Politics, 2006. Vol. 29(2). P. 329–350.

⁴¹²Operational Portal: Mediterranean Situation. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019. URL: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴¹³ Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) West and Central Africa Report // IOM. July–September 2023. 2023. URL: https://dtm.iom.int/dtm_download_track/68456?file=1&type=node&id=46211 (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴¹⁴EU: Dramatic Changes in Refugee Policy // Statewatch. 1 September 1998, URL: <https://www.statewatch.org/statewatch-database/eu-dramatic-changes-in-refugee-policy/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

collaborations⁴¹⁵. More than ever before, the ECOWAS and her member states have served and are serving the strategic interest of the EU in the operationalisation of this policy. The EU has positioned itself as a partner to ECOWAS and the AU in achieving its free movement protocol through improved border control procedures, and institutional capacity strengthening. In exchange of foreign aid, readmission agreements and border tightening processes (that may seem paradoxical to ECOWAS and AU's borderless Africa initiative), the EU fosters its policy direction. In the real sense, the interest of the EU is self-serving as it works to achieve its policy of using third countries to achieve its aim⁴¹⁶.

The European Union's migration externalization policy, which has undergone significant changes since the European Council's Tampere decision in 1999⁴¹⁷, provides the basis for extending EU migration rules and cooperation requirements to non-EU States in two main forms: conditionality of assistance through readmission agreements and border security. Prior to the 2015 migration crisis caused by the Arab Spring, the EU took a more lenient approach, concluding bilateral readmission agreements with eighteen third countries, mobility partnerships with seven countries, including Cape Verde and Morocco, as well as regional mechanisms such as the Rabat Process and the Cotonou Agreement, along with the African Union. - EU Partnership on Migration, Mobility and Employment⁴¹⁸.

The 2016 Migration Partnership Framework marked a decisive shift towards active externalization by linking development financing to the implementation of EU

⁴¹⁵Jones C., Romain L., Yasha M. Access Denied: Secrecy and the Externalisation of EU Migration Control // Statewatch. 2022. URL: <https://www.statewatch.org/media/3781/secrecy-and-externalisation-of-migration-control.pdf> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴¹⁶El-Qadim N. The Asymmetrical Government of Migrations: Morocco/European Union. Paris: Dalloz, 2015. P. 3.

⁴¹⁷Presidency Conclusions: Tampere European Council, 15 and 16 October 1999. European Parliament, 1999. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/tam_en.htm (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴¹⁸Schimmelfennig F., Sedelmeier U. Governance by Conditionality: EU Rule Transfer to the Candidate Countries of Central and Eastern Europe // Journal of European Public Policy. 2004. Vol. 11(4). P. 661–679.

migration control objectives by recipient countries. Through the EU's 4.9 billion Euro Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, covering twenty-six countries, the EU has encouraged transit states to manage migration flows to Europe and accept the readmission of deportees⁴¹⁹. An example of this approach is Niger, which receives funds to implement new migration laws that contradict the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement, including the infamous Anti-Smuggling Law Loi 36, introduced against national interests in order to curb smuggling networks transporting migrants north to Europe⁴²⁰. Joint investigative teams consisting of French and Spanish agents are currently working side by side with officials of Niger prosecuting suspects in a direct operational presence.

Securitization is the second element of externalization. In 2016, the EU expanded its Common Security and Defense Policy Mission (EUCAP) in the Sahel, Niger, to include counter-terrorism training, illegal migration control, and the establishment of an outpost in the transit city of Agadez to enforce the anti-smuggling law, receiving 72 million euros in 2022 for extension. operations until 2024⁴²¹. The EU has also launched Operation Sofia in the Mediterranean, a naval mission to survey, assess and dismantle smuggling networks using ships to transport migrants to Europe. These externalization mechanisms demonstrate how EU migration policy is increasingly transferring border control functions to African states, sometimes to the detriment of regional integration protocols such as ECOWAS, creating a contradiction between the goals of free movement on the continent and European migration management priorities.

