

West African States and the Upsurge in Migration: The Diplomatic and Humanitarian Challenges

¹Sunny Mene Piate, ²John Okon Obisung & ³E. Oyombio

^{1,2&3}Department of Political Science,
Akwa Ibom State University

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/djiapeh.v2.i2.05

Abstract

The increasing upsurge in migration across West Africa has intensified the tension between regional integration objectives and the growing need for security and humanitarian protection. While the Economic Community of West African States promotes the free movement of persons as a cornerstone of regional integration, rising incidences of armed conflict, terrorism, political instability, climate change and economic hardship have compelled member states to adopt stricter border security measures that often undermine humanitarian protection and regional mobility. Arising from this, the study examines the collision between regional integration goals and the increasing need for security and humanitarian protection in addressing migration within West African states. Employing a qualitative research design, the study relies on documentary analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents, reports from international organizations and relevant legal instrument. The theoretical model adopted for the study was Political Realism. The utility of the theory to the discourse is that it highlights the gap between what West African leaders say (Pan Africanism) and what they actually do (deportation and border closures). The study identifies a knowledge gap in existing literature, which largely examines migration either from a security perspective or a humanitarian perspective with limited attention on how both intersect within the ECOWAS regional integration framework. The study finds that the securitization of migration has increasingly constrained the implementation of ECOWAS free movement protocols while exposing migrants and displaced persons to heightened humanitarian vulnerabilities. It recommends the adoption of a balanced regional migration governance framework that simultaneously strengthens cross-border security cooperation and safeguards the rights and protection of migrants, refugees, and internally displaced persons in accordance with regional and international legal obligations.

Keywords: Border Security, ECOWAS, Humanitarian Protection, Migration, Regional integration and West Africa

Corresponding Author: Sunny Mene Piate - <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5061-1096>

John Okon Obisung - <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6325-2727>

E. Oyombio - <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7417-5184>

Journal URL:

<https://internationalpolicybrief.org/development-journal-of-international-affairs-political-economy-and-humanities-volume-2-number-2/>

Background to the Study

At its core, migration is the movement of people from one place to another with the intention of settling permanently or temporarily in a new location. The consensus among scholars is that it is a fundamental human phenomenon driven by a complex interplay of "push" and "pull" factors. The push factors include negative conditions in the place of origin (such as conflict, poverty, environmental degradation), while the pull factors have to do with positive attractions in new destination (e.g. job opportunities, better education, safety). Migration can either be internal: movement within a country such as rural-urban, international: movement across national boundaries, voluntary: movement by choice for better prospects or forced: moving due to persecution, disaster, or violence, such as refugees and internal displaced persons. In West Africa, migration is not just a modern trend, it is a historical way of life. The region is characterised by some of the highest rates of intra-regional movement in the world. Unlike many western perspectives that view migration as a crisis, West Africans often view it as a livelihood strategy. The key drivers of migration in the region has to do with economic disparity, climate change and security challenges especially in the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahelian belt that have created significant populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Migration inflows refer to the movement of people, including refugees, internally displaced persons and economic migrants entering a specific country or the broader region. Unlike the traditional migration definitions within this specific geopolitical context, the term carries heavy weight regarding sovereignty, regional stability, and resource scarcity. In short, migration inflows in West Africa are not just demographic shifts; they are strategic assets in international negotiations and are urgent pressure points for regional humanitarian agencies. In the context of diplomatic and humanitarian affairs, a migration upsurge refers to a sudden and significant increase in the number of people crossing borders, typically driven by acute push factors like war, climate disasters, and economic collapse. Unlike standard migration, an upsurge is defined by its speed and scale, which often exceeds the immediate processing capacity of the states and aid organizations involved.

