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Study of Nigeria Government's Combat Against Smuggling

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Abstract: *Smuggling remains one of the most persistent threats to Nigeria's economic stability, border integrity, and national security, with the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) and collaborating agencies employing strategies including intelligence gathering through informants, checkpoints and inspection, and interagency collaboration to combat the phenomenon. This study examines the effectiveness of these strategies and the challenges constraining their implementation, drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with customs officers, security personnel, and border community stakeholders, alongside documentary evidence from official reports and scholarly publications. Theoretically, the study integrates Crime Pattern Theory, which explains the spatial dynamics of smuggling across activity nodes, pathways, and edges, and Biased Conformity Theory, which illuminates the cognitive and social mechanisms through which officials and communities rationalise complicity in illicit trade. Findings reveal a dual picture: while the NCS has recorded significant seizures, enhanced revenue collection, and formalised interagency cooperation, structural challenges including border porosity, resource constraints, systemic corruption, technological gaps, and community economic dependence continue to undermine enforcement effectiveness. The study concludes that addressing smuggling requires a holistic approach encompassing massive investment in surveillance technology, comprehensive institutional reform to combat corruption, full implementation of the Integrated Cargo Tracking System, strengthened cross-border cooperation, and an integrated border community development programme.*

Keywords: *Combat; Nigerian Government; Smuggling.*

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1.1 Introduction

Smuggling has emerged as one of the most persistent and multifaceted threats to Nigeria's economic stability, national security, and border integrity. Across the vast and often porous borders that Nigeria shares with its neighbours, the illicit movement of goods, weapons, and persons has flourished, undermining legitimate trade, depriving the state of vital revenue, and fuelling insecurity. This is particularly along the northern corridors bordering Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The scale of the problem is staggering: Nigeria loses billions of naira annually to smuggling activities, while the proliferation of small arms and light weapons through unguarded routes continues to aggravate communal conflicts and embolden criminal networks across the country (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), as the primary agency responsible for border enforcement, has therefore found itself at the forefront of a complex and evolving battle that demands not only physical presence at border posts but also intelligence, technology, interagency coordination, and

community engagement. The challenges confronting Nigerian security agencies in this fight are formidable. Nigeria's borders stretch for thousands of kilometres, much of it rugged terrain with minimal government presence, inadequate infrastructure, and limited surveillance capacity (Okolie, 2019). Smugglers have adapted to enforcement efforts by developing sophisticated networks, exploiting corrupt officials, and shifting routes in response to checkpoint operations (Adogamhe et al., 2018).

The rise of transnational criminal organisations, the fusion of smuggling with terrorism financing, and the exploitation of digital technologies for coordination have further complicated the operational environment (UNODC, 2019). Meanwhile, resource constraints ranging from inadequate funding and personnel to outdated equipment have hampered the ability of agencies to mount a sustained and effective response (Okeke et al., 2019). Corruption within law enforcement ranks has, in some cases, transformed supposed guardians of the border into facilitators of illicit trade, eroding public trust and undermining the very strategies designed to combat smuggling (International Crisis Group, 2021).

This article examines the strategies employed by Nigerian security agencies in combating smuggling.

1.2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the strategies employed by Nigerian security agencies in combating smuggling, with particular focus on the Nigeria Customs Service and its operational commands along Nigeria's land borders. Data were collected through a combination of primary and secondary sources, including semi-structured interviews with serving and retired customs officers, security personnel from collaborating agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force, Nigerian Immigration Service, and Department of State Services, as well as community leaders and traders in border towns such as Idiroko, Seme, and Jibiya. Secondary data were drawn from official reports of the Nigeria Customs Service, the National Bureau of Statistics, the International Crisis Group, and relevant scholarly publications, while documentary evidence including seizure records, revenue reports, and policy documents provided additional empirical grounding.

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the data, guided by the theoretical framework of Crime Pattern Theory and Biased Conformity Theory, which informed the interpretation of findings on smuggling routes, enforcement effectiveness, and institutional challenges. Artificial intelligence tools were employed solely for language editing, paraphrasing, and improving the clarity and coherence of the manuscript, while all research design, collection of data and discussion remained the exclusive intellectual contribution of the researcher. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including proper acknowledgment of sources and tolerable use of AI.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This section conceptualises smuggling from global to Nigerian context. Second, it develops a theoretical framework with two complementary explanations: Crime Pattern Theory and Biased Conformity Theory

2.1 Conceptualising Smuggling

Smuggling is both an ancient practice and a contemporary global challenge. Although it occurs in virtually every region of the world, it is particularly prevalent in Africa, where weak border governance, economic disparities, and pervasive corruption create conditions conducive to illicit trade (World Trade Report, 2013). Nigeria, with its extensive and poorly policed borders, is among the most affected countries on the continent. The scale of the problem is difficult to quantify

precisely, but the persistence of smuggling despite decades of enforcement efforts testifies to its resilience and adaptability. A foundational definition is provided by Columbian (1993), who described smuggling as the illegal transportation of objects, substances, information or people across an international border, in violation of applicable laws or other regulations. This broad formulation captures the essential elements of the offence: movement across a border, illegality, and the existence of a regulatory framework that is being violated. The motivations for smuggling, as Columbian notes, are varied and include participation in illegal trade, tax evasion, circumvention of import or export restrictions, and the provision of contraband to restricted populations.

