

# Rethinking Regional Integration and Migration Governance

*Assessing the Impact of Burkina Faso, Mali,  
and Niger's Withdrawal from ECOWAS on Regional  
Migration Governance*



Africa Migration Policy Center

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# Foreword

## FES AMPC

Migration has long been central to West Africa’s economic, social, and political life, with ECOWAS’s Free Movement Protocol serving as a cornerstone of regional integration. For decades, this framework enabled millions of citizens to live, work, and trade across borders, fostering livelihoods, trade networks, and social cohesion. The recent decisions by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—sometimes referred to as the “Sahelexit”—represent a significant moment for regional mobility. While similar withdrawals have occurred in the past, such as Mauritania’s temporary exit from ECOWAS, these developments raise important questions about the adaptability of regional mobility frameworks and the ways in which governance mechanisms interact with the realities faced by migrants and borderland communities.

This study, conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung African Migration Policy Center (FES AMPC) in collaboration with the Civil Society Network on Migration and Development (CSONetMADE), provides timely evidence on the human and structural dimensions of these developments. Drawing on surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and extensive document analysis, the research captures both immediate effects—such as changes in documentation requirements, informal costs, and access to services—and broader structural considerations, including the coordination of legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and the influence of external actors on migration governance.

The findings highlight the resilience and adaptive capacity of local communities and civil society actors who continue to support migrants despite institutional gaps and political upheavals. At the same time, the study underscores the urgent need for coordinated action at national, regional, and international levels to safeguard rights, facilitate safe and orderly mobility, and strengthen the institutions underpinning regional integration. By spotlighting both challenges and innovative local solutions, the research offers actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders engaged in migration governance across the Sahel and West Africa.

It is our hope that this publication contributes to informed policy dialogue on migration, sovereignty, and regional cooperation, and serves as a practical guide for strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing protection for vulnerable populations, and fostering inclusive and resilient regional integration. While focused on West Africa, the lessons drawn here carry broader implications for understanding the complex interplay between governance, mobility, and human security in contexts of political transformation.

### **Susanne Stollreiter**

Resident Representative  
FES AMPC, FES AU and FES Ethiopia offices

# Foreword

I have the honor to introduce the Fact-Finding Report on the Impact of the Exit of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a document meticulously crafted through collaborative research and dedicated expertise. This comprehensive report delves into the multifaceted implications of this significant regional development, examining its far-reaching consequences for economic integration, security, and the overall trajectory of regional cooperation in West Africa.

The withdrawal of these three member states has undoubtedly sent ripples across the region, affecting various sectors and stakeholders. It is therefore of paramount importance that we understand the nuances of this situation, and this report serves as a vital tool in this endeavour. Through an extensive fact-finding mission, involving rigorous data analysis, surveys, and consultations with key stakeholders across the affected countries and beyond, the research team has provided an objective and nuanced assessment of the impacts of this exit.

The report covers critical areas including trade, security, governance, and socio-economic development, offering a thorough understanding of the challenges and opportunities that have arisen. The findings were presented and deliberated upon during a stakeholders' meeting, which brought together a diverse array of participants from international organisations, civil society, the private sector, and ECOWAS. This meeting provided a valuable platform for sharing insights and recommendations, underscoring the need for a coordinated and inclusive approach to address the complexities of this situation.

The discussions highlighted the potential disruptions to regional trade, security implications, and effects on community cohesion and development initiatives. As such, we trust that this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and all stakeholders interested in the future of West African integration and cooperation. The recommendations put forth are intended to inform and guide efforts towards mitigating the adverse effects of the withdrawal and exploring new avenues for regional collaboration and development.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the researchers who contributed to this report, the participants of the stakeholders' meeting, and all those who have supported this initiative. Your commitment to understanding and addressing the challenges facing our region is commendable and reflects the spirit of cooperation and solidarity that ECOWAS embodies.

May this report catalyse constructive dialogue and concerted action towards a more resilient and prosperous West Africa.

**Dr Anthony Luka Elumelu**  
Director of Private Sector (Retired)  
ECOWAS Commission  
18th November, 2025

# Acknowledgement

This study benefited from the cooperation and steady commitment of many individuals and institutions. The Civil Society Network on Migration and Development (CSOnetMADE) expresses sincere appreciation to the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Africa Migration Policy Center (FES-AMPC) in Addis Ababa for its partnership and strong support throughout the research period. We are grateful to the past and present FES-AMPC team, as well as the wider programme and finance teams, whose institutional support and close engagement with the research process carried the work from its early stages to completion. We also thank the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nigeria Office, as well as other FES offices in the region, for the backing provided during the presentation and dissemination of the study findings.

We acknowledge the collective efforts of the research team for their professionalism and commitment throughout the study. This includes the lead and assistant researchers, field researchers and assistant field researchers across the study countries, as well as the data analysis support team. Their understanding of political contexts, careful fieldwork, analytical rigour, and dedication to accurate and ethical research significantly strengthened the quality and credibility of this publication. We also recognise the contributions of partners who supported coordination and knowledge exchange among the research teams.

We further extend our appreciation to the civil society organisations, government institutions, community actors, and independent experts who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights through interviews and consultations. Their perspectives added depth to the analysis and grounded the findings in lived realities. We also acknowledge the administrative and coordination personnel whose work ensured effective communication, documentation, and smooth implementation of activities throughout the project.

To all those who contributed their time, expertise, and support, we extend our sincere gratitude. This publication reflects a collective effort and a shared commitment to advancing inclusive, rights-based, and regionally grounded migration governance.

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## **Civil Society Network on Migration and Development (CSOnetMADE)**

The Civil Society Network on Migration and Development (CSOnetMADE) is a coalition of over 350 civil society organizations and affiliates – NGOs, Community groups, Migrants, Diaspora, Academia – working across Nigeria and beyond to advance safe, orderly, and regular migration.

CSOnetMADE facilitates and strengthens non-state actors' engagement in national and regional migration processes through evidence-based advocacy, policy engagement, research, and capacity building. It actively supports Nigeria's participation in the Global migration governance spaces such as ECOWAS and African Union Free Movement frameworks, Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

Through multi-stakeholder dialogue, awareness campaigns, capacity building and technical support to government and communities, CSOnetMADE contributes to shaping inclusive, rights-based migration policies and enhancing understanding of migration dynamics in Nigeria and Africa.

## **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung African Migration Policy Center**

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung African Migration Policy Center (FES AMPC) is a regional project of the Foundation dedicated to advancing migration governance across the African continent. Working in partnership with states, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the African Union, civil society organizations, trade unions, and think tanks, FES AMPC promotes the implementation of safe, regular, and orderly migration practices in Africa.

Together with its partners, the Center focuses on five thematic areas: EU–Africa Migration Dialogue, South–South Migration Cooperation, Climate Mobility, Legal Pathways and Labour Migration, and Remittances. Since 2019, FES AMPC has actively contributed to migration policy dialogue and governance spaces by advancing progressive, development-oriented, and migrant-centred approaches to migration governance at national, regional, and continental levels.

