



Nigeria's Border Communities: Navigating Challenges and Fostering Inclusive Development

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Abstract

This study, "Nigeria's Border Communities: Navigating Challenges and Fostering Inclusive Development," explores the complex issues confronting border communities in Nigeria and identifies strategies for promoting inclusive development. The research highlights the unique challenges faced by these communities, including insecurity, poverty, and marginalization, and examines the impact of these challenges on their socioeconomic development. The study reveals that border communities in Nigeria are critical to the country's economic and social fabric, but they are often neglected and excluded from national development initiatives. To address these challenges, the research proposes a comprehensive approach that prioritizes inclusive development, security, and community engagement. The findings of this study have significant implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and stakeholders seeking to promote development and stability in Nigeria's border communities. By understanding the specific needs and concerns of these communities, stakeholders can design targeted interventions that promote economic growth, social cohesion, and human well-being. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on border communities in Nigeria and provides a framework for promoting inclusive development in these regions.

Keywords: Border Communities, Inclusive Development, Nigeria, Socioeconomic Development, Insecurity, Marginalization, Community Engagement, Social Cohesion

Introduction

Nigeria shares over 4,000 kilometres of land borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, alongside a vast Atlantic coastline. These frontier zones are home to millions of citizens living in hundreds of communities. Ideally, border regions should serve as vibrant economic gateways and symbols of national integration. Instead, Nigeria's border communities are defined by profound systemic neglect, geographical isolation, and acute insecurity. For decades, national development strategies have favoured urban centers and state capitals, leaving peripheral populations structurally invisible. This dynamic has turned Nigeria's frontiers into fragile spaces where national sovereignty is weakly enforced, and basic human development is nearly non-existent (Adebayo, 2026). Reversing this trend requires a deep understanding of the unique challenges these communities face and a deliberate, inclusive development framework to integrate them into the national fabric.



The challenges confronting Nigeria's border communities are multifaceted and complex, encompassing issues of insecurity, poor infrastructure, limited access to basic services, and marginalization. Insecurity, particularly in the form of banditry, smuggling, and cross-border crimes, has become a persistent threat to the stability and well-being of these communities (Nosiri and Ohazurike, 2016). The lack of adequate infrastructure, including roads, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions, further exacerbates the difficulties faced by residents, limiting their access to essential services and opportunities for economic advancement.

Moreover, the porous nature of Nigeria's borders contributed to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, further destabilizing these regions and creating an environment conducive to violence and conflict. For example, the supply and circulation of illegal arms and ammunition fueling Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east geo-political zone of Nigeria was made possible by the porous nature of Nigeria's border with the republic of Chad. The impact of these challenges is felt across various sectors, including agriculture, trade, and commerce, which are critical to the livelihoods of border community residents and the country at large. In addition to these challenges, Nigeria's border communities often experience marginalization and exclusion from national development initiatives. This is reflected in the limited attention given to their specific needs and concerns of border communities.

Border Communities as Drivers of Sustainable Development in Nigeria.

When policy papers and national discourse turn to Nigeria's peripheral communities, the tone is almost universally somber. Border regions are routinely framed through the lens of deficit as passive, vulnerable, and ungoverned spaces plagued by infrastructural decay, insecurity, and economic informality. This conventional perspective, however, suffers from a profound analytical blind spot. It treats border communities entirely as liabilities, ignoring their active, organic contributions to the nation's survival and future growth (Iyekekpolo, 2020).

