ISSUES IN INTER-STATE BORDER SECURITY AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN THE SOUTHEAST ZONE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study explored the critical issues surrounding border security and irregular migration from South-East Nigeria. It focused on the indicators of border security, drivers and patterns of irregular migration, impacts and the challenges of managing these dynamics. It is a qualitative study and employed documentary data sourced from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and institutional reports, journal articles, governmental reports, books and other online publications. Securitization Theory was adopted as a framework for explanation. Findings revealed that poor policy implementation and diminishing state control of national borders resulted in unrestricted entry into Nigeria. The situation facilitates illegal cross-border activities, exacerbating national and regional criminalities and destabilizing socio-economic structures. The entry further gave rise to high youth unemployment, poverty, and inflation and these phenomena drive irregular exodus from the Southeast. Criminal elements exploit the irregular movements to indulge in human trafficking and organized crime. Governments' initiatives like Operation Restore Peace and Ebubeagu Security Network were hampered by structural and operational limitations, inadequate inter-agency coordination, and resource constraints. Are form of the Nigerian border security management system, creation of job and skill acquisition centres and development of basic infrastructure for better living of the people are recommended.

KEYWORDS: Nigeria Borders, Border Security, Migration, Irregular Migration, Southeast Nigeria

INTRODUCTION
A state is known primarily for its territorial boundary as a fundamental feature of its existence as a state. The regulation and protection of the borders help to control the influx of people, goods and services and what may be referred to as encroachment and other external interferences. The state security apparatus responsible for securing these borders requires efficient manpower and resources to achieve optimal goals. Border security and irregular migration represent urgent and complex issues in Southeast Nigeria. While migration refers to internal or inter-state movement of persons from one location to another for residence purposes, irregular migration becomes the inter-state aspect of migration exercised without legal travel documentations. As migration patterns evolve globally, the Southeast region is increasingly exposed to heightened transnational criminal activity, necessitating a robust understanding of its border security framework.

Border security, broadly understood as the protection and regulation of territorial boundaries, plays a critical role in controlling the movement of people and goods, thereby safeguarding national security and supporting socio-economic stability (Osimen, Anegbode, Akande, &Oyewole, (2017). In Southeast Nigeria,border security is not only about preventing illegal activities but also involves maintaining regulated access points and areas that face challenges due to structural and operational limitations (Nelson, Conley, Schaffer, Bodurian, Kraut, Cipoletti, Dukkipati, & Walker, (2010).

Irregular migration in Southeast Nigeria is influenced by a range of socio-economic and political drivers that push individuals toward unauthorized cross-border movements. The impact of economic instability, poverty, and limited job opportunities in Nigeria is compounded by organized crime and insecurity, creating strong incentives for irregular migration (Afolayan, 2018). The pathways taken by irregular migrants are often facilitated by informal networks sometimes operating in response to legal barriers and enforcement gaps that prevent individuals from pursuing formal migration channels (Frontex, 2021). Additionally, criminal groups exploit these pathways, capitalizing on individuals' vulnerabilities to indulge in human trafficking, kidnapping, and armed robbery. These further intensify the challenges facing border security agencies (Global Organised Crime Index, 2023). More so, the effects of irregular migration in South-East Nigeria can impact the region's social and economic stability. The influx of irregular migrants, combined with limited regulatory oversight, has exacerbated insecurity, straining local economies and complicating social relations within host communities (Chime, 2022). The economic impact is particularly severe, as irregular migration fuels informal economies disrupting formal markets and employment sectors.It often leads to increased poverty and reduced social cohesion. Moreover, the flow of arms and illicit goods through porous borders heightens violence and insecurity, with militant groups exploiting these channels to strengthen their influence in the region (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2023). This form of migration has left places in the Ihiala, Orlu, and Ekwusigo axis of the Southeast deserted as a result of the criminal activities of these migrants. Some are involved in kidnapping for ransom while others kidnap, kill and harvest human organs for sale. In

The government has a responsibility to provide security for its citizens by stopping the activities of criminal elements constituting threats to social order. The government's responses to irregular migration in the Southeast have included various security initiatives, such as multi-agency military interventions like Operation Restore Peace and Operation Golden Dawn. The aim was to stabilize border areas (Elusoji, 2021; Njoku et al., 2021). However, these efforts continue to face structural and operational constraints, including inter-agency coordination challenges and resource shortages. Regional strategies, such as the Ebubeagu Security Network and anti-open grazing policies, underscore the region's efforts to address security independently, though these initiatives face obstacles, including limited cooperation with federal authorities (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Given the current security condition of the Southeast geopolitical zone, this study seeks to examine the state of border security and irregular migration in the zone, to proffer lasting solutions to them. This study, therefore, examines the specific dynamics of border security in Southeast Nigeria, drawing attention to the critical factors that shape and sometimes undermine the effective management of irregular migration.