# Study Highlights

- **Migration has long been a cornerstone of West Africa's economic integration and social fabric, with the Protocol on Free Movement of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) serving as the region's most powerful expression of collective mobility and cooperation.** Yet the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the union has exposed migrants and borderland communities to deep uncertainty. Evidence from surveys, interviews, and fieldwork shows that despite ECOWAS having yet to suspend the Free Movement Protocol for the trio, mobility is shrinking, informal costs and harassment are rising, and civil society organisations are struggling to maintain support networks. These disruptions reveal not only the immediate human cost of "Sahelexit" but also the growing fragility of West Africa's regional integration project.
- **The study highlights the direct human toll of these developments.** Migrants, traders, and displaced persons report lost access to formal movement channels, declining livelihoods, and increased exposure to exploitation and abuse at border points. Women and youth, already among the most mobile and economically active groups, face heightened vulnerability as bureaucratic barriers, insecurity, and informal fees multiply along previously open routes. These findings underscore that the crisis of mobility is not only institutional but also deeply social and humanitarian in nature.
- **Beneath these outcomes lie deep structural weaknesses.** The study identifies gaps in the legal and institutional enforcement of free movement protocols, uneven harmonisation between national laws and regional commitments, incomplete identity and documentation systems, and chronic shortages of disaggregated migration data. Weak protection frameworks for women, children, and displaced groups exacerbate vulnerability, while political fragmentation and limited institutional capacity within ECOWAS erode trust in regional governance. If unaddressed, these weaknesses risk accelerating irregular migration, entrenching insecurity, and undermining mobility as a driver of trade, livelihoods, and regional stability.
- **Closing these gaps requires decisive, collaborative action.** The study recommends strengthening bilateral accords and legal protections at the national level, revitalising ECOWAS mechanisms to harmonise data and bridge political divides, and empowering local authorities and civil society as frontline actors. International partners must align their support with local context specifics, regional mobility, and integration capacity-building rather than security-first analysis alone. A forward-looking framework, anchored in inclusivity, accountability, and resilience, offers the best chance of reimagining migration governance in a way that protects rights, sustains integration, and secures mobility as a foundation for peace and development in West Africa.

# 1. Executive Insight: A Region at a Crossroads

For nearly five decades, the **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)** has been West Africa's main vehicle for regional integration. The union was established in 1975, and its founding goal was to promote economic cooperation among member states and reduce external dependence. The adoption of the **1979 Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment** has enabled more than 80 million citizens to live, work, and trade across borders without visa restrictions (United Nations, 2020; Bolarinwa, 2015). From informal traders in bustling markets to seasonal migrants and diaspora entrepreneurs, this regime has fostered a deeply interwoven regional identity rooted in **shared economic opportunity, social cohesion, and collective prosperity**. Bilateral

antitrafficking pacts, cross-border cooperation frameworks, and ECOWAS-supported development initiatives have strengthened economies, human rights protections, and peacebuilding across the Sahel and coastal nations (Castillejo, 2019; Walther, 2024).

Yet, this framework now faces its most severe challenge to date: the collective **withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS**, a turning point that threatens the very foundation of regional mobility and cooperation. Figure 1 (Shvili, 2021) highlights the geographic interconnectedness and migration corridors shaping the Sahelian region.

Map of the Sahel Region and West Africa

Figure 1



In late 2023, military-led regimes in **Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger**, responding to domestic political pressures and rising disillusionment with ECOWAS, formalised a mutual defence pact under the newly formed **Alliance des États du Sahel [Alliance of Sahel States] (AES)**. By January 2024, all three governments announced their **intention to withdraw** from ECOWAS, citing as their *raison d'être* sanctions,

perceived external interference, and ECOWAS's alleged failure to address insecurity and economic decline (Adekaiyaoja, 2024; Svicevic, 2024; Allegrozzi, 2024). This coordinated "Sahelxit" marked the first collective withdrawal of multiple member states in ECOWAS history, distinct from Mauritania's single-member departure in 2000 and Guinea-Bissau's partial suspension in 2012. We recall

that Mauritania, a founding member of ECOWAS, withdrew in 2000 to join the Arab Maghreb Union (Oduor, 2017). Neither Mauritania's nor Guinea-Bissau's experience could match the threat of the comprehensive suspension of all protocols seen in this case, thereby challenging four decades of institutional continuity and prompting widespread

concern across diplomatic, humanitarian, and local communities (Pichon, 2024; Westcott, 2024). Figure 2 (Adam et al., 2020) depicts the full scope of regional membership and the strategic centrality of the withdrawing Sahelian states.

Map Showing the ECOWAS States

Figure 2



The implications are immediate and tangible. This withdrawal has led to the reintroduction of border controls, the suspension of mutual recognition agreements, revalidation requirements for residence and work permits, and a weakening of ECOWAS-wide protections once relied on by migrants, traders, students, and displaced persons (Bisong et al., 2024; *Security and economic implications*, 2024). It threatens a return to fragmented national policies at a time when irregular migration, trafficking, and insecurity are

rising, amplified by diminished regional coordination and growing border tensions (Rain, 2024; Mouthaan, 2022). With **ECOWAS's harmonised protocols suspended**, the ripple effect will stretch across trade, civil society operations, and humanitarian coordination.

In response to these seismic shifts, the **Civil Society Network on Migration and Development**, a network of over 300 migration-focused organisations, has partnered with

the **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung African Migration Policy Centre** to lead a pioneering, evidence-based perception assessment of how the Sahelexit is or may be reshaping migration governance and regional integration in West Africa.

Between September 2024 and September 2025, the research team employed a **mixed-methods approach** that blended empirical data collection and participatory engagement. It included:

- a perception survey across **Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria**, with over 30 completed responses
- **30 in-depth interviews** with policymakers, border officials, migrants, and civil society leaders
- **six focus group discussions (FGDs)** in key migration spots – Niankologo (Burkina Faso), Sikasso (Mali), Gaya, Konni, and Niamey (Niger), and Katsina (Nigeria) – with Nigeria’s inclusion in the research serving to gauge the impact of the withdrawal from neighbouring ECOWAS member states
- a comprehensive review of **migration policy documents, regional frameworks, and case comparisons** from Brexit, Morocco’s withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Mauritania’s departure from both the Arab Maghreb Union and ECOWAS, and other relevant precedents
- a workshop presenting the draft of the study report to ECOWAS commission and member states, as well as other relevant regional and international partners.

### Early Insights into an Emerging Crisis!

The findings in this study reflect a moment of profound uncertainty. From the inception of this project in September 2024 until project closure in September 2025, the Sahelexit process remained unsettled; legal debates were still ongoing, exit procedures had yet to be fully enacted, and replacement frameworks were still under discussion. Despite these fluid conditions, the disruption to human mobility, border management, and regional migration governance was already palpable.

Although our research captured this transition at its outset, when many stakeholders still held out hope for a reversal of withdrawals, it surfaced critical lessons for ECOWAS and its partners. Limited access to senior policymakers and evolving political dynamics meant our evidence is necessarily provisional; yet, even these early impressions offer valuable signposts for understanding how governance fractures translate into real-world challenges.

This study contributes to ongoing debates on migration governance by shifting the attention from solely high-level policy to the lived realities of those most affected. By drawing on the experiences of migrants, borderland communities, civil society organisations (CSOs), and local authorities, it demonstrates how resilience is negotiated in everyday contexts marked by uncertainty and institutional gaps. In doing so, the study provides not only an account of the vulnerabilities created by political withdrawal but also a grounded perspective on the adaptive capacities and coping strategies that sustain mobility, livelihoods, and social cohesion across the region.

## 2. Breaking Ranks: Understanding the Withdrawal

ECOWAS was established on 28 May 1975, when 15 nations signed the Treaty of Lagos with the aim of deepening economic cooperation and reducing reliance on former colonial powers. In its earliest years, the urgency of regional integration was clear; between 1969 and 1973, intraregional imports comprised a mere 5% of total imports (Yansane, 1977).

Over time, ECOWAS's vision expanded from trade liberalisation to a more comprehensive framework linking mobility, governance, and human rights:

→ 1979 – The Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment laid the foundation for visa-free travel and labour mobility across the region.