Far from being mere burdens on the state, Nigeria's border communities function as foundational pillars of the nation's socio-economic and geopolitical architecture. Operating within a framework that mirrors the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these resilient frontier populations quietly drive regional trade, preserve cross-border ecosystems, foster multicultural diplomacy, and act as the first line of national defense. Recognizing and empowering these communities is not just an act of political charity; it is an absolute necessity for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. Border communities in Nigeria act as economic drivers of regional integration. While formal national indicators often mislabel frontier economic activities as "informal" or "contraband," border communities are actually dynamic engines of grassroots commerce. They serve as critical nodes in the transnational trade networks that link Nigeria to the broader West and Central African sub-regions. Communities along the Illela (Sokoto-Niger), Seme-Badagry (Lagoon-Benin), Banki (Borno-Cameroon), and Mfum (Cross River-Cameroon) axes host sprawling markets that sustain millions of livelihoods (Ani, 2006). These markets are not just local trading posts; they are sophisticated distribution hubs where agricultural commodities, manufactured goods, and textiles are exchanged across national lines. By facilitating this flow, border residents lay the practical groundwork for regional frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Osuji, 2024). Border communities also serve as shock absorbers and food supply stabilizers. During periods of domestic economic stress, currency fluctuations, or policy shifts, these communities leverage their cross-border networks to stabilize local supply



chains. When local harvests face seasonal shortages within Nigeria, border traders utilize informal channels to source grains, livestock, and raw materials from neighboring countries. This flexible, resilient network prevents acute localized food shortages, providing a vital safety net for both rural and urban consumer markets. The pursuit of environmental sustainability in Nigeria is deeply intertwined with the geography of its frontiers. Border communities are the de facto custodians of Nigeria's most vital shared ecological treasures.

From the shrinking waters of the Lake Chad Basin in the far north to the dense, biodiverse rainforests of the Gashaka-Gumti and Cross River National Parks along the Cameroon border, frontier populations live on the front lines of environmental conservation. Local traditional institutions often enforce customary laws that protect shared forests, watersheds, and wildlife corridors from indiscriminate exploitation. As climate change accelerates desertification in the Sahel, border communities have developed unique local mechanisms to manage the seasonal migration of pastoralists from Niger and Chad. By negotiating access to grazing lands and watering holes, these communities help prevent resource-driven conflicts. This micro-level environmental management directly advances the core goals of climate adaptation and terrestrial preservation.

National security strategies often rely heavily on military deployments to secure borders. However, the most durable framework for peace along Nigeria's frontiers is the daily practice of "micro-diplomacy" conducted by border communities. The colonial boundaries drawn across West Africa split homogenous ethnic groups such as the Yoruba in the west, the Hausa and Kanuri in the north, and the Ekoi and Ejagham in the east into different nations (Rufai, 2024). Today, border communities use these shared cultural identities to build deep social capital. Cross-border marriages, shared festivals, and unified traditional leadership structures create a strong social fabric. This interconnectedness allows local communities to defuse cross-border tensions long before they escalate into international diplomatic crises. In areas where state security personnel are spread thin, the vigilance of border residents serves as a critical asset. Local hunters, farmers, and traders possess deep knowledge of the local terrain. When integrated into community-led policing frameworks, their observations provide vital human intelligence. By detecting the movement of armed bandits, insurgent groups, and illicit weapons traffickers, border communities act as an essential, early-warning shield for the entire nation.

The role of border communities in Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable development is a paradox of untapped potential and systemic neglect. Often viewed through the narrow lens of national security and "ungoverned spaces," these peripheral regions are actually the heartbeat of regional integration and economic resilience. Border communities like Seme, Idiroko, Mubi, and Gamboru Ngala are not merely geographic markers; they are vibrant economic corridors. In Nigeria, the informal cross-border trade (ICBT) sustains millions. While formal statistics often miss this, these communities provide food security and essential commodities that the central state fails to deliver.