In the Nigerian legal context, the Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA, 2023) offers a more precise definition. It defines smuggling as the act of illegally importing, exporting, loading, unloading, or diverting goods subject to customs control, with the intent to defraud the government of due duties payable or to evade customs and excise regulations. This definition is significant because it foregrounds intent (the deliberate purpose of evading lawful obligations) and it situates smuggling within the framework of customs law rather than treating it as a generic form of illicit trade. The focus on customs control is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context, where the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) is the primary agency responsible for border enforcement and revenue collection.

Dominguez (1975) expands the conceptualisation by describing smuggling as an organised transnational activity that typically occurs across international boundaries and entails the systematic breaking of immigration and customs laws. This emphasis on systematic organisation distinguishes smuggling from opportunistic or petty violations of border regulations. It also highlights the transnational character of the activity: smuggling networks frequently span multiple countries, exploit differences in regulatory regimes, and operate across the boundaries of state authority. Uduma (2020) offers a definition that emphasises the economic dimensions of smuggling. He describes it as the illicit transportation of goods and services across borders in defiance of established customs and trade regulations. The consequences of this activity, Uduma argues, extend beyond the immediate loss of revenue to encompass broader harms: smuggling circumvents taxation, breaches policies designed to safeguard domestic industries, and undermines efforts to uphold public safety and national security. This formulation is useful because it links smuggling to the wider framework of economic governance and state capacity.

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (2002) provides a definition that foregrounds the criminal law dimension. It describes smuggling as the criminal offence of bringing into or removing from a country those items that are prohibited or upon which customs or excise duties have not been paid. The emphasis on prohibition and payment of duties captures two distinct categories of smuggling: the movement of goods that are illegal to import or export (such as narcotics or weapons) and the movement of goods that are legally tradable but are smuggled to avoid taxation. Both categories are prevalent in the Nigerian context.

Deflem and Kelly (2001) offer a definition that underscores the clandestine character of the activity. They describe smuggling as involving the importation and/or exportation of goods by wrong or unlawful means, with the objectives of evading taxes and any other measures prohibiting or restricting the importation or exportation of such goods. The phrase "by wrong or unlawful means" is important because it draws attention to the methods employed (concealment, false documentation, bribery, and the exploitation of unguarded routes) rather than solely to the goods themselves. Adetula (2014) adds a motivational dimension by noting that people engage in smuggling for selfish purposes, including the pursuit of extra profit through the circumvention of the appropriate agency responsible for ascertaining the nature of goods before they are allowed into the country. This focus on profit-seeking behaviour connects smuggling to broader economic incentives and helps explain why the activity persists despite enforcement efforts.

Taken together, these definitions reveal several key characteristics of smuggling. First, it is a cross-border activity: the border is both a physical boundary and a regulatory interface that creates the conditions for arbitrage and evasion. Second, it is illegal or at least non-compliant with customs regulations: the smuggler seeks to avoid duties, taxes, or prohibitions that would apply to legitimate trade. Third, it is motivated by economic gain: the smuggler anticipates profit from the difference between the price of goods in one jurisdiction and another, or from the avoidance of regulatory costs. Fourth, it is often clandestine and systematic: effective smuggling requires planning, networks, and methods of concealment or evasion.

2.2 Crime Pattern Theory

The first theoretical lens through which this article examines smuggling is Crime Pattern Theory, which emerged over the past three decades as a major framework within environmental criminology for analysing the spatial distribution of crime (Newton & Felson, 2015). Developed principally by Brantingham and Brantingham (1984; 1993), the theory holds that offenders actively search for crime opportunities in locations with which they are familiar, and that they commit offences in areas that are already known to them. Like everyone else, potential offenders recognise potential crime sites and specific opportunities through their routine activities, and the patterning of crime across space reflects the convergence of offenders' awareness spaces with opportunities for offending (Burke, 2009).