Amadi (2022) argues that the phenomenon of migration in West Africa can be better understood within the context of the historical evolution in the sub-region, which he periodize in three eras: the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. For him, in the pre-colonial era, migration was predominantly driven by the expansion and contraction of empires which thrived on trade, necessitating movement. Ethnic groups migrate to exploit trade opportunities or in response to environmental pressures such as drought or desertification, which pushed them towards more fertile land. This period according to him, was characterized by a largely fluid movement across the region, with no regional borders obstructing the migration flows. The slave trade led to the forced migration of millions of West Africans to North America, Europe and the Caribbean (Teye, 2022). The colonial era dramatically altered the migration landscape. The imposition of artificial boundaries restricted the free movement of indigenous populations and forced labour became prevalent, with many West Africans compelled to work in mines and plantations within the sub-region (Rossi, 2014). At independence, West Africa entered a new migration phase, influenced heavily by the lingering effects of colonisation. The newly independent nations grappled with

political instability, often leading to civil unrest and conflicts which resulted in significant displacement and cross-border migration as people fled to safer areas within and outside their home countries. Though the motivation behind creating Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was seemingly economic, the institution was birthed when the sequence of conflicts, coups and counter coups had more or less characterized the entire West African sub-region (Amadi, 2022; Teye, 2022; Piate, 2025).

West Africa is a region made up of sixteen (16) states. Aside Mauritania, the remaining states constitute members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The region is composed of variety of states in terms of territorial size, colonial history, economic strength, internal cohesion and external linkages. It comprises eight francophone states, five anglophone and two lusophone (UNODC, 2009). Despite the region's heterogeneity in terms of size and endowments, it shares a common feature of multiple layers of insecurity, associated with conflicts and crime at community and national levels, often across borders and with regional ramifications (Bryden, N'Diaye and Olonisakin, 2008; Piate, 2025). As a result, the region has been among the world's most unstable regions and has a dramatic modern history characterised by endemic internal conflicts, protracted civil wars, interstate conflicts, coups and transnational organized crimes (Zabadi and Isnuha, 2011; Piate, 2025). The sub-region is characterised by various security threats, differing in their nature, manifestation and intensity which can be subsumed under two main themes: the non-state actors related security challenges which includes transnational terrorism, small arms and light weapons proliferation, oil bunkering, drug trafficking and state-related security challenges such as unconstitutional changes of government, insurgency and fragile states (Piate, 2013; Piate, 2014; Piate, 2017). The persistency of conflicts in West Africa is as a result of historical animosities, contested legitimacy, resource conflict, extremist ideologies, chronic failure of intelligence, lack of extensive collaboration among the multilateral joint task force, lack of sequence national solidarity among west African states to enforce their obligations under the counter terrorism strategy and porous borders (Piate, 2026; Piate, 2026).

The intensification of conflicts in West African states has led to an increase in the flow of forced migrants and refugees within the sub-region. The magnitude of these migration flows, along with the significant diplomatic, humanitarian and political consequences of large-scale population displacement, has given rise to a migration crisis in West Africa. While the protocol on free movement of persons has historically encouraged integration, the 21st century has introduced sudden migration inflows triggered by systemic instability. Despite several frameworks adopted at the sub-regional level to deepened integration, sudden and massive migration inflows often catch member states off-guard. The lack of emergency-generation readiness and limited institutional infrastructure leads to reactive, rather than proactive stance. States find themselves caught between two conflicting agendas: integration (facilitating movement) and securitization (border control in response to insecurity). This tension creates significant diplomatic friction between neighbouring states and places immense strain on humanitarian systems that are already underfunded and overstretched. It is within this context that the study examines the collision between regional integration goals and the increasing need for security and humanitarian protection.

Theoretical Explication of the Discourse

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is political realism. In the context of the study of West African geopolitics, political realism (often called Realpolitik) offers a sobering lens through which to view how states respond to sudden migration inflows. It shifts the focus from humanitarian ideals to the cold logic of national security and state survival. Realism is a broad tradition, but its application to migration upsurge in West Africa is rooted in three distinct "waves of thinkers". Classical Realists like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, argue that human nature is inherently competitive. In West Africa, this translates to the idea that states will prioritise their own populations and resources over outsiders during a crisis. Modern Realists like Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr, defined interest as power. For Morgenthau, he would argue that West African states' preparedness for migration is not about altruism, but about ensuring that the influx does not destabilize the state's internal order or economic power. For Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, who is a structural cum neo-Realist, focuses on the anarchical nature of the international system. Since there is no world government to force West African states to take in migrants, each state must decide based on its own security needs.