Sustainable development (SDG 8—Decent Work and Economic Growth) is naturally occurring in these zones through grassroots entrepreneurship. However, because this trade is frequently criminalized or hampered by sudden border closures, the potential for long-term capital investment remains low. The greatest hurdle to sustainable development in these regions is the "security-development" nexus. Nigeria's borderlands are frequently the frontlines of insurgency, arms smuggling, and human trafficking (Isana and Afaha, 2026). When the state fails to provide schools, hospitals, and roads (SDG 9), a vacuum is created. Non-state actors, such as insurgent groups or



smuggling syndicates, fill this void by providing pseudo-governance or employment, directly undermining national stability. Sustainable development cannot exist without peace (SDG 16), yet peace cannot be achieved in borderlands by military force alone. It requires the "inclusive development" of the people living there. Border communities possess a unique "trans-border citizenship." The Yoruba's in Ogun State share kinship with those in Benin; the Kanuri's in Borno share ties with Chad and Niger (Asiwaju, 1984). This cultural bridge is a powerful tool for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). By investing in these communities, Nigeria can transition from "border control" (exclusion) to "border management" (inclusion). When border populations feel like valued citizens of Nigeria, they become the first line of defense against transnational crime, acting as the eyes and ears of national intelligence.

For a border community to impact sustainable development, it must be connected. Currently, many Nigerian border towns are more accessible to their neighboring countries than to their own state capitals. Poor road networks turn what should be trade hubs into "poverty traps." To foster inclusive development, the Border Communities Development Agency (BCDA) must move beyond small-scale interventions to massive infrastructural integration that links border markets to national industrial zones. The impact of border communities on Nigeria's sustainable development is currently restricted by a "center-periphery" bias. To unlock their potential, Nigeria must shift its strategy from viewing borders as barriers to viewing them as gateways. True sustainable development will only be achieved when a resident in a remote village in Illela or Bakassi has the same access to the Nigerian state's benefits as a resident in Abuja. Until then, these communities will remain the "weakest link" in the national chain, rather than the "strongest bridge" to continental prosperity (Nosiri and Ohazurike, 2016).

Border Communities in Nigeria and Their Specific Challenges

Challenges confronting border communities in Nigeria are unique and specific in nature. These challenges impact negatively on their development, security, and well-being. For example, in the north-east geo-political zone of Nigeria, border Communities that share boundaries with Cameroun and Chad such as Gamboru Ngala, Bama, and Banki have been significantly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency and militancy. The porous border with Cameroon and Chad facilitated the movement of illegal arms and ammunition across borders. The communities have experienced cross-border crimes, Boko-Haram insurgency, armed banditry, kidnappings, smuggling, displacement and humanitarian crises due to conflict and insecurity, food insecurity, and poor infrastructural development.

In the north-west geo-political zone, border communities including Birnin Kebbi is in Kebbi State, Illela in Sokoto State, Batagarawa and Mai'adua in Katsina State have experienced illegal circulation of small arms and ammunition, Lakurawa insurgency, cross-border crimes, smuggling of goods and services, human trafficking, insecurity and banditry, attacks and kidnappings and lack of functional infrastructure. In southern Nigeria, border communities including Badagry in Lagos state, Idiroko in Ogun State, Mfon in Cross River State and Oron in Akwa Ibom State faced challenges of illegal circulation of arms and ammunition, armed robbery, pirates attack, kidnappings, drugs trafficking, smuggling and human trafficking (Omeje, 2010). Weak enforcement of border security regulations exacerbates the challenges faced by border communities. Displacement and humanitarian crises due to conflict and insecurity. Endless influx of refugees



spurned by insurgency in southern Cameroun created a serious humanitarian crisis in the region. Poor state of existing infrastructure made development unsustainable in the area.

Structural Realities and the Geography of Neglect

The crisis in Nigeria's border communities stems from a governance model that equates the physical distance from capital cities with political irrelevance. This layout has created a distinct set of structural hardships.