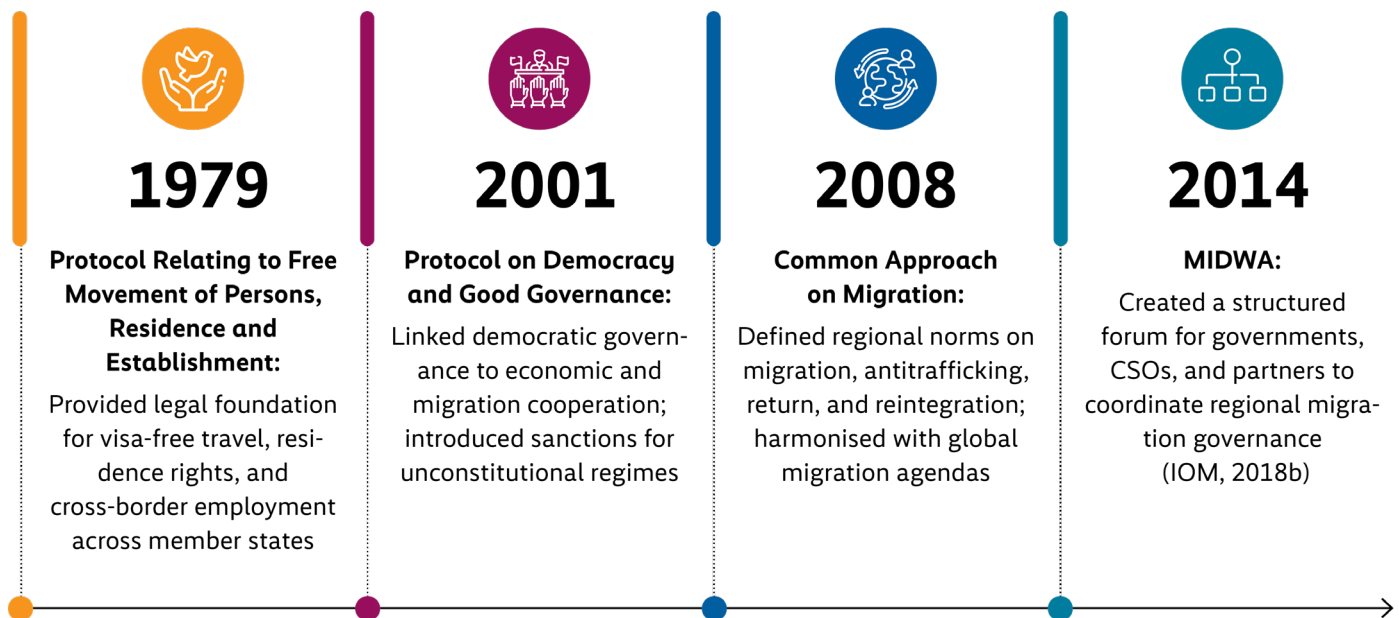
→ 2001 – The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance anchored political stability and the rule of law as prerequisites for integration.

→ 2008 – The Common Approach on Migration established shared regional norms for migration management, protection, and cooperation with global partners.

→ 2014 – The Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA) created a participatory platform for states, civil society, and international partners to coordinate migration governance, building on the preparatory work for the 2006 UN High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018b).

### Timeline of ECOWAS Integration and Migration Frameworks

Figure 3



Initiatives such as the ECOWAS Cross-Border Cooperation Support Programme (ECBCSP) and bilateral accords have long underpinned regional efforts to facilitate trade and mobility and combat trafficking. The ECBCSP, approved for 2021–2025, specifically aims to strengthen cooperation for regional peace, security, migration, and free movement. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in November

2021 between Niger and Nigeria, for example, aimed to combat human trafficking and smuggling by creating a multi-agency cooperation framework. This MoU was facilitated with technical support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Such bilateral and regional initiatives sought to align with ECOWAS frameworks, often through updated national action plans (United Nations Office on

Drugs and Crime [UNODC] Country Office Nigeria, 2022). The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s tested ECOWAS's capacity for regional peacebuilding, leading to large-scale interventions through the Economic Community of African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and exposing the limits of its stabilisation mechanisms (Timeline: A history, 2023; Ruys et al., 2018). Despite such crises, the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol has remained central to facilitating mobility and labour circulation across West Africa, a role consistently emphasised in migration and policy reviews (IOM, 2015; McAuliffe et al., 2024).

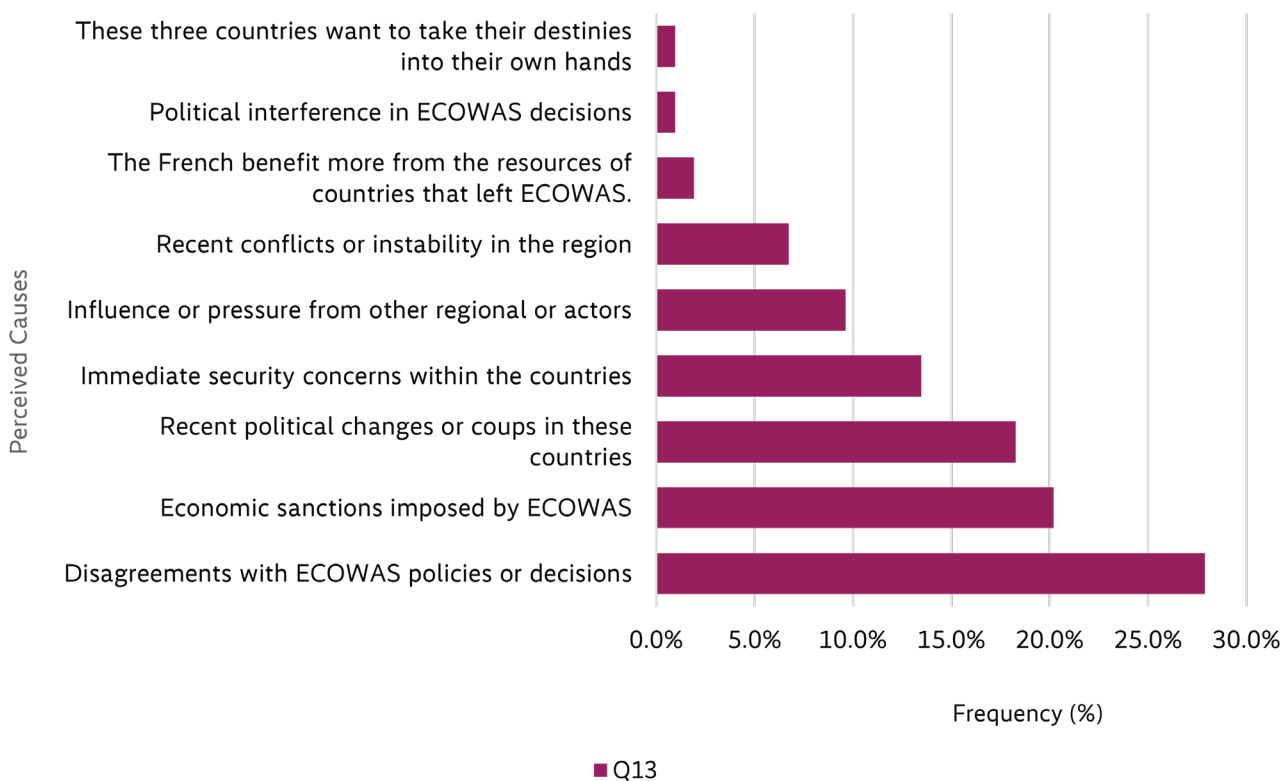
Yet trade and migration analyses reveal that intraregional trade within ECOWAS remains modest compared to other African blocs, generally in the high single digits as a share of total trade. This underscores both the achievements of regional integration and the persistence of structural constraints (Yaduma and Khan, 2023; United Nations Trade and Development, 2019). Overall, evidence suggests that while the Free Movement regime has fostered cross-border ties and economic exchange, its transformative potential continues to be limited by political upheavals, uneven

implementation, and institutional weaknesses (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019).