The theory emphasises three interrelated concepts to explain the patterning of crime (Maguire et al., 2012; Wortley & Townsley, 2017). *Activity nodes* are centres of high activity where individuals spend the majority of their time, such as home, school, workplaces, recreational centres, and shopping areas. In the context of smuggling, nodes include key border crossings, towns, and meeting points where smugglers gather or operate. Smugglers may use these nodes as starting points, end points, or transit points in their operations. *Pathways* are the routes that connect activity nodes, such as streets, footpaths, and waterways. By studying these pathways, researchers can identify common routes used by smugglers, which can help in predicting and intercepting smuggling activities. Edges are boundaries that cannot easily be traversed, and they may be either physical or perceptual (Burke, 2009). *Physical edges* include rivers, forests, and bridges. Smugglers often exploit edges because they represent transition zones where surveillance may be weaker and the movement of border security operatives may be less noticeable.

While Crime Pattern Theory offers valuable insight into the spatial dynamics and routine activities that smugglers exploit, it does not delve deeply into the economic or social drivers that influence smuggling in border communities, such as income disparity, unemployment, and the structural asymmetries between neighbouring economies. The theory also has shortcomings in explaining broader security challenges (such as terrorism financing or regional instability) that are facilitated by smuggling but extend beyond the spatial and situational logic of crime patterns. These limitations point to the need for a complementary theoretical lens, which is provided by Biased Conformity Theory.

2.3 Biased Conformity Theory

The primary theoretical foundation for this study is Biased Conformity Theory, which provides a context-sensitive explanation of compliance and deviance. The theory posits that individuals are rational actors, but their rationality is not purely objective; it is shaped by subjective interpretations of situations, emotions, and social influences (Mukhtar & Abdullahi, 2026). Rather than adhering strictly to formal rules, individuals evaluate actions based on perceived benefits and costs, which are themselves influenced by personal interests, institutional pressures, and environmental conditions. A central assumption of the theory is that individuals attach meanings to actions based on situational definitions. What is considered right or wrong is not fixed but varies depending on

how actors interpret their circumstances. Consequently, individuals may assign negative meanings to actions that are objectively beneficial to society —such as strict border enforcement that disrupts local trade—while justifying behaviours that serve their personal or institutional interests. This process results in selective conformity, where compliance with rules is conditional and dependent on subjective evaluation.

The theory draws on insights from Social Constructionism, which emphasises the role of shared meanings and social interactions in shaping behaviour. According to this perspective, reality is not objective but is constructed through ongoing social processes. Individuals and groups create and sustain meanings through interaction, communication, and institutional practices, which in turn influence how they perceive and respond to situations. Applied to smuggling, this perspective suggests that behaviours are not inherently criminal but become defined as such through social processes. What is considered smuggling, for instance, depends on societal norms, institutional contexts, and power relations. In border communities where cross-border trade is a historical and culturally embedded practice, the distinction between legitimate trade and smuggling may be blurred, and enforcement may be perceived as arbitrary or predatory rather than legitimate.

The theory is further enriched by Techniques of Neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957), which provides insight into the mechanisms through which individuals justify deviant behaviour. The theory posits that individuals use specific strategies to neutralise guilt and maintain a positive self-image while engaging in actions that violate societal norms. These techniques include denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. In the context of smuggling, these neutralisation techniques are often evident in how both smugglers and complicit officials rationalise their actions. A smuggler may justify the activity by attributing it to economic necessity (denial of responsibility) or by arguing that the government is corrupt and undeserving of revenue (condemnation of the condemners). An officer may accept a bribe by reasoning that the salary is inadequate (denial of responsibility) or that no real harm is done (denial of injury).

The Nigerian border context provides ample illustration of Biased Conformity Theory in operation. The prevalence of corruption within the Nigeria Customs Service—where officers engage in bribery and collusion with criminal networks—can be understood not simply as individual moral failure but as a systemic pattern of biased conformity (International Crisis Group, 2021). Officers may conform to the informal norms of their institution, where accepting payments is expected and where strict enforcement may be perceived as naive or self-defeating. The organisational culture, poor remuneration, and lack of accountability mechanisms create conditions in which deviant behaviour becomes rational, normalised, and self-reinforcing.

3.0 Strategies Employed by Nigerian Security Agencies in Combating Smuggling

Nigerian security agencies have developed various approaches to combating smuggling, recognising that no single strategy can address a phenomenon as complex and adaptive as illicit cross-border trade. The strategies examined in this section include intelligence gathering through informants, checkpoints and inspection, and interagency collaboration.

3.1 Intelligence Gathering Through Informants

Intelligence gathering through informants is a foundational strategy employed by the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) and other security agencies in the fight against smuggling. The logic of this approach is straightforward: effective enforcement depends on timely, accurate, and actionable information about the activities of smugglers, and such information is often most readily obtained from individuals who are embedded in or connected to smuggling networks. As Ekundayo (2018) observes, informants play a pivotal role in providing valuable, often confidential, and first-hand

information about illegal activities such as smuggling occurring at border towns. By cultivating a network of informants, customs officials gain insights into criminal operations, including details about routes, individuals involved, and the timing of illegal movements.