The most visible sign of border community neglect is the complete absence of basic infrastructure. Roads leading to these communities are often unpaved tracks that become impassable during the rainy season. This disconnects residents off from domestic markets. Clean drinking water, electricity, and telecommunications networks are rarely available. Where cellular signals exist, residents frequently rely on foreign networks from neighboring countries. This reliance further detaches them from the Nigerian state. Healthcare and education are severely underfunded in these areas. Primary health centers, where they exist, are often dilapidated structures lacking essential medications, electricity, and qualified personnel. Similarly, schools suffer from leaking roofs, a lack of learning materials, and a severe shortage of teachers (Onuoha, 2013). Teachers and healthcare workers routinely reject postings to these areas due to the harsh living conditions. This leaves the local population uneducated and vulnerable to preventable diseases.

In many border villages, the only visible signs of the Nigerian state are checkpoint agencies like the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) and the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS). Regrettably, these agencies are often viewed as predatory rather than protective. Local governments, which are constitutionally mandated to develop these areas, are financially crippled and administratively distant. This leaves a governance vacuum filled by traditional institutions or cross-border authorities. Because the state is largely absent, Nigeria's borders have become highly vulnerable to security threats (Osuji, 2024). The lack of infrastructure and governance directly fuels local grievances and instability.

Porous Borders and Transnational Crime also constitutes a serious problem to border communities in Nigeria. Nigeria's borders feature thousands of illegal, unmonitored entry points. Transnational criminal networks exploit these gaps to smuggle small arms, light weapons, narcotics, and human trafficking victims. Border communities often get caught in the crossfire of these operations or are forced to cooperate with criminals to survive. Border communities are also plague by insurgency and banditry: In the Northeast (bordering Chad and Cameroon) and the Northwest (bordering Niger), militant groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and armed bandits use border communities as safe havens (Isana, 2026). They exploit the dense forests, difficult terrain, and lack of security forces to launch attacks, recruit unemployed youth, and extort locals through illegal taxes (Rufai, 2024). Cut off from the formal Nigerian economy, many border residents rely on informal cross-border trade for survival. However, the state routinely labels these survival activities as smuggling. Sudden border closures, intended to curb contraband, frequently devastate local livelihoods, criminalize honest traders, and deepen poverty.

Recognizing these deep structural imbalances, the Federal Government established the Border Communities Development Agency (BCDA) through an Act of Parliament in 2003 (amended in 2006). The BCDA was created to ensure the sustainable development of border communities. Its mandate covers infrastructure provision, socioeconomic empowerment, and enhancing security along the border socio-economic axis. The agency was designed to bridge the development gap



between the core and the periphery. It treats border development not just as a welfare issue, but as a critical national security imperative (BCDA, 2024).

Despite its vital mandate, the BCDA has struggled to transform Nigeria's frontiers due to several chronic institutional failures. The BCDA are small compared to the needs of over 21 states with border local governments. Delayed and incomplete disbursements prevent the agency from executing large-scale, long-term infrastructure projects. Instead of focusing on strategic, high-impact regional interventions, the BCDA's budget is frequently split into small, politically driven constituency projects. This leads to scattered, low-impact installations such as a handful of solar streetlights or a single motorized borehole that fail to fix systemic poverty. The BCDA often builds infrastructure without coordinating with the line ministries responsible for running them. As a result, the agency might build a health center clinic, but it remains empty and locked because the Ministry of Health was never engaged to provide doctors, nurses, or medical equipment.

Policy Roadmap for Inclusive Frontier Development

To fully harness the positive contributions of border communities, Nigeria must move away from policies focused purely on control and containment. Instead, Nigeria needs a comprehensive approach that links border security with human development. The federal and state governments must prioritize building durable roads that link border communities to major domestic economic hubs. The state needs to adopt a development model that treats these communities as strategic partners in national growth. Instead of criminalizing the vital economic lifeblood of the frontiers, the Federal Government should establish Special Border Economic Zones (SBEZs). Transitioning informal markets into regulated commercial hubs equipped with processing facilities, cold storage, and digital banking access will formalize trade. This approach will protect local livelihoods while generating valuable tax revenue for the state. Nigeria should move toward an Integrated Border Management model that blends traditional security measures with human development. The state can build deep institutional trust by co-locating border security checkpoints with vital social infrastructure, such as modern clinics and schools. When border residents see state agencies as partners in human development rather than predatory forces, their cooperation on national security matters will increase naturally.