⁴¹⁹ EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa // European Commission, 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/index_en (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴²⁰Loi No. 2015-36 du 26 mai 2015 relative au trafic illicite de migrants. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/60a505e24.html> (accessed: 18.05.2025); Document d'action: Fonds fiduciaire d'urgence de l'Union Européenne en faveur de la stabilité et de la lutte contre les causes profondes...', undated. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/default/files/final_t05-eutf-sah-ne-05_eci_avenant_1.pdf (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴²¹ In 2023, the Nigerian Government announced the termination of the EUCAP Sahel programme due to political shifts in the region. However, the subject matter is beyond the scope of the thesis.

The EU externalization program was implemented through the European border agency Frontex, which has expanded significantly from several million euros at the time of its founding in 2005 to half a billion euros by 2021⁴²². Initially, Frontex was authorized to carry out patrols, search and rescue operations and transportation in the opposite direction, but after the adoption of the European Coast and Border Protection Ordinance in 2016, which granted it full agency status with powers to protect EU borders and work in third countries, Frontex's mission has significantly expanded. Since then, Frontex has established liaison offices in Niger and Senegal to coordinate measures to prevent illegal immigration and the readmission of deportees, and has expanded its operations in the Sahel by establishing risk analysis teams in Niger, Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and the Gambia. Although these units are being created to build the capacity of local analysts who collect cross-border data to combat transnational crime, they act strategically, contributing to border management initiatives and providing intelligence directly to Frontex headquarters in Poland. Under the pretext of increasing the capabilities of local security forces, the EU is tightening border controls and demanding data exchange, pushing countries such as Niger to implement integrated border management systems similar to EUROSUR, the European border surveillance system⁴²³.

EU-ECOWAS cooperation is carried out through key partnership mechanisms, including the Cotonou Agreement, the Rabat process, which aim to address migration issues through development assistance, tighter border controls and policy harmonization. The Cotonou Partnership Agreement, signed in 2000 and replacing the

⁴²²Budget, Frontex. 2021.
URL: https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/Budget/Budget_2021.pdf (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴²³Working Arrangement between the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger). URL: <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/working-arrangement-between-the-european-border-and-coast-guard-agency-frontex-and-the-european-union-capacity-building-mission-in-niger-eucap-sahel-niger/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

Lomé Treaties, radically changed the direction of its activities from reflecting the economic needs of the ACP countries to functioning as an Economic Partnership Agreement serving European interests⁴²⁴. This introduced a policy framework linking aid to good governance and respect for human rights, with funding primarily going to good performers rather than bad ones. From an economic point of view, this required ACP countries to exchange non-reciprocal trade preferences for WTO-compliant economic partnership agreements, open ACP countries' markets without providing equivalent protection to local industries, limit policy freedom to identify independent development paths and favor EU exporters and investors, given limited institutional capacity and inadequate guarantees for local manufacturers⁴²⁵.

Article 13 of the Cotonou Agreement introduced binding migration provisions requiring countries to ACT on the readmission of citizens who do not have legal status in the EU, regardless of whether EU countries have made real efforts to support legal migration⁴²⁶. Development assistance was linked to poverty and unemployment reduction initiatives aimed at reducing migration pressure on EU states, which mainly served the EU's interests in limiting migration rather than addressing the root causes. These externalization mechanisms demonstrate how EU migration policy is increasingly transferring border control functions to ECOWAS States, which sometimes contradicts regional protocols on free movement and creates a contradiction between European priorities in migration management and the goals of integration into West Africa.

⁴²⁴Von Moltke K. Implications of the Cotonou Agreement for Sustainable Development in the ACP Countries and Beyond. IISD & Direction du développement et de la coopération (Switzerland), 2004. P. 43.

⁴²⁵Von Moltke K. Implications of the Cotonou Agreement for Sustainable Development in the ACP Countries and Beyond. IISD & Direction du développement et de la coopération (Switzerland), 2004. P. 53.

⁴²⁶Gathii J.T. The Cotonou Agreement and Economic Partnership Agreements in: Realizing the Right to Development // UNOHCHR. 2013. P. 259–273.