The importance of informant networks in border enforcement reflects the inherent limitations of physical surveillance. Nigeria's borders are vast—approximately 4,047 kilometres of land boundaries—and the resources available for patrolling them are limited. Surveillance technology, while increasingly sophisticated, cannot cover every kilometre of border terrain, particularly in remote and rugged areas where smuggling is most prevalent. Human intelligence fills this gap by providing information that technology cannot capture: the intentions and plans of smugglers, the identities of key actors, the locations of hidden routes, and the timing of anticipated movements. This information is instrumental in planning targeted interventions, intercepting contraband, and apprehending criminals, thereby contributing significantly to the Customs Service's efforts to combat smuggling (Ekundayo, 2018).

The cultivation of informant networks is not without challenges. Informants must be recruited, managed, and protected, and their reliability must be assessed. They may have their own motivations—financial reward, revenge, immunity from prosecution, or the elimination of competitors—that shape the information they provide. In some cases, informants may provide false or misleading information, either deliberately or inadvertently. Managing these risks requires careful vetting, ongoing assessment, and the development of trusting relationships between handlers and informants. Moreover, the use of informants raises ethical and legal questions. The boundaries between legitimate intelligence gathering and entrapment or complicity in criminal activity must be carefully maintained.

3.2 Checkpoints and Inspection

Checkpoints and inspection represent the most visible and traditional strategy employed by Nigerian security agencies to combat smuggling. This approach involves the establishment of designated locations—typically at border crossings, strategic highways, and key transit points—where customs officials systematically examine goods, vehicles, and individuals to ensure compliance with import and export regulations (Nigerian Customs Service, 2020). The logic of this strategy is that by physically intercepting goods at critical points along smuggling routes, enforcement agencies can detect and seize contraband, deter would-be smugglers, and disrupt the flow of illicit trade.

The inspection process at checkpoints typically involves the examination of vehicles, the verification of documentation, and the physical inspection of goods. Customs officials are trained to identify indicators of smuggling—inconsistencies in documentation, concealment methods, and suspicious patterns of movement—and to take appropriate action when violations are detected. This process helps identify potential security threats, such as the smuggling of weapons or illicit substances, and provides a means to intercept individuals with criminal intent (Nigerian Customs Service, 2020). The presence of customs officials at checkpoints can act as a visible deterrent to potential criminals and smugglers. The knowledge that customs officials conduct rigorous inspections acts as a strong disincentive for those contemplating illicit activities, discouraging them from attempting to cross the border with illegal goods (Gilmour, 2017).

In the Nigerian context, checkpoints have been criticised for contributing to the very problems they are meant to address. Multiple checkpoints along major trade routes can create opportunities for rent-seeking, where officials extract payments from traders and transporters regardless of whether they are engaged in smuggling. The proliferation of checkpoints—often manned by different agencies with overlapping mandates—can impede legitimate trade while failing to stop determined smugglers who use unapproved routes. As one customs official acknowledged, "Because of the

porosity of our borders, you cannot really stop them because they are many" (ICIR, 2025). This observation points to the fundamental limitations of checkpoint-based strategies: when the border is vast and porous, and when smugglers can shift routes in response to enforcement pressure, physical checkpoints alone cannot provide comprehensive security.

3.3 Interagency Collaboration

Recognising the interconnected nature of trans-border crimes, Nigerian security agencies have increasingly emphasised interagency collaboration as a strategy for combating smuggling. Smuggling is not a standalone criminal activity; it often overlaps with other forms of transnational crime, including trafficking in persons, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and the financing of terrorism. The principal agencies involved in border security include the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS), the Department of State Services (DSS), the Nigerian Navy, and the Nigerian Army. Each agency has distinct responsibilities: Customs is responsible for the collection of duties and the prevention of smuggling; Immigration is responsible for the control of persons entering and leaving the country; the Police have general law enforcement powers; the DSS is responsible for intelligence and internal security; and the military provides support for border security operations. Effective interagency collaboration requires that these agencies share information, coordinate operations, and align their strategies to avoid duplication and gaps (UNODC, 2019).