Investing in off-grid renewable energy solutions, like solar mini-grids, can quickly power border clinics, schools, and small businesses. Expanding national telecommunications coverage to these areas is also vital to bring residents into the national digital economy and improve local intelligence gathering. True border security cannot be achieved solely through military force. Nigeria must adopt a "human security" model where the state earns the trust of border populations by providing public services (Asiwaju, 2003). For instance, when residents see the state as a provider of schools, hospitals, and clean water, they are far more likely to cooperate with security agencies, share intelligence, and help defend national sovereignty. The Border Communities Development Agency (BCDA) must be structurally reformed to operate through a decentralized, community-driven framework. Rather than implementing top-down constituency projects, the BCDA should fund initiatives identified directly by border community development committees. Giving priority to off-grid solar infrastructure, cross-border access roads, and regional language education (such as French-immersion hubs) will maximize the unique geographic advantages of these regions. Nigeria's border communities are far more than peripheral zones vulnerable to external threats; they are vital, active spaces essential to the nation's sustainable development. Through grassroots



economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and cross-border diplomacy, these communities demonstrate daily that the nation's edges can be sources of strength, innovation, and stability. Achieving the vision of a secure and prosperous Nigeria requires a fundamental shift in perspective. The nation must stop viewing its borders merely as lines of division to be policed and start seeing them as vibrant gateways of opportunity. By investing in the human capital of its frontiers and treating border communities as vital partners, Nigeria can unlock a sustainable future that leaves no citizen behind.

The BCDA requires structural reform, starting with increased funding secured through dedicated development funds or public-private partnerships. The agency must stop executing piecemeal constituency projects. Instead, it should focus on large-scale, cross-border development zones. Crucially, the BCDA must establish binding frameworks with state and local governments to ensure that whenever a facility is built, the staff and operational budget are ready immediately. Nigeria should leverage regional frameworks, such as the African Union Border Programme (AUBP) and ECOWAS protocols, to pursue joint development initiatives with neighboring countries. Co-managing cross-border markets, shared water resources, and pastoral corridors can transform border regions from tense security zones into zones of shared prosperity. Nigeria's border communities are currently structural vulnerabilities, but they hold the potential to become engines of regional integration and economic growth. The long-standing neglect of these frontiers has undermined national security and left millions of citizens disconnected from their own country.

Addressing these challenges requires moving past short-term border closures and scattered, superficial development projects. By empowering the Border Communities Development Agency, investing in vital infrastructure, and adopting a human-centric security model, Nigeria can finally integrate its border communities. Fostering inclusive development at the frontiers is an economic necessity, a human right, and an essential step toward securing the nation's future.

Conclusion

Nigeria's border communities are a vital part of the country's socioeconomic fabric, but they face unique challenges that hinder their development and integration into the national mainstream. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes inclusive development, security, and community engagement. By understanding the specific needs and concerns of border communities, policymakers and development practitioners can design targeted interventions that promote economic growth, social cohesion, and human well-being. This includes investing in infrastructure, social services, and community development initiatives, as well as promoting peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Ultimately, fostering inclusive development in Nigeria's border communities requires a collaborative effort between government agencies, development partners, and local stakeholders. By working together, we can unlock the potential of these communities and contribute to the country's overall development and growth. By prioritizing the development of Nigeria's border communities, we can promote national stability, economic growth, and sustainable development.

The study concludes that Nigerian border communities, while crucial for security and economic integration, are severely marginalized by a centralist governance model that prioritizes security over development, creating vulnerabilities to transnational crime. A strategic shift toward an integrated management model, featuring the empowerment of the BCDA and the establishment of special economic zones, is necessary to transform these regions into secure, prosperous gateways.



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Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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