The resilience of this framework faced renewed trials during the coups of August 2020 and January 2022 in Mali, as well as July 2023 in both Burkina Faso and Niger. Following these unconstitutional changes in government, ECOWAS invoked Article 45 of its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, imposing on the three states border closures, asset freezes, and the suspension of diplomatic ties to compel a return to civilian rule. Transitional authorities in these countries, later united as the AES, condemned such sanctions as overly rigid, arguing that they exacerbated economic hardship and alienated local populations (Banchereau, 2025; *Security and economic implications*, 2024). Against this backdrop of contested authority, the AES formalised its own mutual defence pact in late 2023 and, in January 2024, announced collective withdrawal from ECOWAS, an unprecedented Sahelexit that marked the first multistate departure in history. Figure 4 illustrates the percentage distribution of perceived causes, with ECOWAS decisions (28%) and economic sanctions (20%) emerging as dominant themes.

### Immediate Causes of the Withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS

Figure 4



These plausible reasons for the withdrawal of the AES administration are confirmed by the results of this research survey. Citing grievances over punitive measures, perceived external interference, and ECOWAS's inability to curb

insecurity and economic decline, the three governments severed ties and suspended participation in key regional protocols. Their exit immediately halted free-movement rights and mutual recognition agreements, foreshadowing a

profound reshaping of cross-border trade, security cooperation, and migration governance (detailed in the next chapter).

Economic and security strains both fuelled and followed this rupture. Between 2016 and 2023, the combined gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger lingered around \$460, barely half the ECOWAS average of \$810. In 2024, a growth forecast of just 1.3% fell well short of the 4% to 5% required for sustained poverty reduction (Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, 2024). Meanwhile, jihadist insurgencies in the tri-border area tripled their rate of attacks in three years, undermining formal border operations (Adeleye, 2024). Formal border traffic has declined, and informal cross-border movements continue to persist, suggesting that tighter controls have not halted irregular mobility.

Since its formation in September 2023, the AES has rapidly moved to establish its own security cooperation framework. Member states (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) have agreed to form a joint force of approximately 5,000 personnel to address Islamist insurgencies and coordinate across borders (Reuters, 2025a; Wabwireh, 2025; Çakırtekin, 2025). Russia has also publicly pledged military support, including equipment and training, for this joint force (Reuters, 2025b). These developments, alongside AES members' withdrawal or distancing from ECOWAS, highlight a strategic shift towards sovereignty-first security arrangements (Das, 2024).

Comparative precedents offer both warning and hope. Brexit's orderly, referendum-driven process in a stable, resource-rich state underscores the value of clear legal pathways and administrative capacity. Earlier African exits (Mauritania from ECOWAS in 2000 and Morocco from the OAU in 1984) demonstrate that reintegration is possible once core grievances are addressed. Yet the Sahel's intertwined conflicts and entrenched poverty amplify the stakes, making a seamless return to the fold far more challenging. Greenland's 1985 departure from the European Economic Community over fisheries policy similarly illustrates the technical and political complexities of disentangling from supranational commitments (Musa et al., 2025; Ewokor, 2025).

For the region's estimated 7.5 million migrants, Sahelexit has already imposed visa requirements and documentation hurdles that drive many towards riskier, irregular routes. The remittance sector, vital in 2022 for channelling nearly \$34 billion into West Africa (7.6% of the regional GDP) and in 2024 for contributing to Africa's total flow of \$95.3 billion, now faces new bottlenecks (Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, 2024; RemitSCOPE Africa, n.d.). High transfer fees (averaging 8.4%) further disadvantage low-income families and microentrepreneurs (Ishie, 2025).

Civil society actors on the front lines report a 40% surge in legal-aid requests as migrants grapple with entry restrictions and fears of detention. Humanitarian agencies warn

that these shifts undermine access to basic services and rights, even as comprehensive international data remain limited.

Looking ahead, three principles should guide ECOWAS's response: first, deploy targeted, sector-specific measures that address political crises without dismantling the entire integration architecture; second, open sustained dialogue with transitional authorities, articulating clear benchmarks for phased re-engagement; and third, reinforce subsidiarity by empowering local border committees and civil society networks to mediate disputes in real time. International partners, the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and United Nations (UN) can support these reforms by co-sponsoring platforms that bridge ECOWAS and AES divides.

Sahelexit has laid bare both the achievements and fault lines of West African integration. The durability of regional institutions will depend on their capacity to adapt to political upheavals, economic shocks, and security threats while preserving the human bonds that have long sustained cross-border communities. In the chapters that follow, this study examines how these strategic imperatives are already reshaping migration governance, catalysing new forms of civil society collaboration, and charting potential pathways to renewed cooperation. The stakes remain immediate and undeniably human.

## 2.1. Bilateral Diplomatic Relations with Immediate Neighbours

### 2.1.1. Niger–Benin

Since 2023, relations between Niger and Benin have been marked by border closures and mediation efforts following Niger's withdrawal from ECOWAS. In July 2024, Niger agreed to mediation talks with Benin facilitated by former Beninese presidents, aimed at repairing strained trade and transit ties and resolving disputes over the Niger–Benin oil pipeline (Reuters, 2024b). Following mediation, diplomatic normalisation began; in May 2024, Benin provisionally reversed its decision to block Niger's crude oil exports via its port and agreed to hold meetings to address pipeline operations (Reuters, 2024b). Yet tension remained. Niger continued to keep its borders closed to most goods, citing security concerns and accusing Benin of violating pipeline agreements (Reuters, 2024b; Niger junta agrees, 2024). In September 2024, under Chinese-mediated talks, Nigerien and Beninese delegations met to discuss further normalisation. They welcomed the presentation of credentials by a new Beninese ambassador to Niger and committed to holding the next session of their Joint Cooperation Commission (Niger, Benin en route, 2024). The talks, however, underscored that border reopening would require trust-building and addressing security apprehensions. These developments suggest that while mediation has yielded tentative diplomatic thawing, the durable resolution and full resumption of trade and transit, as well as particularly stable oil export flows, remain contingent on resolving underlying

security and compliance concerns between the two states. Since 2023, relations between Niger and Benin have been marked by border closures and mediation efforts following Niger's withdrawal from ECOWAS.

### 2.1.2. Niger–Nigeria

In early 2024, Nigeria reversed course on the sanctions it had imposed on Niger following the 2023 coup. In March 2024, President Bola Tinubu officially ordered the reopening of land and air borders with Niger, lifted financial restrictions, and restored commercial transactions that had been suspended in compliance with ECOWAS directives (The State House Abuja, 2024). The reopening had immediate economic effects; Nigeria's exports to the Niger Republic jumped by 204% from ₦6.72 billion in the first quarter of 2024 to ₦20.46 billion in the second, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, largely driven by resumed cross-border trade in manufactured goods, staples, and other non-oil commodities (Tunji, 2024; Olusola, 2024). Throughout 2024, trade between Nigeria and Niger rebounded strongly. Nigerian exports rose from about ₦46.51 billion in 2023 to approximately ₦82.38 billion in 2024, while total bilateral trade climbed from ₦50.48 billion in 2023 to ₦91.92 billion in 2024 (Tunji, 2025). These figures reflect both pent-up demand for Nigerian goods in Niger and the quick adaptation by traders once logistical and regulatory barriers eased. Nonetheless, despite this rebound, trade has not returned to fully pre-crisis momentum due to lingering issues: namely, political distrust, non-tariff barriers, bureaucratic delays, and remaining uncertainties over border regulation (Tunji, 2024; The State House Abuja, 2024). The oscillation between sanctioning and re-engagement reveals a tension in Nigeria's posture: While it upholds ECOWAS solidarity, its policy has also been shaped by self-interest, particularly the stabilisation of its northern border, ensuring supply chains for border communities and protecting economic flows. In this balance, the reopening and revival of trade softened what would otherwise have been more severe disruptions to mobility and commerce in border regions (Onuah, 2024; Nigeria reopens borders, 2024).