METHODOLOGY

This study qualitatively investigated the intricate issues of border security and irregular migration in Southeast Nigeria, specifically focusing on the nature of border security, drivers and patterns of irregular migration, its effects, governmental responses, and the challenges associated with these dynamics. Utilizing documented evidence, the study relies on, journal articles, governmental reports, policy papers, e-books and reliable organizational publications. Content analysis is employed to systematically examine and analyse these data, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the variables under investigation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Securitization Theory, formulated by scholars Ole Waever and Barry Buzan in the early 1990s, offers a fresh approach to understanding security beyond traditional military dimensions. First formally articulated in Ole Wæver's1995, "Securitization and Desecuritization," the theory proposes that security issues are socially constructed through discourse. According to Waever, securitization occurs when influential actors frame an issue as an existential threat, thereby moving it out of the realm of political debate and into one of immediate action, often bypassing standard democratic processes (Waever, 1995). This process emphasizes the role of language in constructing security threats, suggesting that anything can become a security issue if powerful actors declare it so. Unlike conventional security frameworks, Securitization Theory underscores the impact of subjective perceptions and communicative acts in defining what is considered a threat (Buzan et al., 1998).

The theory gained traction and refinement through contributions from "The Copenhagen School of International Relations," a group of scholars closely associated with Wæver and Buzan who expanded upon the theory's applications and implications. Disciples of Securitization Theory, including scholars like Lene Hansen and Michael C. Williams, further examined how security threats are constructed and contested across different domains, such as environmental security and human rights (Williams, 2003). These scholars argue that securitization is a political act that can empower or disempower actors, making the theory a valuable tool for analysing how issues like immigration or climate change are framed as security concerns. Hansen, in particular, has explored the visual dimensions of securitization, adding depth to how security issues are communicated and interpreted (Hansen, 2011). Together, these disciples have expanded the theory's applicability and refined its conceptual framework, making it influential in fields like international relations, political science, and security studies.

The basic tenet of Securitization Theory is that security threats are not objective realities but are produced through language and discourse. According to the theory, securitization follows a three-stage process: identifying an issue, framing it as a threat, and legitimizing extraordinary measures to address it (Buzan et al., 1998). This process often allows leaders to gain authority by claiming that they are addressing urgent threats to the survival of the state, a tactic that can shift issues like migration or disease control out of the usual political discourse and into a domain where normal checks and balances might be overlooked. Securitization Theory thus critiques the traditional view that threats are objective and inevitable, suggesting instead that threats emerge from the way issues are framed by actors with vested interests (Wæver, 1995). This perspective encourages a more critical view of security practices and questions the motives and outcomes of framing certain issues as existential threats.

Applying Securitization Theory to the study of border security and irregular migration in Southeast Nigeria offers insight into how irregular migration is framed as a security issue by influential actors, attracting local and regional responses. In this context, political leaders, law enforcement, and community stakeholders represented irregular migration in Nigeria as an existential threat to national stability, economic integrity, and public safety. By securitizing migration, these actors elevated it beyond ordinary political debate, justifying stricter border controls and militarized responses under the premise of protecting the state and its citizens (Buzan et al., 1998). This framing can create a sense of urgency around migration management, allowing for actions that might bypass standard regulatory checks or ignore humanitarian concerns, focusing instead on rapid deterrence and containment measures. Securitization of irregular migration in the Southeast is evident in the passage of the anti-open grazing bill by the government of South-Eastern states which will prevent the migration of killer herdsmen to the zone that has contributed to violent deaths in the region and the establishment of Ebubeagu Security Network) to stop the violent activities of unknown gunmen operating across the borders of the states of the South-East.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUAL IZING KEY TERMS

Scholars views on the concepts of border security and irregular migration are examined hereunder.

Border Security As a concept, border security is multifaceted and varies across different authors, each contributing unique perspectives on definitions and essential features. For instance, border security is a component of border management, encompassing terms such as border control, border monitoring, and border protection. It primarily aims to facilitate or regulate the movement of people, animals, and goods across national boundaries (Osimen, Anegbode, Akande, and Oyewole, 2017). This view highlights two main aspects: securing the borderlines—activities directly at the border—and controlling ports of entry, including harbours and airports. Meanwhile, Nelson, Conley, Schaffer, et al. (2010) broaden the perception to encompass the management oInstrument of data collection and analysis was triangulated.of the flow of various items across national boundaries, suggesting a more integrated approach to border security that includes not just physical boundaries but also the logistics involved in monitoring and controlling movement.