The CPA, signed in 2000 and revised in 2005 and 2010 laid the foundation for the aggressive border control policies that the EU has focused on post 2015/2016. The increased presence of EU and Frontex officials in ECOWAS member states are evidence of how deeply entrenched the externalisation policy of aid for migration control is rooted. Although the Samoa agreement signed in (2023) that replaced the CPA appeals more to mutual ownership and commitments, there is still a power asymmetry that gives the EU leverage over the contracting parties⁴²⁷.

The Rabat Process, established in 2006 as the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development, serves as a multilateral platform uniting fifty-seven countries from West, North, and Central Africa, European states, the European Union, and regional organizations including ECOWAS to address migration and development issues⁴²⁸. Created as a response to inadequate bilateral agreements in managing irregular migration routes from Morocco to the Canary Islands through the Strait of Gibraltar, the Process formally emerged from the Euro-African Ministerial Conference convened by France, Morocco, Senegal, and Spain, actively engaging origin, transit, and destination states in comprehensive migration management⁴²⁹.

The framework operates through five core domains: development benefits of migration addressing root causes, legal migration and mobility, protection and asylum, prevention of irregular migration and human trafficking, and return, readmission, and reintegration. These domains are monitored under the Joint Valletta Action Plan adopted in 2015, with subsequent action plans like the Marrakesh Action Plan (2018-2020) specifying twenty-three measures across ten objectives covering returns, borders,

⁴²⁷The Samoa Agreement: EU–OACPS Partnership. European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), 2024. URL: <https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/p5hqk3r> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴²⁸The Rabat Process: Balanced Dialogue, Concrete Action (Brochure). International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 2023. URL: <https://www.rabat-process.org/en/about> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴²⁹Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process). International Organization for Migration, n.d. URL: <https://www.iom.int/euro-african-dialogue-migration-and-development-rabat-process> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

visas, and refugee integration. By supporting national and bilateral projects, the Rabat Process enables implementation of EU-Africa migration initiatives⁴³⁰.

Critically, the Rabat Process functions as a vehicle for EU externalisation policy, transferring migrant control responsibilities to African countries through EU financing, technical assistance, and securitisation measures. Return and readmission programs incentivising migrant returns and reintegration, alongside border security projects, are presented as development cooperation while fundamentally serving EU domestic migration rules⁴³¹. The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa exemplifies this dynamic, financing projects in origin and transit countries like Niger, Mali, and Nigeria ostensibly to combat poverty, unemployment, and instability driving irregular migration, yet increasingly diverting resources toward border security, migrant return programs, reintegration assistance, and readmission enforcement⁴³². While framed as development support, these measures primarily serve EU objectives of reducing arrivals and returning undocumented migrants, revealing how migration diplomacy platforms can subordinate regional integration priorities to external migration control interests.

The 2021 European Union Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration encourages more voluntary return programs and puts forth the concept of externalisation⁴³³. The programs support migrants who are ready to return home better financially and logistically and often include help for their integration to avoid them

⁴³⁰Jones C., Romain L., Yasha M. Access Denied: Secrecy and the Externalisation of EU Migration Control // Statewatch. 2022. URL: <https://www.statewatch.org/media/3781/secrecy-and-externalisation-of-migration-control.pdf> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴³¹Mager T. The Emergency Trust Fund for Africa: Examining Methods and Motives in the EU's External Migration Agenda., 2018. P. 3.

⁴³²EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. European Union, 2021. P. 1.

⁴³³Improving Return and Readmission: Stepping Up Voluntary Returns and Helping Reintegration. UN Network on Migration, n.d.. URL: <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/pledge/improving-return-and-readmission-stepping-voluntary-returns-and-helping-reintegration> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

returning abroad in the near future. The programmes are promoted as aids for people, but they also encourage cooperation for readmissions by originating states.