The logic of interagency collaboration is grounded in the recognition that no single agency has the resources or expertise to address smuggling comprehensively. Customs officials may identify a smuggling route but lack the manpower to patrol it; police officers may have the manpower but lack expertise in customs regulations; immigration officials may identify a suspicious individual but lack intelligence on their connections to smuggling networks. By sharing information and coordinating operations, agencies can leverage each other's strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses (NCS, 2020). Interagency collaboration takes various forms. Joint operations involve multiple agencies working together on specific enforcement activities, such as targeted raids on smuggling routes or joint patrols of border areas. Information sharing involves the exchange of intelligence and operational data between agencies, enabling each to benefit from the knowledge and capabilities of the others. Joint training exercises build capacity and foster familiarity between personnel from different agencies. And formal coordination mechanisms like interagency task forces and joint command centres, provide structures for ongoing collaboration.

4. Challenges of Implementing the Strategies in Combating Smuggling

The strategies examined in the preceding sections—intelligence gathering through informants, checkpoints and inspection, and interagency collaboration—represent genuine efforts by Nigerian security agencies to address a complex and adaptive criminal phenomenon. Yet their implementation confronts a series of interconnected challenges that significantly constrain their effectiveness. These challenges are not merely technical or logistical; they are embedded in the physical geography of Nigeria‘s borders, the institutional cultures of the agencies charged with securing them, and the economic realities of borderland communities whose livelihoods have long depended on cross-border trade.

4.1 The Porosity of Nigeria’s Borders

The most fundamental challenge confronting smuggling enforcement is the sheer extent and porosity of Nigeria‘s borders. Nigeria shares approximately 4,047 kilometres of land boundaries with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, and its total land and maritime borders span an estimated 36,450 kilometres. Within this vast perimeter, a recent report cited by the House of Representatives revealed that out of 1,978 official entry points, only 84 are manned by security operatives, leaving

1,894 crossing points without any form of official surveillance. This statistic, described by lawmakers as "disturbingly low" and exposing "a major gap in our national defence system," captures the scale of the enforcement challenge with stark clarity (UNODC, 2019).

The implications of this porosity for smuggling are direct and predictable. When enforcement agencies concentrate their limited resources on the small fraction of border points they can actually monitor, smugglers shift their activities to the vast majority of crossing points that remain unguarded. Along the Idiroko corridor in Ogun State—a major smuggling route linking Nigeria to Benin Republic—officials acknowledge that the border is characterised by hundreds of unofficial "bush paths" that make comprehensive enforcement physically and strategically impossible. Smugglers exploit these pathways precisely because they fall outside the surveillance infrastructure that checkpoints represent. The same pattern is evident along the Jigawa-Niger border, where the Nigeria Immigration Service has acknowledged the corridor is "vulnerable to insecurity, illicit trade and irregular migration across the Sahel" (Badamsi, 2025).

4.2 Resource Constraints

The challenge of securing vast and porous borders is compounded by severe resource limitations. As the House Committee noted, border security agencies suffer from "inadequate funding, poor logistics, ineffective and outdated surveillance equipment and shortage of personnel". The disparity between the scale of the task and the resources available to perform it is stark. Despite the Federal Government spending over N9 trillion on security in recent years, the expected improvement in border security has not materialised, leading lawmakers to question the effectiveness of current expenditure patterns (UNODC, 2019).

At the command level, resource constraints manifest in the absence of the basic tools necessary for modern border enforcement. Research on the Sokoto/Zamfara Area Command found that the advanced technological tools needed to combat smuggling—drones, scanners, and cameras—were not deployed in that command, creating opportunities for corrupt officials to facilitate the entry of illicit goods . This disparity between national capabilities and command-level realities means that the benefits of the Nigeria Customs Service's modernisation agenda are unevenly distributed, with land-border commands that confront the most intense smuggling pressures often receiving the least technological support.

The consequences of resource constraints extend beyond technology to encompass personnel and logistics. The Jigawa State Command of the Nigeria Immigration Service, operating along a critical corridor bordering Niger Republic, has called for increased logistics and manpower for officers deployed to remote border posts . Community leaders in border areas have similarly urged the government to provide the resources necessary for effective surveillance. Without adequate staffing, even manned border posts cannot operate effectively. Officers who are exhausted, under-equipped, and isolated are more vulnerable to corruption and less capable of sustained vigilance.

4.3 Corruption and Complicity

Perhaps the most corrosive challenge to the effectiveness of anti-smuggling strategies is corruption within the ranks of the very agencies responsible for enforcement. The prevalence of corruption in border security has been extensively documented, and its impact is not marginal but systemic. A SaharaReporters investigation uncovered allegations that officers of the Army, Police, and Nigeria Customs Service are part of a sophisticated smuggling syndicate generating between N4 billion and N6 billion every week along the Seme Badagry and Idi Iroko borders. According to border operators, officers posted to enforce border laws instead act as guarantors and escorts for smugglers, ensuring safe passage after financial settlements (Badamasi, 2025).