### 2.1.3. Mali–Côte d'Ivoire

Relations between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire have been complicated by militant spillover from northern Mali and Burkina Faso rather than state incursions. The instability in the Sahel has allowed jihadist groups, such as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), to attempt cross-border recruitment and attacks. In early 2025, Ivorian intelligence services dismantled a recruitment network operating in Daoukro, which was linked to Malian and Burkinabè cells of the GSIM (Roger, 2025). This operation led to several arrests and triggered the deployment of additional security forces to northern and central border areas. In response, both countries intensified intelligence-sharing, joint border surveillance, and information exchange on suspected movements across the frontier. These measures were designed to

contain militant infiltration and strengthen early warning systems along the northern Ivorian corridor. While political tensions between the AES bloc and ECOWAS continue to limit high-level dialogue, practical coordination in security operations has persisted out of necessity. Local commanders and administrative officials maintain working contacts to ensure rapid communication about threats or cross-border incidents. The outcome of these efforts has been a temporary reduction in attempted incursions and recruitment activity, although analysts warn that persistent insecurity in central Mali keeps the threat level elevated. The same pragmatic approach has extended to Mali's wider neighbourhood. In 2025, for instance, Mali and Guinea held talks in Conakry addressing issues of transhumance, documentation, and cross-border taxation. The meeting produced concrete recommendations, including the creation of a permanent consultation framework that brings together herders, traders, and local security actors, as well as the interconnection of customs systems to curb informal fees and corruption (Mali and Guinea, 2025). These outcomes illustrate how functional, technical cooperation can soften the impact of Mali's institutional withdrawal from ECOWAS by keeping channels of movement, trade, and security coordination open despite political realignment.

### 2.1.4. Mali–Guinea

Unlike with ECOWAS, relations between Mali and Guinea have remained notably cooperative despite institutional tensions between the AES bloc and ECOWAS. Both countries have leveraged geographic proximity and shared security concerns to sustain pragmatic diplomacy focused on border management and free movement. In August 2025, senior officials from Mali, led by Minister Mossa Ag Attaher and General Bachir Diallo, Guinea's Minister of Security, met in Conakry for high-level talks aimed at strengthening cross-border governance (Mali and Guinea, 2025). The discussions addressed persistent challenges, such as road harassment, illegal taxation, documentation delays, and intercommunity frictions linked to livestock transhumance along their shared frontier. Building on earlier bilateral accords, the meeting resulted in several concrete measures. Both governments agreed to create a permanent consultation framework bringing together local herders, traders, and security actors to address disputes and coordinate seasonal mobility. They also committed to interconnecting customs systems to streamline administrative procedures, curb informal levies, and improve the traceability of goods. Additionally, plans were made to reinforce joint security patrols and harmonise the recognition of travel and transport documents to facilitate legitimate cross-border movement (MSKT, 2025). These cooperative mechanisms mark an important evolution in Mali–Guinea relations, shifting from ad hoc coordination to structured engagement. By targeting local-level issues that directly affect mobility and trade, both states have managed to soften the impact of Mali's institutional withdrawal from ECOWAS, preserving daily socioeconomic exchanges that underpin regional stability. This pragmatic diplomacy illustrates how functional

collaboration on border governance can be sustained even when formal regional frameworks are under strain (MSKT, 2025; Felix et al., 2024).

### 2.1.5. Burkina Faso–Ghana

Burkina Faso and Ghana maintain a notably pragmatic and technical track of cooperation even as regional political tensions have strained formal institutions. In May 2024, the Ghana Boundary Commission and its Burkina Faso counterpart signed an MoU in Bolgatanga to reaffirm common land boundaries, institutionalise joint boundary administrative meetings, and adopt draft framework agreements to improve cooperation in cross-border governance (Polkuu, 2024). Later, on 19 August 2025, telecommunication regulators from both countries met virtually to address cross-border signal interference. The National Communications Authority of Ghana and the Autorité de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et des Postes Burkina Faso reviewed spectrum-monitoring data from late 2024 and initiated work towards finalising a frequency coordination agreement to establish clear minimum signal strength thresholds and mitigate the harms of signal spillover in border communities (National Communications Authority, 2025; Khoza, 2025). These collaborative efforts extend into economic corridors. Trade between Burkina Faso and Ghana reached XAF7.7 billion by the end of 2024, facilitated in part by a new agreement signed between the Burkina Faso Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Ghana’s SIC Insurance Company aimed at streamlining transit along the Ouagadougou–Accra corridor (La Rédaction, 2025). At the same time, an International Trade Centre-led study of the Paga–Dakola border crossing recommended reforms to reduce bureaucratic delays, improve coordination among border agencies, and enhance safety for traders, especially women, who disproportionately bear the costs of insecurity and informal fees (*Burkina-Ghana border*, 2025). Despite these advances, mobility across the Burkina–Ghana border remains constrained. Persistent issues include weak agency coordination, poor infrastructure at border crossings, non-tariff barriers, insecure trade routes due to occasional violence, and financial service disruptions. The effectiveness of technical agreements often depends on commitment and capacity at the local level. Provisions such as document recognition, transit facilitation, and signal boundary enforcement are still uneven in implementation. Even with growing bilateral engagement, through technical agreements on telecommunications, boundary reaffirmation, economic corridor facilitation, and trade enhancement, many mobility and trade barriers persist along the Burkina Faso–Ghana border. While these pragmatic collaborations have softened some immediate disruptions (e.g., smoother signal transmission, clearer legal frameworks, transit improvements), full mobility recovery remains constrained by infrastructure deficits, security concerns, and administrative bottlenecks (Extensia, 2025; Gold-Alorgbey, 2025).

The study underscores that free movement in West Africa has long been a cornerstone of integration, but one vulnerable to shifting politics and weak implementation. The withdrawal of the AES from ECOWAS therefore represents not a break from stability but an intensification of pre-existing tensions around sovereignty, governance, and mobility. From this read, we can understand how the current study positions itself within that body of work, bridging academic debates and policy realities to highlight both the historical depth of free movement and the fragile foundations upon which it rests.

### History’s Warning Signs!

In light of the comparative precedents, history provides cautionary parallels. Morocco’s OAU withdrawal in 1984 produced a decades-long freeze in continental cooperation across Western Sahara, hampering cross-border trade and asylum processes (OpinioJuris, 2017). Likewise, Mauritania’s exit from ECOWAS for the Arab Maghreb Union in 2000 was primarily to pursue an economic and cultural alignment with the Maghreb (AmaniAfrica, 2025; ICMPD, 2024). Brexit, though different in scale, similarly demonstrated how a sophisticated legal economy can unravel into complex, protracted negotiations, with vulnerable migrant workers caught in limbo for years.