In contrast, Nosiri and Ohazurike (2016) adopt a more security-centric perspective, defining border security as the protection of the state against illegal cross-border activities such as drug trafficking and illegal migration. Their view emphasizes the preventive aspects of border security, highlighting its role in safeguarding national security and development by thwarting illegal flows that could threaten a state's stability. They outline specific features of border security, including geophysical control, enforcement of immigration laws, and enhanced inspections to detect and prevent the entry of prohibited items. This delineation underscores a more operational focus on how border security is executed, particularly in managing illegal activities that pose threats to the state. Furthermore, Shehu and Dalha (2023) enrich the discourse by emphasizing the complexity of border security, suggesting that it is not solely about the movement of individuals but also involves military, economic, political, and environmental considerations.

Their perspective aligns with Uzoma and Eudora (2016), who echo the idea that border security aims to reduce illegal flows while not entirely limiting legal movements. Fauzan, Abdallah, and Ahmad (2019) enhance this complexity by framing border security as the protection of life-support systems and the absence of threats, thus broadening the scope beyond mere enforcement to encompass the well-being of border communities. The authors collectively underscore the importance of balancing national security with human rights (Gana, Adamu, &Zakariya'u, 2023). This highlights an ongoing challenge in border security discourse: achieving effective control while respecting the rights of individuals, particularly asylum seekers and migrants. Overall, while the authors converge on the importance of border security, their definitions and emphases differ, illustrating the multifaceted nature of the concept in contemporary discourse. The entire discourse expanded understanding of national/border security to the extent that government agencies responsible for security are landed in a tight managerial cornerwithadual mandate of providing security without abusing human rights. Securitization of migration thus, failed to provide adequately for full observation of the rights of migrants.

Irregular Migration
Irregular migration is a complex phenomenon characterized by the movement of individuals across borders in a manner that violates the immigration laws of the destination country. Scholars have offered varying definitions of irregular migration, often emphasizing its illegality and the precarious circumstances that compel individuals to undertake such journeys. For instance, Afolayan (2018) conceived irregular migration as the unauthorized entry, stay, or departure of individuals, often driven by factors such as economic hardship, conflict, and environmental degradation. This understanding highlights the motivations behind irregular migration, indicating that individuals may resort to illegal pathways when legal avenues are inaccessible or overly restrictive. Additionally, Castles and Miller (2020) emphasize the dynamic nature of irregular migration, suggesting that it is influenced by a combination of political, social, and economic factors in both origin and destination countries.

The characteristics of irregular migration often include the use of informal networks and routes, as migrants navigate legal barriers and border restrictions. According to Frontex (2021), irregular migrants often rely on smuggling networks, which can expose them to exploitation and human rights abuses. Moreover, irregular migration patterns are characterized by a mix of voluntary and forced migration, complicating the legal and ethical frameworks governing migration. For example, refugees fleeing conflict zones may engage in irregular migration as a last resort, further complicating the classification of migrants and the responses from host countries. Understanding these characteristics is crucial for formulating effective policies that address the root causes of irregular migration while ensuring the safety and dignity of migrants.

Patterns of irregular migration have evolved significantly in recent years, often influenced by geopolitical changes and global crises. According to the International Organization for Migration (2023), irregular migration patterns are increasingly characterized by mixed flows, where migrants from various backgrounds undertake journeys along the same routes, often leading to heightened vulnerability. Furthermore, a comprehensive study by Abubakar et al. (2023) indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has also shifted migration patterns, with many migrants seeking to return to their home countries or relocate to new destinations due to economic downturns. The interplay between these patterns and global events highlights the need for adaptive and nuanced approaches to migration governance that consider the multifaceted nature of irregular migration and its impacts on both migrants and host societies.

NATURE OF BORDER SECURITY IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA
Border security in Southeast Nigeria reflects a complex interplay of historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors, underpinned by the legacy of colonial rule. African borders, including those of Nigeria, are often viewed as arbitrary constructs that do not align with the socio-cultural realities of the continent's diverse populations (Ikome, 2012). This arbitrary demarcation has contributed to the region's security challenges, exacerbating issues related to illegal activities and cross-border crime. In Southeast Nigeria, security has become a highly contested commodity, with pervasive perceptions that the Nigerian government struggles to maintain effective control over its borders (Nosiri&Ohazurike, 2016). The porous nature of these borders facilitates transnational crimes, including smuggling, human trafficking, money laundering, and terrorism, which further destabilize the region and threaten national security.

One of the most significant consequences of ineffective border management in Nigeria is the rise of armed banditry, particularly in the post-colonial context. Onuoha in Ubandawaki, Maihula, and Abdullahi (2023) highlighted that the proliferation of illegal routes—numbering approximately 1,497—has become a hallmark of the country's border security crisis. These routes are exploited by various criminal elements for the illicit smuggling of small and light arms, enabling not just Nigerian herdsmen but also foreign counterparts from Mali, Chad, and Niger to engage in violent activities. This alarming trend illustrates how porous borders not only facilitate the movement of goods but also contribute to the recruitment and training of bandits in modern guerrilla warfare techniques. Consequently, armed banditry has evolved to include kidnapping for ransom, a practice that has further entrenched violence in the region.