The report's findings illustrate how corruption transforms enforcement infrastructure from a barrier to smuggling into a facilitator of it. Checkpoints, which are designed to intercept contraband, become points at which payments are negotiated. Inspection, which is meant to detect hidden goods, becomes a formality that can be waived for a price. Intelligence, which should be used to disrupt smuggling networks, may instead be sold to the very networks it is meant to target. As the investigation noted, members of the Union of Pioneers Association—a body representing more than 3,000 long-time border traders—accuse security personnel of monopolising the profits of smuggling while indigenous operators bear the risks . The resulting situation is not one in which enforcement fails to stop smuggling, but one in which enforcement is itself a participant in the smuggling economy (UNODC, 2019).

The challenge of corruption is not confined to the Nigeria Customs Service. As the investigation revealed, officers of the Army and Police are also implicated in the smuggling networks. The involvement of multiple agencies creates a situation in which corruption is not an aberration but a feature of the border security ecosystem, sustained by networks of mutual benefit and mutual silence.

4.4 Technological Gaps

Despite the Nigeria Customs Service's significant investments in technology and automation, the deployment of these tools remains uneven and incomplete (Okeke et al., 2019). The Comptroller-General has acknowledged that between 2018 and 2023, Nigeria recorded the highest rate of ammunition smuggling, with the Service intercepting 20 major shipments containing 10,498 arms and 114,929 rounds of ammunition. These figures suggest that despite technological investments, sophisticated smuggling networks continue to adapt and exploit gaps in the detection architecture (UNODC, 2019).

The most significant technological gap is the absence of a fully functional cargo tracking system. The Electronic Cargo Tracking System, intended to provide real-time monitoring of cargo using GPS technology, has not been fully implemented, and stakeholders estimate that the failure to deploy the Integrated Cargo Tracking Note costs Nigeria approximately N900 billion annually in revenue losses from smuggling, under-declaration, and procedural delays. The Comptroller-General has described the introduction of electronic tracking devices for transit containers as yielding results, including the interception of diverted consignments and the arrest of offenders, but the system's coverage remains partial (Okeke et al., 2019).

At the command level, the technological deficit is even more acute. The Sokoto/Zamfara study found that advanced tools were not deployed, leaving officers to rely on physical inspection and manual documentation checks that are inherently limited in their capacity to detect concealed contraband. In an era when smugglers use sophisticated concealment methods—hiding goods in fuel tanks, seat foams, and specially constructed compartments—the absence of scanners and other non-intrusive inspection tools leaves enforcement officers at a severe disadvantage. As the BusinessDay (2021) analysis noted, technology does not automatically eliminate inefficiency and its success depends on the quality of data entering the system, the ability of officers and traders to use it, the reliability of the platforms and the willingness of institutions involved in the clearance chain to work together.

4.5 Inadequate Interagency Coordination

The strategy of interagency collaboration, while conceptually sound, faces persistent implementation challenges. The formal mechanisms for coordination—joint operations, information sharing, and standing committees—are often undermined by institutional rivalries, divergent priorities, and the absence of clear frameworks for accountability. As the House Committee (cited

in Badamasi, 2025) observed, overlapping mandates and institutional rivalries impede collaboration, obscure lines of accountability and result in ad-hoc interventions.

The challenge is not merely structural but cultural. Agencies develop their own norms, priorities, and definitions of success, and these may not align with the broader goal of combating smuggling. An agency that is rewarded for revenue collection may prioritise enforcement activities that generate revenue over those that disrupt smuggling networks. An agency that depends on checkpoint revenues may resist reforms that reduce the number of checkpoints. An agency whose officers are implicated in smuggling networks may have little incentive to cooperate with investigations that would expose their own personnel.

4.6 Cross-Border Cooperation Difficulties

Effective border security requires cooperation with neighbouring countries, but such cooperation is often easier to invoke than to achieve. Disparities in enforcement capacity, differing legal frameworks, and diplomatic complexities create obstacles to the joint patrols and intelligence sharing that effective cross-border enforcement demands. It is observed that achieving effective cooperation with neighbouring countries can be challenging, and these challenges may hinder collaborative efforts, enabling smugglers to exploit gaps in cross-border cooperation (Okeke et al., 2019).

The disparity in enforcement capacity is particularly significant. Nigeria's neighbours—Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon—face their own resource constraints and institutional challenges, and their border security priorities may not align with Nigeria's. Smugglers exploit these disparities by routing goods through the least-monitored segments of the border, regardless of which country has jurisdiction. The problem is compounded by the informal character of much cross-border trade, which is deeply embedded in the economies and livelihoods of borderland communities. The informal nature of our trade is also a problem. That is why some of these things are not formalised because some of the products that are being taken out under ECOWAS protocol, some of them may be legitimate (UNODC, 2019).