When applying realism to the migration upsurge in West Africa, four core assumptions drive the analysis:

- i) **State-Centrism:** The state is the only actor that truly matters. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international bodies (like the UNHCR) are seen as secondary or as tools used by states to manage the problem.
- ii) **Anarchy:** West African states operate in a system where no higher authority can protect them. Therefore, a sudden inflow of migrants is viewed as a potential threat to sovereignty or a demographic invasion that could overwhelm local infrastructure.
- iii) **National Interest and Survival:** A state's primary goal is survival. Migration is analyzed through the lens of securitization, that is, treating migrants as a security risk rather than a humanitarian duty.
- iv) **Rationality:** States are rational actors. If, for example, Nigeria closes its borders (as it did in 2019), the rationalist sees this as a rational move to protect domestic markets and security, despite the diplomatic friction it causes with neighbours.

Table 1.

Challenge Area	Realist explanation/utility
State preparedness	Preparedness is framed as border militarization and surveillance, states invest in preparedness to keep people out or to strictly control their movement, ensuring the state remains the gatekeeper.
Sudden Inflows	These are viewed as shocks to the balance of power, if a large group enters from a conflict zone (e.g. Mali, Burkina Faso) the receiving state worries about the importation of radicalization or ethnic conflict.
Diplomatic friction	Explains why ECOWAS protocol on free movement are often ignored, when national survival is at stake (e.g. economic strain or terrorism), realist argue that regional treaties will always be sacrifice for national safety.
Humanitarian Limits	It explains why humanitarian aid is often instrumentalize, a state may allow refugee camp not out of kindness but to contain a population in one place where they can be monitored and prevented from entering the local labour market.

The utility of the theory to the discourse is that it highlights the gap between what West African leaders say (Pan Africanism) and what they actually do (deportation and border closures). At the core of this analysis is what can be described as Security Paradox, that is State in trying to protect or secure themselves through border closures and strict migration controls often create more regional instability, which ironically leads to more sudden and irregular migration inflows later on.

Upsurge in Migration in West African States: The Diplomatic and Humanitarian Challenges

The contemporary migration landscape in West Africa is defined by unprecedented levels of population displacement and cross-border mobility, compounded by a volatile mix of intensifying armed conflict, jihad insurgencies, frequent coups d'etat and severe climate change-induced desertification, the Sahel region has transformed into a focal point of humanitarian distress. Recent data highlights the severity of this crisis; according to the R4 Sahel framework, the central Sahel hosts over 2.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and upwards of 3.1 million refugees and asylum seekers. This has triggered a massive compounding wave of forced displacement, while historical migration patterns in the region were largely seasonal and economically driven, the current upsurge is increasingly a matter of survival, characterised by an acute chronic hunger emergency that affects over 32 million people in need of urgent assistance. As conditions in landlocked sahelian nations deteriorate, traditional migration corridors are rapidly shifting southward toward coastal West African states like Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. These coastal states which historically absorbed seasonal agricultural labours are now facing a relentless influx of cross-border

migrants and refugees fleeing violence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (Aniche, 2026; Knm, 2020; Nshimbi, 2021; Bako, 2026). While scholars (especially of western extraction) attention remain heavily concentrated on the perilous external routes, specifically the Atlantic maritime passage to the Canary Islands and the central Mediterranean route to Europe, the narrative fundamentally misrepresents the empirical reality of West African mobility. In fact, over 80% of West African migration remains entirely internal to the African continent with the vast majority occurring within the immediate sub-region. This overwhelming concentration of intra-regional south-south migration presents severe diplomatic and humanitarian challenges for West African states. Structurally supported by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement protocols, the scale of displacement is now testing the limits of regional stability. Coastal receiving nations are now grappling with intense pressure on local public infrastructure, complex resource competition between host communities and displaced populations, and growing national security anxieties. Consequently, the upsurge in migration has forced a critical diplomatic and humanitarian re-evaluation as regional bodies and individual states strive to balance regional integration and open-border commitments against the urgent demands of domestic security and humanitarian management (Mudoh, 2026; William, 2019; Zanker, 2020).