In conclusion, the nature of border security in Southeast Nigeria is emblematic of broader systemic issues that transcend mere territorial control. The porous borders, coupled with ineffective government response and the rise of non-state actors, illustrate a multifaceted security crisis that requires comprehensive and contextual solutions. Effective border management must address not only the physical security aspects but also the socioeconomic drivers of insecurity, including poverty, unemployment, and inter-communal tensions. As Nigeria grapples with these challenges, a nuanced approach that incorporates community engagement and regional cooperation may prove essential in fostering a more secure environment in Southeast Nigeria and beyond.

DRIVERS AND PATTERNS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN THE SOUTHEAST
Irregular migration in the Southeast of Nigeria is driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic factors. The inability of the government at all levels in Nigeria to live up to its primary assignment and promises to provide a stable economy where citizens can take fair care of their needs has resulted in high unemployment rates, widespread poverty, inflation, and pervasive insecurity. Nigeria's unemployment rate has skyrocketed from 10.44% in 2015 to 33.3% in 2020, with youth unemployment reaching 53%, making Nigeria the second worst globally (Punch, 2023). This economic landscape is particularly dire for the youth, who make up over 60% of the population, leading many to consider irregular migration as a viable means to secure a better future. The situation is exacerbated by rising poverty levels, with Nigeria surpassing India to become the world's poverty capital by 2018, and approximately 133 million Nigerians classified as multi-dimensionally poor, suffering from hunger and deprivation (Punch, 2023). Coupled with Nigeria's poor ranking in the Global Hunger Index at 103 out of 121 countries, these economic hardships drive many, especially youth, to embark on perilous journeys abroad.

Additionally, significant inflation fluctuations, peaking at 21.47% in November 2022, further erode the purchasing power of Nigerians, compelling them to view irregular migration as a last resort to escape dire economic realities and seek better living conditions (Ogunyale, 2023).

Further, the patterns of irregular migration in Nigeria's Southeast region reflect a complex interplay of local and transnational dynamics, exacerbated by organized crime, socio-political instability, and economic deprivation. According to the Global Organised Crime Index (2023), these groups engage in scams and cross-border killings, contributing to a climate of insecurity that further encourages irregular migration. The prevalence of "baby factories," where vulnerable pregnant women are trafficked under false pretences, exemplifies the dark side of this phenomenon, illustrating how crime networks exploit the desperation of impoverished individuals (Global Organised Crime Index, 2023; Shemang, 2024).

Child trafficking is another alarming facet of irregular migration in the South-East, particularly in the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi and Imo where numerous "baby factories" have been discovered by security agents. Sherman (2024) details how traffickers kidnap and deceive young girls and women and transport them to the Southeast, subjecting them to forced pregnancies to sell their babies to childless couples. These so-called baby factories are often masquerading as medical clinics, where women are not only held against their will but are also subjected to sexual violence. This form of exploitation reveals the systemic vulnerabilities that make young women targets for trafficking. The social fabric of the region is further strained as communities grapple with the emotional and psychological toll of these crimes, fostering an environment where migration becomes a desperate option for those seeking safety or opportunity.

According to the Global Organised Crime Index (2023), networks from Asia and Latin America have established themselves in Nigeria, engaging in a range of illegal activities, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling. These foreign networks not only facilitate criminal activities but also contribute to the destabilization of local economies, further pushing individuals toward irregular migration. The interconnections between local and foreign criminal networks illustrate a broader transnational dimension of crime that complicates efforts to address migration issues in the Southeast.

The historical context of migration in Nigeria cannot be overlooked. A provision in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution guarantees citizens the freedom to move across the country, which has implications for the ongoing conflicts in the Southeast, particularly between Fulani herdsmen and local farmers. As herdsmen have migrated southward in search of grazing lands, conflicts have intensified, resulting in violence that displaces communities and compels individuals to migrate. The Fulani herdsmen have been identified as the world's fourth deadliest militant group (Global Terrorism Index, 2015; Mikailu, 2016), and their violent incursions into farming territories in states like Enugu and Ebonyi have escalated tensions, leading to widespread fear and further migration (Olaniyan et al., 2015; Ogbomah, 2022).The arbitrary and artificial delineation of borders, a legacy of colonialism, has contributed to a weak regulatory framework, making it easier for individuals to move illegally across state lines (Ikome, 2012). This lack of effective border control facilitates not only human trafficking but also arms smuggling and other forms of organized crime, creating a cycle of violence and insecurity (Nosiri&Ohazurike, 2016). Anecdotal evidence suggests the existence of nearly 1,497 illegal routes across Nigeria's borders, which criminal groups exploit to circulate weapons and other illicit goods (Onuoha in Ubandawaki et al., 2023).