With the EU's support through EUTF, more development aid now depends on countries willing to comply on readmitting migrants. This development aid conditionality has made African governments more concerned with EU migration issues than with their core development goals or the rights of their citizens as outlined by ECOWAS's free movement protocol⁴³⁴. The EU has shown consistently that development aid depends on compliance with EU border policies which has generated tensions and questions about sovereignty.

Although jointly administered by EU and AU Commissions, the EU and European External Action Service provide most funding and effectively control the Process, directing dialogue toward European priorities of reducing migration and securing African readmission commitments rather than expanding legal migration or migrant protection⁴³⁵. This externalisation strategy systematically eradicates illegal migration to Europe by operating in ECOWAS and transit countries, creating economic and political imbalances that restrict free movement and complicate regional migration management.

The EU's approach fundamentally conflicts with the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol designed to promote visa-free travel, residence, and business across West Africa⁴³⁶. Through the EU Emergency Trust Fund, European influence shifts West African focus toward border security, migration limitation, and repatriation, directly opposing regional integration goals⁴³⁷. Niger's 2015 Loi 36, introduced under EU

⁴³⁴Kipp D. From Exception to Rule: The EU Trust Fund for Africa. SWP Research Paper. 2018. No. 13. P. 2.

⁴³⁵Deng G.D., Atit M. Darfur People Living in South Sudan Welcome ICC Trial of Janjaweed Leader // VOA. 2022. URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/darfur-people-living-in-south-sudan-welcome-icc-trial-of-janjaweed-leader/6515872.html> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴³⁶40 Years of Free Movement in ECOWAS // ECOWAS, 2019. URL: <https://www.ecowas.int/40-years-of-free-movement-in-ecowas/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴³⁷Ibrahim M. M. ECOWAS Free Movement Area and Externalisation of Borders // ASGI. 2020.

pressure and aid incentives, criminalises northbound migration, establishes detention centres with documented human rights violations, and harms small and medium enterprises thriving on open borders. Local transporters and businesses operating between Niger and Burkina Faso report these policies further plunge communities into poverty, demonstrating how EU externalisation directly obstructs ECOWAS protocol principles and regional integration objectives⁴³⁸.

B. Ndiaye argues that «EU’s restrictive policies on border control in Senegal, and the “excessively restrictive visa policy” initiated by France, Spain and Italy which are top destinations for migrants from Senegal have eroded the gains made by ECOWAS and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfFTA) in the past years. The reinforcement of border control and the tightening of legal pathways to Europe have made young people turn to the dangerous Sahara and Mediterranean route to immigrate»⁴³⁹.

EU-funded migration control initiatives in West Africa have led to numerous negative consequences that directly undermine ECOWAS integration goals. Border security has led to increased harassment and violations of the rights of ECOWAS citizens, which contradicts the guarantees of free movement provided for in the Protocol and endangers the regional community and the economy⁴⁴⁰. The EU's priority on border protection, rather than addressing root causes such as poverty and unemployment, has led to uneven development: economic partnership agreements favor European investors

URL: https://sciabacaoruka.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IBRAHIM-MUHAMMAD-MUKHTAR_ECOWAS-free-movement-area.pdf (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴³⁸Hornschild C. Migration Controls at the Burkina Faso–Niger Borderland Reveal European Attitudes to African Livelihoods // LSE Africa at LSE Blog. 2022. URL: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/01/07/migration-controls-at-the-burkina-faso-niger-borderland-reveal-european-attitudes-to-african-livelihoods/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴³⁹Ndiaye B. Civil Society Input to EU–Africa Cooperation on Migration: The Case of Senegal // ECRE Working Paper, 2020. URL: <https://www.ecre.org/ecre-working-paper-civil-society-input-to-eu-africa-cooperation-on-migrationthe-case-of-senegal/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴⁴⁰ Захаров И.А., Агафшин М.М., Горохов С.А. Миграционный кризис в Западной Африке: ограничения и перспективы политического регулирования // Вестник РУДН. Международные отношения. 2024. Vol. 24(4). P. 616–627.

and exporters, while accelerating deindustrialization and reducing intra-African trade. Development assistance is selectively directed to countries that comply with the requirements for controlling illegal migration, while States that do not comply face deprivation, exacerbating socio-economic inequality between regions and, paradoxically, stimulating migration to more developed areas⁴⁴¹.