At the diplomatic level, the migration upsurge has intersected with catastrophic institutional fragmentation within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Following structural political friction and unconstitutional regime changes, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger executive a historic withdrawal from ECOWAS to institutionalize the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This geopolitical realignment fundamentally fractures the landmark 1979 ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons, residence and establishment, which historically guaranteed visa-free reciprocity across the sub-region (Mudoh, 2026; Obuah, 2026; Aniche, 2026). As bilateral relationship sour, the transition of West Africa into a fractured, multi-polar environment (ECOWAS Versus AES) places millions of trans-border migrants in legal limbo. Security frameworks have sharply pivoted toward pandemic-era nationalism, unilateral border closures, and the deployment of AI-driven biometric border surveillance. These shifts criminalize irregular migration and strip community citizens of foundational protections against arbitrary expulsion. Concurrently, the region faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The institutional breakdown between coastal ECOWAS nations and the landlocked Alliance of Sahel States has severely disrupted humanitarian supply corridors, leaving displaced populations stranded in highly contested, ungoverned spaces. While regional demographic pressures push high dependency ratios onto weak social safety nets, international funding allocations fail to keep pace with the exponential surge in need. Forces to navigate militarized borders and hostile security environments without regional institutional oversight, migrants face systematic rights violations, acute vulnerability to human trafficking, and a total absence of non-contributory social protection systems (DIDA, 2026; Anche, 2026; Mudos, 2026).

Migration has become one of the most pressing governance, security and humanitarian issues confronting West African states, while migration has historically been an integral feature of

West African societies due to trade, pastoralism, seasonal labour movements and cultural ties, the current upsurge differs in scale, complexity and drivers. The region is experiencing unprecedented population movements driven by convergence of security crises, violent extremism, political instability, climate change, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic hardships. These interconnected factors have transformed migration from a largely economic and social phenomenon into a multidimensional challenge with significant diplomatic and humanitarian implications. The deterioration of security across the Sahel has emerged as one of the most significant drivers of migration. The expansion of extremist groups linked to organizations such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda has created widespread insecurity in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These groups exploit weak governance structures, porous borders, ethnic tensions and local grievances to expand their influence.

Communities affected by terrorist attacks, kidnappings, armed conflicts and military operations are often compelled to flee their homes in search of safety. The security crisis has generated millions of internally displaced persons and refugees, placing enormous pressure on host communities and governments. In many cases, migration becomes a survival strategy rather than a choice (De Hass, 2021; Adebayo, 2005). The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel has further aggravated migration pressures. Political instability contributes to migration in several ways, such as weakening state institutions and governance structures, reducing investment confidence and economic opportunities, disrupting development programmes and public services, creating uncertainty regarding security and livelihoods, triggering sanctions and diplomatic tensions that affect local economies. (Betts and Collier, 2017 Koser, 2016, Williams). The resulting governance deficits make it difficult for states to provide security, employment and social services, enlarging both forced and voluntary migration. Associated with this is the factor of climate change, which has become a major force multiplier of migration in West Africa. The Sahel is one of the world's most environmentally vulnerable regions, experiencing rising temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts and recurrent flooding. These environmental changes undermine agricultural productivity and threaten livelihoods that depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture and livestock rearing. As farming and pastoral communities face increasing difficulties sustaining themselves, migration becomes an adaptive response. Climate related migration often occurs gradually; individuals and households may first move seasonally, then permanently relocate when environmental conditions deteriorate beyond recovery. (Bratton and de Walle, 1997; Adepoju, 2010).

Desertification represents one of the most visible environmental drivers of migration. Large portions of the Sahel are experiencing land degradation due to overgrazing, deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices, reduced rainfall, and rising temperatures (Gemenne, 2011). The southward expansion of arid conditions reduces the availability of fertile land and water resources, competition over shrinking resources frequently generates conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, particularly in countries such as Nigeria, Mali and Niger (Piate, 2025, Piate, 2025). As productive land becomes scarce, affected populations migrate toward urban centers, neighboring countries or even outside Africa in search of sustainable livelihoods.

Again, West Africa has one of the fastest-growing populations globally, with a large youth demographic entering labour markets that are unable to absorb them adequately. Key socio-economic drivers include: high unemployment and underemployment, poverty and income inequality, limited industrialization, weak social protection systems, inadequate educational opportunities and rapid urbanization. Many young people perceive migration as a pathway to economic advancement, social networks, remittances, and stories of success abroad further encourage migration aspirations, even when the journey entails significant risks. The irony of the current migration surge is that it encompasses both forced and voluntary movements. Forced migration occurs when individuals are compelled to flee because of armed conflict, terrorism, human rights violations, political persecution and environmental disasters. This category includes refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs). On the other hand, voluntary migration is driven primarily by economic, education, family, or personal considerations. However, the distinction between forced and voluntary migration is increasingly blurred. Many migrants leave because deteriorating environmental, economic, or security conditions leave them with few realistic alternatives.