The reopening of the Tsamiya Segbana corridor between Nigeria and Benin, while intended to facilitate legitimate trade, also illustrates the tension between trade facilitation and security enforcement. Corridors that are opened for legitimate commerce can become conduits for illicit trade if surveillance and inspection are inadequate.

4.7 Legal and Regulatory Lag

The legal and regulatory frameworks governing customs and border control often lag behind the evolving tactics of smuggling networks. The Nigeria Customs Service Act 2023 provides a modernised legal basis for enforcement, but the implementation of new provisions—including those relating to electronic tracking, risk management, and penalties for smuggling—has been uneven. The N900 billion annual loss attributed to the failure to deploy the Integrated Cargo Tracking Note illustrates how regulatory and technological gaps translate directly into revenue losses.

Beyond specific provisions, the broader legal environment creates challenges for enforcement. The ECOWAS protocol on free movement of goods and persons, while essential for regional integration, creates ambiguities that smugglers exploit. Goods that are legally traded under the protocol may be diverted into illicit channels, and distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate trade requires documentation and verification systems that are often absent at the border. As one report noted, goods moved through unapproved routes, evade regulatory checks or lack the required documentation undermine the integrity of Nigeria's trading system.

4.8 Community Dynamics and Economic Dependence

Finally, the effectiveness of anti-smuggling strategies is constrained by the economic realities of borderland communities. For many communities along Nigeria's borders, cross-border trade—both formal and informal—is a primary source of livelihood. When enforcement strategies disrupt this trade without providing alternative economic opportunities, they generate resistance and non-cooperation from the very communities whose support is essential for effective border security. The effectiveness of that resolve will ultimately depend on what happens beyond Customs checkpoints. Whether communities cooperate with security agencies, whether legitimate traders can operate efficiently, whether neighbouring jurisdictions strengthen collaboration and whether enforcement can stay ahead of increasingly adaptive smuggling networks (UNODC, 2019).

The challenge is not simply one of winning "hearts and minds" but of addressing the structural economic conditions that make smuggling a rational livelihood strategy. When formal employment is scarce, when legitimate trade is burdened by excessive checkpoints and informal payments, and when the state has historically failed to provide basic services, communities develop their own understandings of what is legitimate and what is not. These understandings—constructed through social interaction and reinforced by economic necessity—can sustain tolerance for, or participation in, smuggling even when communities recognise its illegality. Within the framework of Biased Conformity Theory, this represents a form of selective conformity in which local norms and economic imperatives shape behaviour in ways that diverge from formal legal requirements.

The Nigeria Customs Service has recognised the importance of community engagement, particularly through its Customs Cares initiative, which includes healthcare outreach to border communities and social investment programmes. The Ogun I Area Command has engaged traditional rulers in border communities, seeking their cooperation in intelligence gathering and sensitising residents against smuggling. These initiatives represent a recognition that border security cannot be achieved through enforcement alone. Yet the scale of economic deprivation in borderland communities means that such engagement, however well-intentioned, cannot substitute for broader development interventions that address the structural drivers of informal cross-border trade.

5.0 Discussions

The study found that reliance on informants can be understood as a pragmatic response to the limitations of formal enforcement mechanisms. When the state's capacity to monitor and control its borders is constrained—by resources, geography, or institutional weaknesses—it turns to informal mechanisms that operate within the very networks it seeks to police. This strategy is effective precisely because it exploits the subjective rationality of individuals who, for their own reasons, are willing to provide information about smuggling activities. However, it also creates risks: the same conditions that make informants valuable—their embeddedness in criminal networks, their personal motivations—also make them potentially unreliable and may lead to the perception that the state is negotiating with criminals rather than enforcing the law (UNODC, 2019).

The effectiveness of checkpoints, however, depends on multiple factors. The location of checkpoints is critical: they must be positioned at points where smuggling is likely to occur, which requires accurate intelligence and understanding of smuggling routes. The resources available for inspection—personnel, equipment, and technology—determine the thoroughness and speed of examinations. The training of officials determines their ability to detect sophisticated concealment methods and to distinguish between legitimate trade and smuggling. And the integrity of officials determines whether checkpoints function as barriers to illicit trade or as opportunities for corruption.

Within the framework of Biased Conformity Theory, the challenges of interagency collaboration can be understood as reflecting the subjective interpretations and institutional interests that shape the behaviour of officials and agencies. Each agency develops its own norms, priorities, and

definitions of success, and these may not align with the broader goal of combating smuggling. An agency that is rewarded for the number of seizures may prioritise high-visibility operations over intelligence-led investigations; an agency that depends on checkpoint revenues may resist reforms that reduce the number of checkpoints. Effective interagency collaboration therefore requires not only structural mechanisms for coordination but also attention to the incentives and cultures that shape agency behaviour.