EU policy has effectively criminalized migration within ECOWAS, despite the region's desire for unhindered mobility. The actions of Frontex and Europol on the ground undermine national sovereignty, while strict policing, support for repressive regimes and increased bureaucracy at the borders contradict the spirit and letter of the Protocol on Freedom of Movement⁴⁴². European pressure on ECOWAS States has made travel to the regions more difficult, created conditions for human rights violations, and weakened regional cooperation. International organizations such as IOM, as EU implementation partners, have contributed to this dynamic through programs such as the Migration Dialogue for West Africa, encouraging member states to develop policies aimed at achieving EU migration control goals rather than regional integration. Scientists argue that this diplomatic emphasis is inappropriate, as issues related to the EU, such as tightening borders, are prioritized over the regional bloc's own interests, which effectively encourages the export of talent to Europe, ignoring the priorities of African integration.

The fundamental disadvantage of the EU's externalization is that it sees migration as a security threat rather than as a symptom of deeper causes such as poverty and poor governance. This symptomatic approach ensures repeated illegal migration, which scientists describe as "sticking gaping wounds with a Band-Aid." Through instruments

⁴⁴¹Castillejo C. The Influence of EU Migration Policy on Regional Free Movement in the IGAD and ECOWAS Regions // German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), 2019. URL: <https://www.idos-research.de/en/discussion-paper/article/the-influence-of-eu-migration-policy-on-regional-free-movement-in-the-igad-and-ecowas-regions/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

⁴⁴²Arhin-Sam K., Bisong A., Jegen L., Mounkaila H., Zanker F. The (In)Formality of Mobility in the ECOWAS Region: The Paradoxes of Free Movement // South African Journal of International Affairs. 2022. Vol. 29(2). P. 187–205.

such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, Mobility Partnerships, and agreements on Return and Readmission, the EU is strategically «outsourcing border control to countries of origin and transit, aligning development financing with policy requirements and effectively exchanging development cooperation for enhanced migration controls»⁴⁴³. This strategic shift in migration diplomacy focuses on preventing illegal migration to Europe, rather than supporting regional integration structures such as ECOWAS, which creates fundamental tension between European migration management goals and West Africa's desire for free movement.

Even though externalisation focuses on security, human trafficking and increased pressure on asylum systems, it has led to severe conflicts with certain regional laws, including ECOWAS's Protocol on Free Movement of Persons. Because the EU strong focus on controlling borders, deportations and returning people often contrasts with ECOWAS's desire for free movement in the region, Niger's Law 2015-036 and such border closures limit freedom of movement and weaken the local economy. These restrictive border regimes have challenged regional cooperation and have contributed to legal and human rights abuses.

Tying development aid to compliance on migration control efforts also means that there are bound to be cases of uneven development. Border communities would receive more attention and attract more funding, while rural and other remote communities are overlooked. This type of investments is counterproductive, as it is more likely to worsen economic and social differences thereby increasing the migration pressures the EU aims to reduce. Aid conditionality and excessive border control mechanisms destroys local systems and fail to achieve sustainable development, thereby returning all parties to a migration crisis.

⁴⁴³Kandilige L., Yeboah T. Asylum and Protection Mercenarism: Effects of European Externalisation on African Migration Governance // Externalizing Asylum, 2024. URL: <https://externalizingasylum.info/asylum-and-protection-mercenarism/> (accessed: 18.05.2025).

The EU combines cooperation and coercion in its policy playbook to externalise its migration rules and aid development in Africa. The approach may have reduced illegal arrivals to Europe, but it contravenes regional integration goals amidst several human rights abuses. The creation of a more sustainable method of managing migration will mean that EU policies match ECOWAS's free movement objectives, and that development is not tied to compliance. A true partnership and a future of shared responsibility are needed for the externalisation strategy to become useful for dealing with migration and promoting regional development.