The increase in migration across West Africa has exposed significant diplomatic challenges for states and regional organizations. The region now faces a complex balancing act between maintaining regional integration, safeguarding national security, responding to geopolitical shifts, and managing external pressures from international partners. Three of the most significant diplomatic challenges are the ECOWAS paradox, geopolitical fragmentation arising from the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and European Union (EU) border externalization policies. The 1979 ECOWAS protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment was adopted to promote regional integration by allowing citizens of member states to move freely across borders without visas for up to ninety days. The protocol reflects the historical reality that migration has always been an integral feature of West African societies, where trade, pastoralism, family ties, and seasonal labour migration long predated colonial boundaries. However, the security environment has changed dramatically over the last decade. The expansion of violent extremist groups across the Sahel, rising transnational organized crime, arms trafficking, human trafficking and irregular migration have transformed national borders into critical security frontiers. As a result, many ECOWAS member states have strengthened border controls through increased military deployment along borders, more stringent migration checks, enhanced intelligence sharing, closure of borders during periods of insecurity and surveillance technologies and biometric registration. This has created what many scholars describe as ECOWAS paradox, that is, a situation where governments are legally committed to facilitating free movement while simultaneously implementing restrictive security measures that impede mobility. Again, African migration governance often reflects tension between developmental goals and security concerns as states increasingly frame migration as a security issue, leading to policies that contradict commitments to regional integration (Adepoju, 2005, Adepoju, 2010, Bakewell, 2008). A second diplomatic challenge stems from the growing geopolitical fragmentation within West Africa following the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger following a military coups in these countries and subsequent disagreements with

ECOWAS over sanctions, democratic governance, and constitutional order. These tensions eventually culminated in the decision by the three countries to withdraw from ECOWAS.

This geopolitical realignment has profound implications for migration governance. First, ECOWAS has traditionally provided a common legal and institutional framework governing migration, border management, refugee protection, and regional cooperation. The withdrawal of key Sahelian states weakens these common institutions and creates uncertainty regarding future implementation of the free movement protocol. Second, migration routes across the Sahel cut across national boundaries. Effective management therefore depends upon multilateral cooperation involving intelligence sharing, border coordination, refugee protection and humanitarian assistance. Diplomatic tensions reduce trust among governments and complicate joint responses to migration crises. Third, fragmented regional governance creates opportunities for human trafficking networks, smuggling organizations, terrorists' mobility, illegal arms trafficking and weak border coordination. State fragility and regional political instability reinforced displacement and weaken collective security arrangements, making migration governance increasingly difficult. This by extension, affects relations with international organizations such as African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN), both of which rely on regional cooperation to coordinate humanitarian interventions (Williams 2020, Castle, de Haas and Miller, 2020). The third major diplomatic challenge concerns the increasing externalization of European migration policies. Border externalization here refers to strategies through which the European Union (EU) encourages neighbouring countries to prevent migrants from reaching Europe by strengthening border controls within Africa rather than at European borders. This the European Union does through financial assistance, development partnerships, technical cooperation and migration agreements. While these initiatives aim to reduce irregular migration, they also generate diplomatic tensions as many African governments argue that migration cooperation has become disproportionately focused on European security interest rather than African development priorities and by extension creates unequal partnership. This dynamic has sometimes pressured African governments to adopt restrictive migration policies that conflict with ECOWAS free movement commitments. Externalization therefore often increases migrant vulnerability rather than reducing migration. Migration is driven by structural inequalities, conflict, demographic change and globalization, and so policies that emphasize border control without addressing these root causes are unlikely to achieve sustainable incomes.

One of the greatest humanitarian concerns associated with irregular migration in West Africa is the failure to adequately protect migrants throughout their journeys. Many migrants travel through unregulated routes across the Sahara Desert toward North Africa and eventually Europe. Weak border governance, corruption, insecurity, and the absence of effective migration management systems expose migrants to numerous human rights violations, which include arbitrary detention, physical violence and torture, sexual and gender-based violence, kidnapping for ransom, forced labour, extortion by smugglers and armed groups, and lack of access to healthcare, shelter, legal assistance, and food (Sunday and Piate 2024). Children and

women are particularly vulnerable. Unaccompanied minors often disappear during transit, while women face heightened risks of sexual exploitation and abuse. In countries such as Niger and Libya, migrants intercepted during transit are often detained under poor conditions without access to legal representation or humanitarian assistance. Protection mechanisms remain insufficient because governments often lack adequate resources and institutional capacity (International Organization for Migration, 2024 United Nation High Commission for Refugee, 2024).