These precedents tell a clear story. Without well-defined transition arrangements, political ruptures institutionalise vulnerabilities, and the human cost is borne by marginalised communities. West Africa now stands at a similar crossroads. The decisions made, and the resources allocated, over the next 12–18 months will determine whether Sahel-exit becomes a footnote in regional history or a catalyst for renewed, more resilient migration governance.

# 3. Echoes of Exit: Impacts on Migration Governance

## 3.1. The Legal Architecture of Mobility and Its Disruption

The collective withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has fractured a migration framework that, for decades, guaranteed the mobility and rights of millions across West Africa. At its core is the 1979 ECOWAS Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, hailed as one of the world’s most progressive regional migration instruments (United Nations, 2020; Bolarinwa, 2015). With that protocol now threatened by the disposition and perception of the three withdrawing states, legal assurances of visa-free travel, residence permits, and work authorisations are no longer assured. Routes that once operated under predictable, rights-based rules are now governed by ad hoc border controls and discretionary enforcement, undermining the legitimacy of previously harmonised migration pathways (Bisong et al., 2024; *Security and economic implications*, 2024).

Over the years, ECOWAS built its migration architecture through a suite of complementary instruments. The 2008 Common Approach on Migration established regional standards for anti-trafficking cooperation and victim protection, while MIDWA created a multistakeholder platform for

policy innovation. International partners, particularly the EU, reinforced these efforts through initiatives such as the Support to Free Movement of Persons and Migration in West Africa (FMM I and II) and targeted partnerships, including the EU–Niger migration partnership, which sought to reduce irregular migration through capacity-building, return mechanisms, and information campaigns. At the bilateral and trilateral levels, accords such as Mali–Côte d’Ivoire labour agreements, the Burkina Faso–Ghana cooperation framework, and the Nigeria–Niger anti-trafficking initiative provided further reinforcement, embedding norms of mobility and protection across the region.

Together, these measures positioned ECOWAS as both a normative beacon and a practical engine of mobility management. However, their impact has been uneven; while they help to formalise cooperation and expand protection frameworks, implementation gaps and shifting political priorities often limit their effectiveness. This mixed record highlights the need not only to sustain ECOWAS’s legal and policy instruments but also to ensure stronger monitoring, accountability, and political will if migration is to remain a secure and sustainable livelihood strategy in the region.

**Instruments Governing Free Movement in West Africa, Thematic Focus, and Impact on Regional Integration and Mobility**

**Table 1**

Agreement/ Instrument	Thematic Focus	Impact on Regional Integration and Free Movement	Key Source(s)/Link(s)
<b>Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment (A/P.1/5/79)</b>  29 May 1979	Right of entry, phased abolition of visa, right of residence and establishment (three phases)	Set the foundational legal basis for the ECOWAS free-movement regime (visa-free entry phase; basis for residence/establishment measures and, later, supplementary protocols)	<a href="#">ECOWAS protocol text</a> (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], 1979)

Agreement/ Instrument	Thematic Focus	Impact on Regional Integration and Free Movement	Key Source(s)/Link(s)
<b>Supplementary Protocol: Code of Conduct for Implementation (A/SP.2/7/85)</b>  6 July 1985	Operational rules for implementing free movement (documents, expulsions, deportation safeguards)	Clarified state obligations and procedures to operationalise the 1979 Protocol (helping harmonise border practices)	(ECOWAS, 1985)
<b>Supplementary Protocol: Second Phase, Right of Residence (A/SP.1/7/86)</b>  1 July 1986	Rules for right of residence (residence permits, labour access, protections)	Advanced the second phase of free movement; provided legal basis for residence cards and labour considerations	(ECOWAS, 1985)
<b>Supplementary Protocol: Third Phase, Right of Establishment (A/SP.2/5/90)</b>  29 May 1990	Right of establishment (business formation, non-salaried activities)	Launched the intended completion of free movement phases (establishment), though implementation has been uneven across member states	Discussed in UNHCR/IOM reviews and ECOWAS documentation (Bluett and Davy, 2020)
<b>Revised ECOWAS Treaty</b>  1993	Overarching treaty obligations (economic union, free movement embedded in treaty)	Reinforced the legal framework for integration, obliging member states to implement protocols (including free movement)	Revised treaty (ECOWAS, 1993)
<b>Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (Lomé)</b>  1999	Regional security mechanism (ECOMOG, standby forces, conflict prevention)	Provided the security architecture underpinning regional responses to coups/instability, relevant where security concerns interact with migration and border control	Protocol text for ECOWAS/Oxford Public International Law/Refworld (ECOWAS, 1999)
<b>Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (A/SP1/12/01)</b>  2001	Rules on democratic governance; sanctions for unconstitutional changes (Article 45 etc.)	Introduced a political conditionality instrument, used to justify sanctions/pressure on coup governments; directly affected membership and the implementation of free movement rights	Official protocol/ analysis for ECOWAS/the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (ECOWAS, 2001)
<b>ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms, Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials</b>  2006	Arms control/regulation of small arms and light weapons across the region	Addressed security-related drivers of irregular mobility and cross-border crime; influenced border security posture and cooperation	ECOWAS convention involving ECOWAS and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (ECOWAS, 2006)

Agreement/ Instrument	Thematic Focus	Impact on Regional Integration and Free Movement	Key Source(s)/Link(s)
<b>Supplementary Act A/SA.7/01/08, ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration</b>  2008	Regional policy framework for migration (anti-trafficking, protection, cooperation with partners)	Set region-level migration strategy and norms; anchored cooperation with partners (UNHCR, IOM) and projects such as MIDWA and FMM	Official Supplementary Act/UNHCR repository ( <a href="#">ECOWAS</a> , 1999)
<b>MIDWA/FMM (Regional Programmes)</b>  2001 onwards	Multistakeholder dialogue; harmonisation; capacity-building (IOM and ECOWAS)	Served as a platform for policy alignment, partner coordination, and technical/regional projects supporting free movement and migration management	IOM/ECOWAS programme and MIDWA (IOM, 2018b)
<b>ECOWAS Supplementary Acts (Acts on Competition, Investment, etc.)</b>  2008	Economic governance and integration (A/SA.1-3/06/08 etc.)	Strengthened economic integration architecture that underpins mobility and cross-border trade (indirect effects on free movement)	UN Trade and Development/ECOWAS references to supplementary acts (A/SA.1-3/06/08). (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2009)

While ECOWAS's migration framework has long served as the legal and institutional backbone for regional mobility, its resilience has increasingly been tested by the influence of external actors. Over the past decade, migration governance in the Sahel has become entangled with broader geopolitical and security agendas, particularly those driven by European and international partners. These actors, through funding instruments, technical missions, and security cooperation, have sought to align regional mobility management with their own border-control priorities. The next section examines how this external involvement, often justified as capacity-building or partnership, has both supported and, at times, complicated the region's efforts to sustain autonomous, people-centred migration governance.

### 3.2. External Influence and the Contest for Migration Governance

Another area of migration governance, particularly in the Sahel, that has faced increasing contention is the influence of external actors, whose presence and priorities have reshaped national and regional policy trajectories. The Sahelexit itself was partly justified by perceptions of overbearing foreign intervention in the region's migration and security policies. Sahelian migration governance has long been influenced by extracontinental and extraregional players, notably the EU and UN agencies but also individual European states, such as France, Italy, and Spain, which have implemented bilateral initiatives targeting migration control, security assistance, and return mechanisms (Europa, 2024; Fakhry, 2023).