Consequently, the interconnectedness of domestic and transnational criminal activities poses significant challenges to the security landscape in the Southeast, further complicating migration patterns.

In response to the escalating violence and insecurity, new forms of governance have emerged, notably the establishment of the Eastern Security Network (ESN), an armed wing of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Formed as a direct response to the perceived inadequacies of state security forces, the ESN seeks to protect local communities from violent incursions, particularly from Fulani herdsmen (Multi-Stakeholders Consultative Forum, 2022). While the ESN has garnered support from local populations who feel abandoned by the state, it has also heightened tensions with Nigeria's military and police forces. The resulting violence has led to a significant increase in casualties, particularly in states like Ebonyi and Imo, where armed confrontations have escalated (Multi-Stakeholders Consultative Forum, 2022).

In conclusion, the drivers and patterns of irregular migration from the Southeast of Nigeria are intricately linked to a myriad of factors, including high unemployment, pervasive poverty, rising crime rates, and long-standing conflicts. The interplay of these elements creates a landscape where individuals, particularly the youth, view irregular migration as a potential means of escape from dire socio-economic conditions. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial to mitigating irregular migration patterns and fostering stability within the region. Failure to tackle these problems may result in a continued exodus of individuals seeking better opportunities abroad, perpetuating a cycle of irregular migration and insecurity.

EFFECTS OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION ON THE SOUTH-EAST

Migrants: Irregular migration causes migrants' suffering and death. Many migrants embark on journeys they do not know the way or the distance without the support of embassies because of the irregular nature of these journeys. As such most of them die on their ways hiding from security agents, and fall victim to slavery, sexual work, human trafficking, organ harvest, deportation and more.Their human rights are violated without authorities defending them. The president of the United States has deported many irregular migrants shown on the international media as deportees and most of them were not allowed to pick up their belongings from their apartments before deportation.Their appearances on world news constitute dents on their images

Communities: The socioeconomic impacts of irregular migration are felt acutely by residents, whose livelihoods are disrupted as businesses close and economic activities stall. As customers and business partners seek alternatives outside the region, the economy shrinks, leading to reduced job opportunities, worsened living standards, and increased poverty (Igbinadalor, 2022).Irregular migration from Nigeria's Southeast geopolitical zone has exacerbated several socio-political and economic issues, intensifying the region's existing crises. Before 2015, the Southeast was known for its relative stability, fostering an environment conducive to daily activities and business. However, recent years have seen an escalation in violence attributed to unknown gunmen and other non-state actors, creating a hostile atmosphere that disrupts socioeconomic stability and undermines governance (Akingbule and Parkinson, 2021; Ayitogo, 2021). These issues, exacerbated by unchecked irregular migration, include rising crime rates, weakened security structures, economic loss from sit-at-home protests, and poor governance in contested areas where armed groups operate with little government interference (Chime, 2022).

The widespread influx of individuals, unregulated by formal migration processes, has indirectly contributed to these challenges by bolstering the ranks of militant groups and straining already inadequate security measures in the region. This cyclical hardship, coupled with heightened insecurity, drives more people—especially youths—into irregular migration patterns, either as economic migrants or as potential recruits for militant groups. In this way, the presence of irregular migrants contributes to a self-sustaining cycle of instability, poverty, and violence.

Government: One of the primary consequences of irregular migration in the Southeast has been its contribution to the increase in violence. Since 2020, the region has witnessed a staggering rise in violent incidents, particularly those targeting security personnel, government institutions, and civilians. Between 2020 and 2021, there was a 555.7% surge in the rate of killings, with Imo State recording the highest fatalities (Chime, 2022). This increase in violent attacks can be partly attributed to the influx of non-state actors and the ease of access to weapons, which often cross poorly monitored borders and end up in the hands of groups that fuel violence. This dynamic has strained local law enforcement, as evidenced by the fact that 103 police officers were killed in 2021 alone (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2023). The increasing population of irregular migrants, coupled with limited security personnel and resources, has further undermined the government's capacity to curb violence.

Economy: Irregular migration has also compounded the problem of economic instability in the South-East, particularly in regions known for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The influx of militants, bandits, herdsmen, and unknown gunmen groups has led to frequent crises disrupting daily economic activities. Sit-at-home protests exacerbate economic losses. These protests often held to demand the release of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) leader Nnamdi Kanu, disrupt businesses across the region, resulting in an average loss of four to five working days per month (Igbinadalor, 2022). The Southeast's major commercial centres—Onitsha, Aba, Nnewi, and Enugu—have been particularly affected, as traders experience a decrease in revenue and customer traffic due to the unpredictability of violence and protests (Igbinadalor, 2022). According to the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria, businesses in the region lost a cumulative N4.618 trillion in revenue in 2021 due to these disruptions (Edeh, 2023).