The increase in irregular migration has fueled sophisticated human trafficking networks operating across West Africa. Criminal organizations exploit migrants' desperation by promising employment or safe passage to Europe. Victims are subjected to sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, domestic servitude, forced labour in agriculture and mining, child trafficking and organ trafficking in some reported cases. Nigeria remains one of the principal countries of origin for trafficking victims in West Africa (United Nations Office for Coordination Nation of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024). Young women have historically been trafficked through Niger into Libya before being transported across the Mediterranean to Europe. Although government intervention has reduced some trafficking routes, criminal networks continue adapting their operations. The humanitarian consequences include long-term psychological trauma, family separation, social stigma, physical injuries and loss of livelihoods (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023). Also, irregular migrants often become victims of exploitation throughout the migration process. Here smugglers frequently charge excessive transportation fees, abandon migrants in dangerous locations, confiscate passports, demand additional ransom payments and forced migrants into labour to repay transportation debts. Many migrants become trapped in exploitative employment especially in North Africa after exhausting their financial resources. Economically, is the issue of non-payment of wages, hazardous working conditions, physical abuse, restriction on movement and debt bondage. Women and girls additionally face forced marriages and sexual exploitation during transit (Mixed Migration Centre, 2023, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, 2023).

The Sahara Desert and Atlantic Ocean represent two of the world's deadliest migration routes. Thousands of migrants cross the Sahara every year from countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Senegal. Migrants across this route, faces extreme temperature exceeding 45°C, dehydration, starvation, vehicle breakdowns, abandonment by smugglers, attacked by armed groups and lack of rescue services. Many deaths remain undocumented because bodies disappear in remote desert areas. The Atlantic migration from West Africa to the Canary Islands has become increasingly popular as the Mediterranean routes become more restrictive. Migrants depart mainly from Senegal, Mauritania and the Gambia and attempt dangerous journeys lasting several days or weeks in overcrowded wooden fishing boats. Humanitarian risk on this route include boat capsizing, drowning, hypothermia, starvation, severe dehydration, engine failures and navigation errors. The growing influx of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants places enormous pressure on host communities such as healthcare facilities, schools, housing, water supplies, sanitation

systems, food security, employment opportunities throughout West Africa. Also, competition for scarce resources may increase social tensions between local populations and newcomers (Economic Community of West African States (2025)).

Humanitarian organizations operating across West Africa face severe funding shortages as international humanitarian funding has increasingly shifted toward other global emergencies. As donor attention and resources are redirected, humanitarian operations in West Africa receive significantly less funding than required, (World Food Programme, 2024). The consequences are better imagined, and they include, reduced food assistance, closure of health programmes, limited protection services, reduced shelter provision, insufficient education programmes, inadequate psychosocial support, limited search and rescue operations. Funding shortages reduce the capacity to respond effectively to displacement crises, increasing migrants' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2024). Examples of humanitarian challenges in West Africa due to the upsurge in migration can be capture this way, Niger serves as a major migration transit hub between West Africa and North Africa. Following efforts to curb irregular migration, many migrants shifted to more remote desert routes, increasing deaths from dehydration and abandonment. Thousands of stranded migrants have required emergency humanitarian assistance. Nigeria on its own, remain one of Africa's major source countries for trafficking victims. Young women have historically been trafficked through Niger and Libya for sexual exploitation in Europe and numerous returnees have required rehabilitation and reintegration services after experiencing severe abuse. In Senegal, economic hardship and youth unemployment have driven thousands of Senegalese migrants to undertake dangerous

Atlantic crossings toward Spain's Canary Islands. Numerous boats have disappeared at sea, resulting in hundreds of death and disappearances. In Burkina Faso, the escalating insecurity due to unconstitutional taking over of power has displaced millions internally while forcing many others into neighboring coastal countries such as Ghana, Benin and Togo and in Mali, violence has generated large refugee movements into Mauritania and Niger. Humanitarian agencies continue providing emergency shelter, food assistance, healthcare, and protection despite limited funding. Below is a concise table of major humanitarian crises in West Africa that have significantly contributed to forced migration displacement and refugee flows.

Table 2.