The EU, as the most influential actor, has used a complex web of funding instruments, missions, and partnerships to

pursue migration objectives in the Sahel. Chief among them is the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), with the Sahel and Lake Chad region, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, being some of the largest recipients of its 248 projects between 2015 and 2025. While framed as efforts to address the "root causes" of irregular migration, roughly two-thirds of the €2.2 billion allocated to the Sahel has been directed towards border management, security enforcement, and reintegration control rather than livelihoods or governance capacity (Europa, 2024; Minko, 2025).

This security-first orientation effectively externalised Europe's migration management, transforming parts of the Sahel into de facto buffer zones aimed at intercepting mobility before reaching North Africa. As former EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell once bluntly put it, "Europe's border is not in the Mediterranean, but south to the Sahel" (Fakhry, 2023).

Recent assessments underscore that this model has not achieved its stated developmental goals. The European Court of Auditors' 2024 review concluded that EUTF interventions in the Sahel showed "limited effectiveness" in tackling the drivers of migration or creating sustainable alternatives to irregular movement (Minko, 2025). In fact, European asylum data show that by 2024, applications from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger had reached a decade-high 22,000, suggesting that deterrence measures have neither reduced departures nor improved conditions in origin countries. Beyond the EU itself, national European policies, including France's military footprint and Italy's and Spain's bilateral return and surveillance partnerships, have deepened perceptions that Sahelian sovereignty over migration policy is being constrained by external priorities. This

tension, compounded by aid conditionalities and political pressure, directly undermines ECOWAS's coherence; the regional body's migration protocols depend on trust, reciprocity, and shared governance, all of which are weakened when member states respond primarily to non-regional actors rather than collective mechanisms. The resulting policy fragmentation has eroded ECOWAS's credibility as a unified migration actor and intensified the political divide between AES members and the bloc.

In summary, the pervasive influence of external actors has produced a layered contestation of authority within Sahelian migration governance. Divergent interests between donors, regional bodies, and national governments have yielded a fragmented policy landscape where humanitarian, security, and political agendas collide. The fallout of this contestation has weakened ECOWAS's coordinating role and blurred accountability, reinforcing calls for greater regional autonomy and ownership over migration policy.

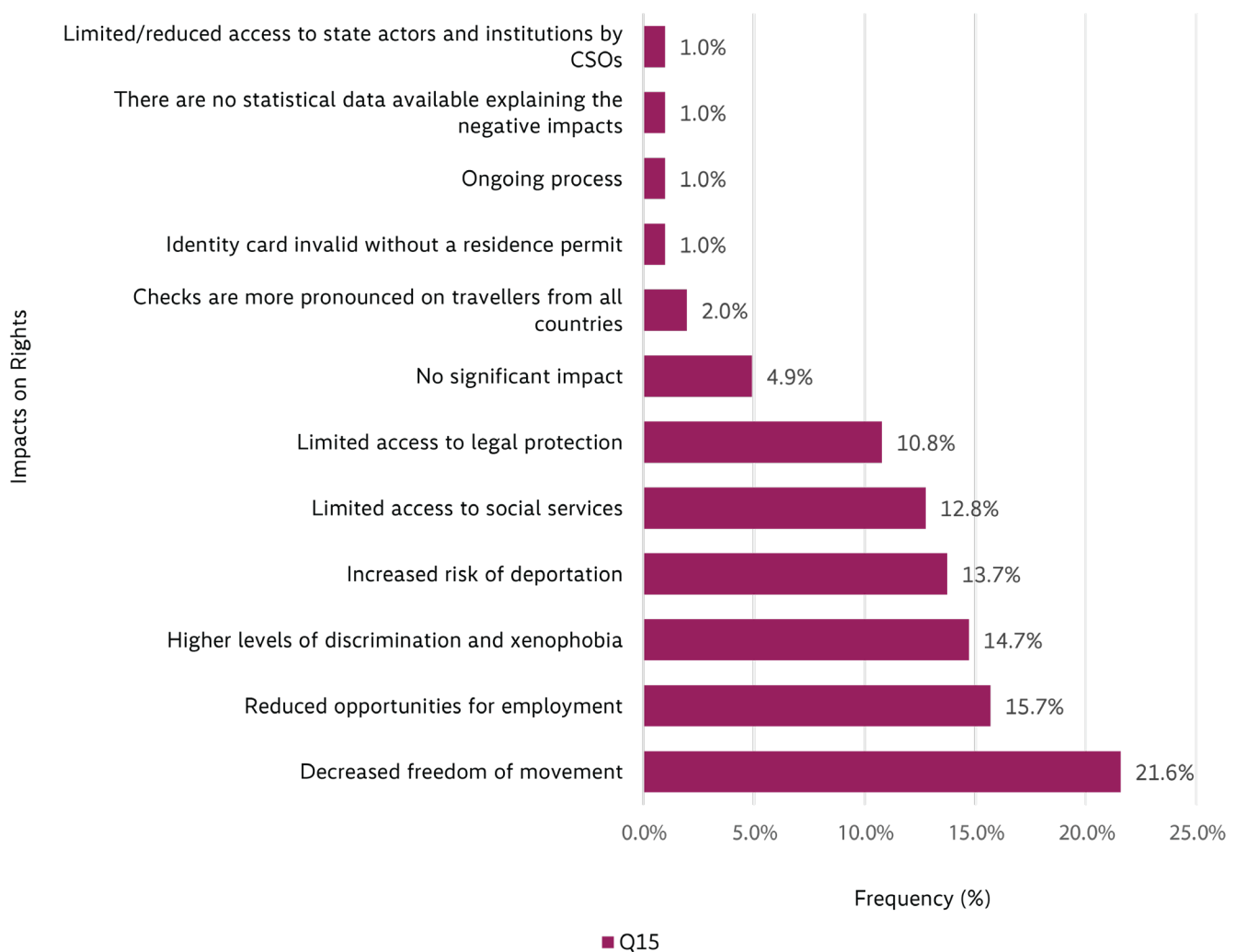
The Sahelexit and the AES's emerging agenda can therefore be seen as both a rejection of imposed migration control paradigms and a bid to reassert national and regional sovereignty in shaping mobility governance that reflects local realities.

### 3.3. Socioeconomic and Human Rights Consequences of the Withdrawal

This research study, conducted across Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, corroborates insights from existing literature that reveal measurable disruptions in a number of regional migration governance systems resulting from the withdrawal. Survey data indicate that 21.6% of the respondents in the affected regions reported direct loss of freedom of movement post-withdrawal. Others noted reductions in access to documentation, legal status, and civil society support.

#### Impact on Migrant Rights

Figure 5



These changes are not theoretical; they are being experienced daily along migration corridors. Qualitative data from

in-depth interviews reinforce these trends. As confirmed by our study, long-standing informal routes, such as those

connecting Mali to Côte d'Ivoire and Mali to Burkina Faso, as well as Niger's crossing into Nigeria and Benin, have been described by migrants, community leaders, and humanitarian actors as sites of heightened scrutiny, tension, and unpredictability. The mutual verification and recognition of identity documents have become contentious, with some countries, such as Senegal, refusing to accept non-biometric national identity documents, including Mali's Numéro d'Identification Nationale card, forcing migrants to present unfamiliar forms of documentation or face detection. Previously harmonised systems for residency, work permits, and cross-border trade are collapsing. These disruptions have particularly affected vulnerable groups, including women, youth, informal traders, and displaced persons, who often lack access to the legal or financial means to adapt. These developments also mark the departure from ECOWAS's rights-based model and suggest a shift towards securitised, discretionary border practices.