Moreover, the economic strain extends beyond the immediate loss of revenue. South-East traders, particularly small businesses, now face increased costs associated with logistics and security as they attempt to continue operations despite these challenges. Many enterprises have been forced to adopt delivery services to retain customers who have become wary of visiting the region due to security concerns (Igbinadalor, 2022). The cumulative economic impact of lost working days increased operational costs, and violent damages to lives and propertieshave deepened the economic wounds in the region, as businesses that relied on a steady flow of interstate customers struggle to survive. The situation is further worsened by irregular migration, which contributes to an already strained economy by swelling the population dependent on these limited and disrupted resources.

Security Agencies: Another dimension of the Southeast crisis is the governance vacuum created by contested spaces—areas where government presence and authority are minimal, allowing armed groups to establish control. These areas, such as Orlu in Imo State and parts of Ihiala in Anambra, have become strongholds for non-state actors who exploit irregular migration patterns to recruit members and evade government intervention (Akinyetun, Ebonine& Ambrose, 2023).

Senator Kashin Shettimam, Nigeria's current vice president, highlighted the inadequacy of security personnel across Nigeria, noting a ratio of 1:400, which complicates effective governance (Independent, 2021). With insufficient policing and the concentration of police control at the national level, state and local governments face challenges in curbing irregular migration and related violence, making the Southeast particularly susceptible to armed group activities and ungoverned spaces.

The proliferation of arms, exacerbated by irregular migration, has added to the volatility in the region. Nigeria's porous borders have allowed the illegal flow of arms and ammunition, which end up in the hands of militant groups operating within the Southeast. In 2019 alone, an estimated 178,459 firearms went missing from police inventories, with no tracking or recovery in place by 2020 (The Sun, 2022). As such, irregular migrants—often driven by economic hardship—can easily acquire weapons, thus contributing to the Southeast's armed violence. The local production of firearms in regions such as Awka, Calabar, and Lagos further complicates control, providing militant groups with easy access to weaponry (Abdullahi, 2022; Conflict Armament Research, 2020).

In conclusion, irregular migration has contributed to a complex interplay of violence, economic strain, governance gaps, and arms proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This migration exacerbates existing crises by adding to the population strain, creating a vulnerable demographic susceptible to militant recruitment, and undermining security efforts due to the influx of people and illegal arms.

RESPONSES TO BORDER SECURITY AND IRREGULAR MIGRATIONS

Operation Restore Peace: The response of national and regional governments to irregular migration from Nigeria's Southeast region has been shaped by a series of security initiatives and collaborative efforts among various agencies to counter rising insecurity. The initiation of Operation Restore Peace on May 18, 2021, marked a significant federal intervention aimed at addressing the escalating violence perpetrated by unknown gunmen targeting security personnel and infrastructure (Nigerian Police Force, 2021). Conducted by the Nigerian Police Force and supported by the Army, Navy, Air Force, intelligence agencies, and other security entities (The Guardian, 2021), the operation sought to restore peace in the South-East, focusing particularly on hotspots like Anambra, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi states. This collaborative response underscores the federal government's perception of the issue as a national security crisis requiring a multi-agency approach to re-establish law and order (Elusoji, 2021). Despite substantial efforts, including the deployment of personnel and resources, the operation has achieved only limited success, providing temporary respite rather than a lasting solution to the region's security challenges.

Operation Golden Dawn: Complementing Operation Restore Peace, the Nigerian Army launched Operation Golden Dawn in October 2021 under the 82 Division based in Enugu (Nigerian Army, (2021), Vanguard, (2021). This phase-based operation, currently in its third phase, reflects an intensified effort to counteract the influence of non-state actors who have been implicated in violent acts across the region. The initiative involves a wide array of government and security organizations, including the Department of State Services, Nigerian Air Force, Nigeria Immigration, NDLEA, and NSCDC, signifying a comprehensive government approach to enhance safety and security (Njoku, Ogugbuaja, Nzeagwu, &Udeaja, 2021).

Operation Golden Dawn's reliance on expanded checkpoints and increased troop presence highlights the government's tactical strategy to regain territorial control and curb irregular migration routes often exploited by criminal elements. However, despite reductions in some criminal activities, this military operation has not fully neutralized the threats or addressed the complex socio-economic factors that contribute to regional instability, illustrating the limitations of militarized solutions in complex societal issues (Arise News, 2023).

Ban on Open Grazing: In response to escalating hostilities, governors from 17 southern states issued a joint resolution in May 2021 banning open grazing within their jurisdictions. This was intended to curb the movement of herders and the resultant violence, particularly within the Southeast region. Yet, this move faced resistance from the federal government, which retains exclusive control over national security policy and appeared unwilling to confront herder incursions head-on (International Crisis Group, 2018). President Muhammadu Buhari's administration faced criticism from southern and north-central communities, who accused him of shielding Fulani herders from accountability. This lack of alignment between federal and regional governments has hindered effective enforcement of anti-grazing laws, allowing herder incursions to persist and further destabilize the region(Nwangwu, Mbah, Ike, Otu, &Ezugworie, 2020).