In conclusion, migration has become a central pillar shaping the relationship between ECOWAS member states and the European Union. While migration between West Africa and Europe represents a smaller proportion of overall African mobility compared to intra-regional movements, it carries disproportionate political and strategic weight. The EU's externalisation policy—manifested through development aid conditionality, readmission agreements, securitisation initiatives, and frameworks such as the Rabat Process—has repositioned ECOWAS and its member states as key actors in Europe's border management strategy. Although these partnerships provide financial assistance, technical support, and institutional capacity building, they also create asymmetrical power dynamics and tensions with ECOWAS's regional integration agenda and free movement principles. Ultimately, migration diplomacy between ECOWAS and the EU reflects a complex interplay of cooperation and contestation, where development objectives, sovereignty concerns, security priorities, and human rights obligations intersect. A balanced approach that aligns migration governance with sustainable development and regional integration goals will be crucial for ensuring that migration serves as a bridge for partnership rather than a source of dependency or division.

Chapter has demonstrated that migration is not merely a social or economic phenomenon within West Africa, but a central structural factor shaping the external relations of ECOWAS with international actors. The analysis confirms that migration

operates simultaneously as a tool of regional integration, a source of diplomatic negotiation, a security concern, and a humanitarian challenge. At the intra-regional level, ECOWAS has institutionalised mobility through the 1979 Free Movement Protocol, positioning itself as one of the most advanced regional mobility regimes on the African continent. Migration diplomacy within the community reflects a deliberate effort to transform historical mobility patterns into a framework for economic cooperation, labour circulation, political solidarity, and regional identity formation. However, the chapter has also shown that implementation gaps, sovereignty sensitivities, economic fragility, insecurity, irregular migration, and institutional weaknesses continue to constrain the full realisation of this vision.

In its engagement with the United Nations system, ECOWAS demonstrates how regional organisations can complement global governance frameworks in addressing forced displacement, refugee protection, and statelessness. Partnerships with UNHCR, IOM, WFP and other agencies reveal a multidimensional governance model combining humanitarian intervention, legal harmonisation, technical capacity building, and peacebuilding initiatives. Yet structural constraints—limited resources, inconsistent national implementation, protracted conflicts, and climate-related displacement—highlight the limits of humanitarian diplomacy in a region marked by economic vulnerability.

The chapter further establishes that migration is a defining element in the relationship between ECOWAS and the European Union. While intra-African migration remains numerically dominant, migration toward Europe carries disproportionate political weight. The EU's policy of migration externalisation—implemented through aid conditionality, readmission agreements, securitisation initiatives, and multilateral dialogue frameworks—has repositioned ECOWAS states as key actors in European border governance. This has produced a complex dynamic of cooperation and asymmetry: financial and institutional support is accompanied by growing pressure to align regional migration governance with European security

priorities. In several instances, such dynamics create tension with ECOWAS's own integration objectives and its free movement regime.

Across all dimensions analysed in this chapter, migration emerges as a field where sovereignty, security, development, humanitarian protection, and regional integration intersect. It functions as both an opportunity and a constraint: a mechanism for economic growth and diplomatic engagement, yet also a source of vulnerability, contestation, and external influence. The key argument advanced in this chapter is that ECOWAS occupies a strategic intermediary position in global migration governance. It acts as a regional integrator internally, a humanitarian partner to the United Nations, and a negotiated stakeholder in its relations with the European Union. The effectiveness of its migration diplomacy ultimately depends on its ability to reconcile these multiple roles while safeguarding regional priorities, strengthening institutional capacity, and maintaining coherence between security imperatives and integration goals.

CONCLUSION

Migration in West Africa is not merely a modern economic trend but an intrinsic historical and structural component of the region. It is defined by a combination of precolonial movement patterns, the imposition of colonial borders, post-independence citizenship laws, and current economic and security challenges. The analysis indicates that migration and displacement are inextricably linked to changing concepts of state authority and belonging. Colonial laws established exclusionary nationality frameworks, which post-independence governments adapted, resulting in layered citizenship, lack of legal recognition, and instances of statelessness. Despite these barriers, enduring networks of labor, trade, ethnicity, and pastoralism highlight the lasting nature of regional connectivity.