Humanitarian Crisis	Country/Region	Period	Estimated Casualties	Migration Impact
West Africa Ebola Epidemic	Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone	2014–2016	11,325 deaths	Internal displacement, cross-border migration, collapse of livelihoods
Boko Haram Insurgency	Northwest Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon	2009–till date	35,000 deaths	More than 3 million internally displace persons (IDPs) and refugees
Central Sahel Crisis	Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger	2015–till date	10,000 killed	One of the world's fastest-growing displacement crises; millions of IDPs and refugees
Mali Conflict	Mali	2012 till date	10,000 deaths	Large refugee movements into Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania
Armed Insurgency	Burkina Faso	2016 till date	20,000 deaths	More than 2 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
Major Flooding	Nigeria especially Borno	2024	230 deaths	More than 600,000 displaced, worsening humanitarian needs and onward migration

Source: International Organisation for Migration (2024)

On the whole, the collision between regional integration goals and the increasing need for security and humanitarian protection in West African states arises from the tension between facilitating the free movement of people and protecting states from security threats while addressing humanitarian needs. That is, while the Economic Community of West African States promotes regional integration through the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, which allows citizens of member states to move, reside and establish businesses across borders, intended to foster economic development, regional cooperation and social cohesion, the rising level of terrorism, armed conflict, political instability, climate change and economic hardship have led to increased forced migration and displacement across the region. These developments have prompted governments to strengthen border controls and impose security measures to prevent the movement of armed groups, traffickers, and other transnational criminal networks. Such restrictions can conflict with ECOWAS commitments to free movement and may limit access to protection for refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. This situation creates significant diplomatic and humanitarian challenges. The overall principal challenge for West African states is to maintain the benefits of regional integration while implementing effective security measures and fulfilling

humanitarian obligations, ensuring that migration governance protects both national security and human dignity.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that the upsurge in migration across West Africa is the product of a complex interaction between security deterioration, violent extremism, recurring coups, climate change, desertification, demographic pressures, and socioeconomic challenges. The Sahel has become the epicenter of these intersecting crises, producing both forced and voluntary migration flows within the region and beyond. For West African states, migration presents a dual challenge. Diplomatically, governments must balance security concerns, regional integration commitments, and international obligations. Humanitarianly, they must respond to growing displacement, protect vulnerable populations, sustain social cohesion despite limited resources. The way forward is that addressing the migration Surge requires a comprehensive approach that combines conflict prevention, democratic governance, climate adaptation, economic development, regional cooperation and strengthened humanitarian responses. Without tackling the underlying drivers, migration pressures are likely to remain a defining feature of West Africa's political, economic and security landscape for years to come.

References

- Adepoju, A. (2018). *International migration within, to and from Africa in a globalized world*, Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Adepoju, A. (2025). Migration in West Africa". *Global Commission on International Migration*, Geneva, Switzerland.
- Amadi, V. (2022). *An Analysis of Migration Governance Frameworks in West Africa*, Johannesburg: Gauteng.
- Aniche, E. T., & Iwuala, V. C. (2026). ECOWAS at 50: A compendium of five decades of regional integration and security in West Africa, *Politikon*, 52(3-4), 265-270.
- Aniche, E. T., Moyo, I., & Nshimbi, C. C. (2021). Interrogating the nexus between irregular migration and insecurity along ungoverned border spaces in West Africa, *African Security Review*, 30(3), 304-318.
- Anieche, B. I. (2026). Economics at 50: A compendium of five decades of regional integration and security in West Africa, *Africa Politics and Society*, 42(1): 1–15.
- Bakewell, O. (2008). Keeping them in their place: The ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa, *Third World Quarterly*, 29(7), 1341–1358.
- Bako, U. Y. (2026). Rethinking securitization in empowerment-based migration awareness campaigns for sustainable Africa — EU migration management".