Ebubeagu Security Network: In addition to these federal responses, Southeast state governors introduced the Ebubeagu Security Network in April 2021 as a joint regional solution to safeguard communities against rising crime. At the Southeast security summit in Owerri, the governors outlined Ebubeagu as a central security platform to coordinate local vigilance groups. The headquarters, established in Enugu, was intended to act as a focal point for security efforts across the five South-Eastern states, facilitating unified and regionally controlled countermeasures against banditry and terrorism (Premium Times, 2021). This initiative illustrates the regional leaders' commitment to independently address the region's unique security challenges while collaborating with federal bodies where feasible. However, the fact that Ebubeagu required federal cooperation to be fully effective highlights ongoing structural challenges where regional initiatives cannot operate with complete autonomy within Nigeria's highly centralized governance framework.

Collectively, these operations reveal a mixed record in addressing the socio-political complexities of irregular migration and insecurity in Nigeria's Southeast. While the federal and regional governments have initiated significant actions, the continued presence of non-state actors and intermittent violence demonstrates the need for a more integrated, long-term approach. The limitations of purely militarized responses, alongside political friction over policies like open grazing, underscore the complexities of resolving the underlying socio-political and economic drivers of instability.

CHALLENGES OF BORDER SECURITY AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST

Systemic Challenges: The challenges of border security and irregular migration from Southeast Nigeria are profound and multifaceted, deeply rooted in systemic corruption, infrastructural inadequacies, personnel shortages, and weak inter-agency cooperation. Each of these issues contributes to a security environment in which Nigerian borders remain porous and vulnerable to illegal crossings and criminal activities.

Corruption within security agencies serves as a significant hindrance, as officials often facilitate illegal flows of goods and people for personal gain. For instance, security agents have been known to assist in cross-border arms trafficking, a reality underscored by Onuoha (2013). Furthermore, Gbemre (2016) noted that security checkpoints often function more as opportunities for extortion than as mechanisms for maintaining border security, thus undermining trust in these institutions and enabling irregular migration and smuggling. Hahonou (2016) adds that regular migrants and traders frequently engaged in bribery at these checkpoints to bypass official procedures. This exacerbates the flow of unregulated cross-border movements and commodities.

Poor Security Facilities and Logistical Support: Another fundamental challenge lies in the lack of adequate facilities and logistical support, which limits the effectiveness of border security efforts in Southeast Nigeria. Many border posts are marked by substandard infrastructure, including poor barracks and office facilities, insufficient communication tools, and a shortage of patrol vehicles (Akpomera&Omoyibo, 2013; Akinyemi, 2013; Danfulani, 2014; Bearzotti et al., 2015). Lamptey (2015) highlights that the inadequate logistical and technological resources at the disposal of border security officials, coupled with insufficient government remuneration, create conditions ripe for corruption. These infrastructural deficits render border patrols inconsistent and inefficient, enabling irregular migrants and smugglers to exploit vulnerabilities in the system. Consequently, without modern facilities and resources, Nigeria's ability to secure its southeastern borders against the threats of irregular migration and trafficking remains significantly impaired.

Manpower Deficiencies: Manpower deficiencies further exacerbate the challenges facing Nigerian border security, as insufficient staffing levels leave numerous border points inadequately monitored. The shortage of security personnel has hindered the management of both official and unofficial border routes, allowing smuggling and unauthorized crossings to proliferate. According to Bodunde, Ola, and Afolabi (2014), as well as Danfulani (2014) and Gbemre (2016), insufficient personnel capacity impedes the establishment of a robust border security network, thus leaving openings for unauthorized migration and the entry of illegal goods. This lack of manpower is compounded by the vastness of the border regions, where officials cannot feasibly cover all access points, creating gaps that smugglers and irregular migrants can exploit. Consequently, addressing these personnel shortages is critical to closing gaps in border security and managing migration flows.

Inadequate Inter-Agency Cooperation: A lack of inter-agency cooperation further undermines border security in Southeast Nigeria, as various security agencies operate in isolation rather than in a coordinated effort. Nosiri and Ohazurike (2015) indicated that the Nigerian Customs Service (NCS) and Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) suffer from poor collaboration in joint border patrol arrangements, which allows illicit networks and smuggling activities to persist unchecked. Menner (2014) acknowledged efforts by the Multinational Joint Task Force in bolstering cross-border security; however, issues like suspicion, poor intelligence sharing, and inconsistencies in operational standards continue to hamper joint operations (Idowu, 2014).