Modern displacement caused by conflict, climate issues, or economic volatility adds to these historical systems rather than replacing them. Consequently, migration should be viewed as a fundamental aspect of the region's political economy—functioning simultaneously as a survival tactic, an adaptive method, and a point of conflict within sovereign states. Governance in the area highlights a conflict between fixed territorial sovereignty and fluid social dynamics. The continuation of movement despite legal obstacles suggests that integration initiatives, such as those by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), rely on centuries-old socio-economic ties. Migration is thus a cornerstone of West African society, not an irregularity to be suppressed.

Contemporary regionalism in West Africa is a multifaceted reaction to global economic volatility, changing power dynamics, and internal security threats. Moving beyond simple tariff reductions, modern regionalism incorporates security collaboration, governance improvements, and development. In West Africa, this is represented by three overlapping institutions: ECOWAS (political-security), the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU/UEMOA) (monetary-economic),

and the Mano River Union (MRU) (peacebuilding). These bodies create a layered governance system where different forms of integration coexist.

However, regionalism here is not a straightforward path to supranational unity; it is a practical adjustment to interdependence amidst fragile sovereignty and instability. Ongoing issues like weak infrastructure, low internal trade, and inconsistent policies highlight the friction between regional ambitions and national realities. The simultaneous operation of WAEMU and ECOWAS further complicates economic harmonization. Therefore, West African regionalism is better understood as an evolving mechanism for managing risk rather than a finished integration project. Its longevity relies less on formal agreements and more on practical implementation, infrastructure growth, political stability, and the alignment of national goals with regional objectives.

The creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, followed by the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement, signified a landmark effort to embed the region's historical patterns of mobility into a formalized institutional structure. The Protocol's gradual strategy—progressively ensuring visa-free entry, rights of residence, and the right to establish businesses—stood as one of Africa's most progressive mobility frameworks, designed to foster a borderless community driven by economic integration and collective development.

Although the initial phase (visa-free travel) has seen broad adoption, the subsequent provisions on residence and establishment continue to face uneven enforcement. Bureaucratic hurdles, security anxieties, economic inequalities, and domestic political considerations have hindered the Protocol's full implementation. Moreover, the growing emphasis on border securitization—responding to threats such as terrorism, human trafficking, and political unrest—has widened the disconnect between legal commitments and on-the-ground experiences. Despite these challenges, the Protocol has substantially boosted intra-regional migration, expanded trade, increased remittance flows, and strengthened informal economic ties. Migration within ECOWAS remains largely intra-African, reinforcing regional interdependence and

bolstering household resilience in labor-sending countries. The central tension persists between upholding freedom of movement and addressing national security priorities. The 2018 revision of the Protocol attempts to navigate this balance by reaffirming human rights and non-discrimination standards while retaining states' discretion to limit entry for security reasons.

Notwithstanding the legal architecture provided by ECOWAS—particularly the 1979 Protocol—genuine regional integration confronts profound structural and political barriers. West African economies remain oriented toward exporting raw materials and engaging in vertical trade with external partners (such as the EU, Asia, and the United States), which constrains the growth of intra-regional commerce—a reality reflected in persistently low levels of internal trade. Furthermore, national laws in member states frequently conflict with ECOWAS protocols: visa requirements, residence fees, arbitrary entry restrictions, and corrupt practices at borders continue to impede free movement. Infrastructure shortfalls and the lack of standardized immigration procedures further deepen the gap between policy aspirations and practical implementation, enabling states to prioritize national sovereignty over regional commitments.