- Betts, A. & Collier, P. (2017). *Refuge: Transforming a broken refugee system*, Allen Lane.
- Bratton, M., & Van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press.
- Bryden, A., N'Diaye, B., & Olonisakin, F. (2008). Understanding the challenges of security sector governance in West Africa," in Bryden, N'Diaye, and Olonisakin (eds), *Challenges for Security Sector Governance in West Africa*. Lit Verlag: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.
- Castles, S., De Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The Age of Migration: International population movements in the Modern World* (6th ed.), Guilford Press.
- De Hass, H. (2021). "A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework, *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1): 1–8.
- Economic Community of West African States (2015). *ECOWAS migration policy framework*.
- Gemenne, F. (2011). "Why the numbers don't add up: A review of estimates and predictions of people displaced by environmental changes? *Global Environmental Change*, 21(1), 41–49.
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2023). West Coast migration crisis, humanitarian needs overview.
- International Organization for Migration (2024). *Missing Migrants Project*.
- International Organization for Migration (2024). *World Migration Report 2024*.
- Knol, A. (2020). Analysing African perspective on migration cooperation with Europe, *European Centre for Development Policy Management*.
- Koser, K. (2016). *International Migration: A very short introduction* (2nd ed.), Oxford University Press.
- Mixed Migration Centre (2023). *A quarterly mixed migration update: West Africa*.
- Mudoh, P. (2026). Economics at 50: Navigating the crossroads of economic integration and institutional fragmentation, *MSI Journal of Modern Research*, 48(2), 112–128.
- Mudoh, S. (2026). Structural drivers of irregular migration corridors across Sub-Saharan economic blocks, *African Development Review*.

- Obulah, E. E. (2026). The implication of the exit of the Sahelian states for ECOWAS, *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 9(2), 73–89.
- Piate, S. M. (2026). The political economy of insecurity in Nigeria: Navigating Nigeria's predatory economy and commercialization of violence, *Journal of Political Discourse*, 4(1), 126–150.
- Piate, S. M. (2013). Domestic challenges confronting Nigeria's foreign policy, *ABSU Journal of Arts, Management, Education, Law and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 91–116.
- Piate, S. M. (2014). the impact of globalization on public policy in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects, *Uniuyo Journal of Politics and Administration*, 1(1), 132–149.
- Piate, S. M. (2017). Nigeria's Foreign policy, Regional Leadership and the Crisis of Neo-Colonial Development (1960–2016), *Social Scientia Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(1), 46–68.
- Piate, S. M. (2025). A discourse on Nigeria's security interest in the Gulf of Guinea in the Twenty-First Century, *Social Scientific Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(2), 88–98.
- Piate, S. M. (2025). Herdsmen-farmer clashes, proliferation, sustainable development in Nigeria: A critical examination of the nexus, *International Journal of Scientific Research in Social Sciences and Management Studies*, 8(2): 177–184.
- Piate, S. M. (2025). Nigeria's foreign policy of peacekeeping operations in Africa: The missing link, *International Journal of Multidisciplinary & Education Research*, 8(1), 97–106.
- Piate, S. M. (2025). Terrorism and violent crime in Africa: A comparative analysis between Nigeria and Kenya, *Social Science and Law Journal of Policy Review and Development Strategies*, 11(1), 210–227.
- Piate, S. M. (2026). The Domestic Environment and Nigeria's Foreign Policy (1960–2025), *Social Scientia Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 10(4): 36–44.
- Piate, S. M. (2025). "Understanding Terrorism and its challenges to National Security in Nigeria, *Journal of Political Discourse*, 3(2), 58–74.
- Rossi, B. (2014). *Migration and Emancipation in West Africa's Labour History: The missing links*, Accra: Spectrum Books Ltd.

- Sunday, E. & Piates, S. M. (2024). Porous borders, small arms proliferation and socio-economic development in Eheng local government area of Cross River State, Nigeria, *Social Scientia Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 9(2), 28–40.
- Teye, J. K. (2022). *Migration in West Africa: An Introduction*, Lagos: Springer.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2024). *Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2023*.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2024). *West and Central African Situation*.
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024). Global humanitarian overview 2024.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2009). Transnational trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa: A Threat Assessment." Vienna.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023). *Global report on trafficking in persons 2022*.
- Williams, P. D. (2020). *War and Conflict in Africa* (2nd ed.), Polity Press.
- Williams, T. (2019). The political economy of border management and irregular migration in the ECOWAS region, *West Africa Policy Series Report*.
- World Food Programme (2024). *Regional emergency response*, Sahel and West Africa.
- Zabadi, I. S. & Nwoha, F. C. (2011). State of West Africa: A Survey of Security Landscape, *The Nigerian Army Quarterly Journal*.
- Zanker, F., Arhin-Sam, K., & Bisong, A., & Tegen, I. (2020). *Free movement in West Africa: Juxtaposition and divergent interest*, (Medam Policy Brief). Kiel Institute for the World Economy.