DISCUSSION

Border security and irregular migration remain one of the national security concerns confronting Nigeria in recent times. Unfortunately, the Southeast geopolitical zone known for its relative peace has now been caught up in the web of numerous security challenges troubling Nigeria. Based on the investigations of this study, it has been found that the arbitrary and porous nature of borders in Nigeria plays a key role in facilitating unchecked cross-border trafficking of arms and people, as well as other illicit activities, all of which contribute to regional instability and weaken governmental control (Nosiri&Ohazurike, 2016; WANEP, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of local defence forces, such as the Eastern Security Network (ESN), further exposed vulnerabilities in border enforcement in the Southeast and Nigeria at large, leading to a rise in non-state actors filling the security void (Multi-Stakeholders Consultative Forum, 2022).

Further, this study established that irregular migration in Southeast Nigeria is driven by entrenched socio-economic challenges that foster distinct migration patterns and fuel organized crime. High youth unemployment, poverty, and inflation act as key motivators, pushing individuals toward migration as a pathway out of economic hardship. Nigeria's youth unemployment rate, for instance, reached 53% in 2020, making it among the highest in the world (Punch, 2023). Criminal networks exploit these conditions, luring vulnerable populations into human trafficking rings, including notorious "baby factories" where women are trafficked under false pretences (Global Organised Crime Index, 2023; Shemang, 2024). Foreign criminal entities compound these issues, engaging in arms smuggling and drug trafficking that destabilize the economy and worsen local security concerns (Global Organised Crime Index, 2023). Additionally, recurring local conflicts, particularly with Fulani herdsmen, have displaced populations and spurred irregular migration as individuals flee violence and economic disruption (Olaniyan et al., 2015).

In response to these security threats, national and regional government actions—such as Operation Restore Peace and anti-open grazing policies—seek to counter irregular migration and insecurity; however, their impact has been limited by structural and operational challenges. While the Nigerian federal government has launched military operations like Operation Golden Dawn to address the region's escalating insecurity (Njoku et al., 2021), these efforts have often fallen short of addressing underlying socio-economic drivers (Arise News, 2023). State-level responses, including the establishment of the Ebubeagu Security Network, signal a regional attempt to address border and migration issues independently, yet these initiatives suffer from a lack of federal cooperation, limiting their effectiveness (International Crisis Group, 2018). Without greater collaboration and targeted socio-economic reforms, current efforts risk providing only temporary stability rather than long-term peace and security in the region.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights that the challenges of border security and irregular migration in Southeast Nigeria are deeply interconnected with the region's socio-economic and structural vulnerabilities. The porous and arbitrary nature of Nigerian borders, coupled with corruption and inadequate enforcement infrastructure, facilitates the unchecked movement of arms, people, and illicit goods. These exacerbate regional instability and diminish state authority. Irregular migration in the southeast is driven by socio-economic hardship, high youth unemployment, and inflation, making migration a seemingly viable escape from poverty while also fuelling organized crime and trafficking networks.

Although national and regional security initiatives, such as Operation Restore Peace and Ebubeagu security outfit, reflect attempts to counter these threats, their effectiveness remains constrained by insufficient collaboration and the lack of deeper socio-economic reforms. Consequently, sustainable peace and security in Southeast Nigeria will require not only enhanced border management but also strategic socio-economic initiatives that address the root causes of migration and insecurity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings on border security and irregular migration from Southeast Nigeria, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen anti-corruption measures and accountability in border security agencies to address the widespread corruption within security agencies.The Nigerian government should implement stricter oversight mechanisms and accountability frameworks to prevent bribery and extortion by border officials. Establishing an independent anti-corruption task force, supported by digital monitoring systems, can help track and report irregular activities among border security personnel. Additionally, introducing competitive salaries and performance-based incentives can reduce the temptation for corruption among officers, ultimately enhancing the integrity of border security.

2. Invest in infrastructure and resources for border security: Improving the infrastructure at border posts, including modern barracks, reliable transportation, and advanced surveillance technology, is essential for effective monitoring and control. Equip border patrols with drones, real-time surveillance systems, and biometric data capture will help close gaps in border security, thereby reducing the exploitation of porous borders by smugglers and traffickers. Moreover, increasing the allocation of personnel with specialized training in border management would improve the efficiency of security operations and the monitoring of both official and unofficial routes.

3. Enhance inter-agency coordination and regional collaboration to overcome the fragmentation among Nigeria's border security agencies.Establishing a unified command structure or a dedicated inter-agency task force would be beneficial. This structure should include members from the Nigerian Customs Service, Nigerian Immigration Service, and regional security bodies, and it should prioritize regular intelligence sharing andjoint efforts. Furthermore, strengthening regional cooperation with neighbouring countries through information-sharing agreements and coordinated patrols can help address transnational security threats, making the region less susceptible to irregular migration and organized crime.

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