Xenophobia constitutes a major social and political impediment to achieving free movement and deeper integration within ECOWAS. Fuelled by economic rivalry, political opportunism, and identity-based divisions, xenophobic sentiments and policies have historically triggered expulsions, discriminatory laws, and diplomatic friction among member states. Such practices erode the foundational ECOWAS principles of non-discrimination, social cohesion, and mutual cooperation. When migrants are scapegoated for broader socio-economic difficulties, xenophobia not only curtails mobility but also diminishes economic productivity and weakens regional solidarity. Tackling this issue demands stronger institutional protections, public education campaigns, and policy reforms that foster tolerance, safeguard migrants' rights, and reaffirm the commitment to regional unity.

An examination of how freedom of movement operates in practice across the ECOWAS region reveals a pronounced disconnect between the rights enshrined in regional protocols and their enforcement on the ground. While intra-regional migration remains robust, domestic legislation—such as work visa mandates, limitations on foreign ownership of small enterprises, and employment quotas for non-citizens—effectively curtails the economic integration of ECOWAS citizens. Recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and unilateral border closures (notably Nigeria's in 2019), have underscored the vulnerability of regional supply chains and the tendency of states to prioritize national interests over collective agreements. Compounding these challenges are external pressures—such as policies from the EU and France—and inconsistent application of the Common External Tariff (CET), which introduce further obstacles to seamless mobility. Ultimately, insufficient political commitment to align national laws with ECOWAS standards has left freedom of movement as an aspirational rather than fully realized principle.

Migration within the ECOWAS space illustrates that mobility functions not only as a demographic trend but also as a strategic tool of diplomacy. Through instruments like the 1979 Free Movement Protocol, the ECOWAS passport, and the brown card insurance scheme, the region has formalized migration as a mechanism for advancing economic integration, political collaboration, and regional solidarity. Yet, despite representing one of Africa's most progressive mobility frameworks, its practical application continues to be hampered by concerns over national sovereignty, security threats, economic fragility, irregular migration flows, and limited institutional capacity. The ongoing tension between regional integration and protectionist impulses continues to shape ECOWAS's approach to migration diplomacy. Even so, ECOWAS serves as a continental reference point, influencing other African regional bodies and reinforcing the premise that well-governed migration can foster unity, facilitate labor mobility, strengthen security cooperation, and deepen diplomatic engagement both within West Africa and beyond.

The collaboration between ECOWAS and the United Nations—channeled through agencies such as UNHCR, IOM, WFP, and OCHA—embodies a comprehensive approach to addressing forced displacement and refugee protection in West Africa. Although ECOWAS treaties were not initially conceived as refugee-specific instruments, they have been strategically leveraged to complement international protection frameworks and advance durable solutions, including voluntary repatriation, local integration, and temporary residence arrangements. While this partnership has yielded notable successes—such as coordinated humanitarian responses, joint action plans, and efforts toward legal harmonization—significant hurdles remain. Resource constraints, political volatility, statelessness, uneven policy implementation, and socio-economic limitations continue to challenge long-term sustainability. Consequently, the ECOWAS–UN alliance reflects both advancement and contradiction: a region committed to open borders and humanitarian values, yet constrained by deep-seated structural vulnerabilities. Enhancing institutional capacity, harmonizing nationality laws, and reinforcing durable solutions are critical to converting short-term humanitarian interventions into enduring regional stability.

Migration has emerged as a pivotal factor shaping relations between ECOWAS member states and the European Union. Although movement between West Africa and Europe constitutes a relatively small share of total African migration compared to intra-regional flows, it carries outsized political and strategic significance. The EU's policy of externalizing migration management—expressed through conditional development aid, readmission agreements, securitization measures, and frameworks like the Rabat Process—has positioned ECOWAS and its members as central partners in Europe's border control strategy. While these collaborations offer valuable financial resources, technical expertise, and institutional support, they also generate asymmetrical power dynamics and potential conflicts with ECOWAS's own integration agenda and free movement principles. Ultimately, migration diplomacy between ECOWAS and the EU reflects a nuanced interplay of cooperation and contention, where development goals,

sovereignty considerations, security imperatives, and human rights obligations intersect. Achieving a balanced approach—one that aligns migration governance with sustainable development and regional integration objectives—will be essential to ensuring that migration functions as a bridge for equitable partnership rather than a source of dependency or division.

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