The experience of the Joint Border Patrol Team (JBPT), established by the Federal Government in 2019 to coordinate border security operations, illustrates both the potential and the challenges of interagency collaboration. The JBPT brings together personnel from Customs, Immigration, Police, DSS, and the military to patrol border areas and intercept smuggling. While the JBPT has recorded some successes—including significant seizures of contraband and arrests of smugglers—it has also faced criticism for heavy-handed tactics, allegations of corruption, and tensions between participating agencies. The challenge, as one analyst observed, is to move from the mere presence of multiple agencies at the border to genuine operational integration (ICIR, 2025).

6.0 Conclusion

Smuggling remains one of the most persistent and multifaceted threats to Nigeria's economic stability, border integrity, and national security. This chapter has examined the phenomenon through a conceptual and theoretical lens, drawing on Crime Pattern Theory and Biased Conformity Theory to explain both the spatial logic of smuggling and the cognitive and social mechanisms that sustain it. Crime Pattern Theory has illuminated how smugglers exploit activity nodes, pathways, and edges—the border towns, unapproved routes, and natural boundaries where surveillance is weakest—to move illicit goods with minimal risk of detection. Biased Conformity Theory has explained how both smugglers and enforcement officials rationalise their participation in or tolerance of illicit trade, showing that corruption and selective enforcement are not merely individual moral failures but systemic adaptations to institutional conditions characterised by inadequate remuneration, weak accountability, and normalised deviance. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why smuggling persists despite decades of enforcement efforts: it persists because the physical environment creates opportunities that are systematically exploited, and because the human actors charged with closing those opportunities often have subjective rationalities that make complicity seem rational.

The study has examined the principal strategies employed by Nigerian security agencies—intelligence gathering through informants, checkpoints and inspection, and interagency collaboration—and assessed their effectiveness. The evidence presents a dual picture. On the one hand, the Nigeria Customs Service has recorded significant seizures, enhanced revenue collection, and begun to institutionalise intelligence-led enforcement and technological modernisation. Interagency collaboration has been formalised through partnership agreements and joint operations, yielding tangible results in the interception of contraband and the disruption of criminal networks. International recognition, including commendation from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, attests to the growing capacity of the Service to operate effectively against transnational organised crime. On the other hand, the scale of smuggling that continues undetected—evidenced by the billions of naira in annual revenue losses, the persistence of arms and narcotics trafficking, and the adaptability of smuggling networks—demonstrates that current strategies, however improved, remain insufficient to address the structural drivers of the problem.

The challenges constraining the effectiveness of these strategies are formidable and interconnected. Nigeria's borders are vast and porous, with only 84 of 1,978 identified entry points manned by security operatives, leaving the overwhelming majority unguarded. Resource constraints limit the deployment of modern technology and personnel to critical commands. Corruption within

enforcement agencies transforms checkpoints from barriers to facilitators of smuggling, with officers allegedly serving as escorts and guarantors for smugglers. Technological gaps, particularly the absence of a fully functional cargo tracking system, leave detection to physical inspection that can be evaded or compromised. Interagency coordination is undermined by institutional rivalries and divergent priorities. Cross-border cooperation is complicated by disparities in capacity, legal frameworks, and diplomatic relationships. And the economic dependence of borderland communities on informal trade generates resistance to enforcement strategies that disrupt livelihoods without providing alternatives. These challenges do not operate in isolation; they reinforce one another, creating a system in which smuggling is not an aberration but a predictable outcome of the conditions under which border security operates.

7. Recommendations

1. The Federal Government should prioritise massive investment in border surveillance technology, including drones, satellite imagery, motion sensors, and night-vision equipment, particularly in commands confronting the most intense smuggling pressures such as Idiroko, Seme, and the Jigawa-Niger border.
2. The Federal Government should implement comprehensive institutional reform to address the systemic corruption that transforms checkpoints from barriers to facilitators of smuggling, including significant improvements in the remuneration, working conditions, and welfare of border security personnel.
3. The Nigeria Customs Service and the Federal Ministry of Finance should prioritise the full implementation of the Electronic Cargo Tracking System to provide real-time GPS monitoring of cargo from point of entry to final destination, thereby detecting diversions and identifying smuggling routes.
4. Nigeria should strengthen its engagement with ECOWAS and the Lake Chad Basin Commission to develop harmonised border security frameworks, including joint patrols, shared intelligence platforms, and coordinated operations against known smuggling networks.
5. The Federal Government should design and implement an Integrated Border Community Development Programme that provides alternative economic opportunities, improves infrastructure, and delivers basic services in border communities.

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