A particularly concerning theme from the FGDs in Katsina, Nigeria, was rising vulnerability to irregular migration risks. Community participants described how, in the absence of clear regional protocols, extortion and harassment by local security officers have become more pervasive, particularly at checkpoints. Migrants reported being asked to present unfamiliar or newly introduced documentation and, in many cases, detained arbitrarily when unable to comply. Female traders, in particular, reported heightened vulnerability to

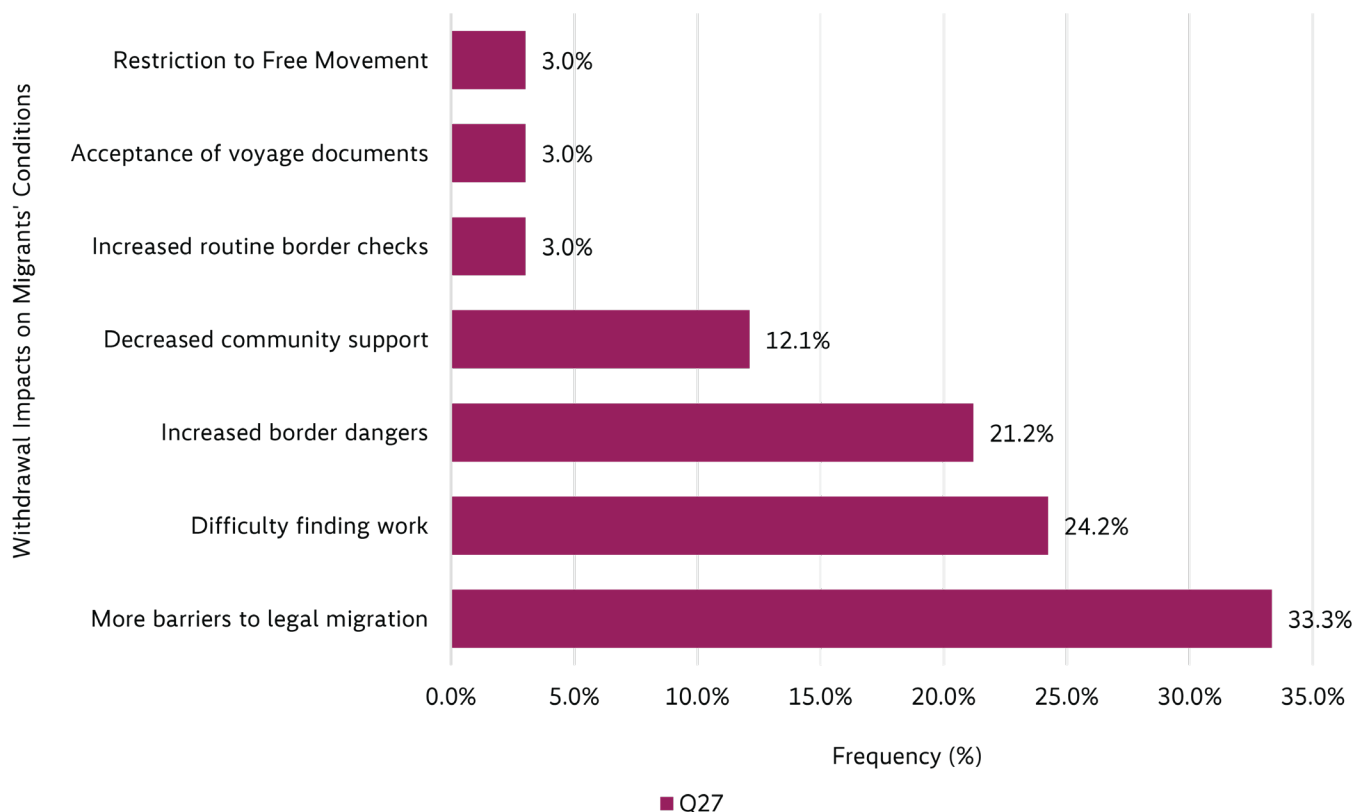
sexual harassment, coercion, and economic exploitation at border posts, alongside inflated transport fees that erode their livelihoods and threaten their personal safety (see Figure 6 below).

The withdrawal of ECOWAS protections has accelerated the rise of irregular migration. Migrants, facing increased bureaucratic and security burdens, are increasingly turning to informal and unsafe routes to circumvent the loss of previously accessible legal pathways for mobility within the region. This trend is corroborated by reports from the International Organization for Migration [IOM] (2024b) and Rain (2024). The resulting reliance on intermediaries, often smugglers acting as local youths or the reverse, has led to a spike in human rights violations, bribery, extortion, and violence, as well as a higher risk of exploitation and trafficking. This is consistent with local accounts, such as those from Katsina region, describing increased human smuggling activity.

ECOWAS protocols had previously offered a range of protections: the right to enter and reside in member states for up to 90 days without a visa; provisions for family reunification; mechanisms for regularisation; and a legal framework that obligated states to respect migrant rights. The withdrawal of the AES from ECOWAS would strip their nationals of these protections, turning formerly routine movements into precarious, legally ambiguous journeys.

## Impact on Migrant Conditions

Figure 6



**Note:** 19.2% of the respondents reported difficulties in obtaining work permits or legal residency post-withdrawal. Others cited reductions in civil society support and worsening living conditions.

### 3.4. Fragmented Governance and Emerging Local Responses

From the FGDs, it was understood that in response, national strategies have varied widely. Niger, under heightened international scrutiny due to its role in migration transit, has tightened internal and cross-border surveillance. Mali has prioritised diplomatic coordination with Burkina Faso, focusing on mutual arrangements for transit and trade. Burkina Faso, constrained by institutional fragility, has leaned on grassroots governance. Village committees, comprising traditional chiefs, youth representatives, and trade associations, now coordinate informal mobility procedures. Transport unions have begun issuing “community guarantor” letters to replace ECOWAS documents. Faith-based groups and diaspora associations have mobilised financial and logistical support for stranded migrants and their families. Though these mechanisms are resilient and adaptive, they lack the consistency and oversight needed for rights-based governance.

CSOs report that community structures have long filled governance gaps, though their capacity is stretched. Legal aid clinics, shelters, and migrant support services in transit hubs and border towns often operate under severe constraints. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s *Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment* (2013) documents that shifting legal and political contexts already complicate civil society’s ability to deliver consistent, compliant assistance. The decision by the AES to withdraw from ECOWAS risks exacerbating these existing challenges, increasing uncertainty in partnerships and access to regional coordination (UNODC, 2023; UNODC, 2013).

The absence of coordinated regional leadership has left a governance vacuum. Without a coherent framework to replace ECOWAS’s migration protocols, national systems are drifting apart. In the long term, this fragmentation could undermine not only mobility rights but also the economic and social interdependence that underpins the ECOWAS integration project. If unaddressed, the Sahelexit risks evolving from a diplomatic fracture into a structural governance crisis that jeopardises decades of progress on regional mobility, human rights, and cooperation (Think Tank, 2024; Pichon, 2024).

The findings demonstrate that withdrawal has immediate, tangible consequences for migrants and the organisations that support them. Reduced access to services, heightened risks of exploitation, and increased uncertainty around rights combine to weaken trust in governance structures. Yet the evidence also reveals enduring efforts by civil society and community actors to provide assistance under difficult circumstances. These realities show that while resilience persists, it is fragile and uneven, requiring stronger institutional backing if it is to remain sustainable.

The next chapter explores how the evolving role of civil society in responding to institutional vacuums, protecting migrants, and advocating inclusive governance will be critical in determining whether West Africa can rebuild a functional, people-centred migration system in the wake of Sahelexit.

# 4.

## Stories from the Borderlands

### 4.1. Human Experiences and Ground Realities

West Africa's migration tapestry has long been woven through the Sahelian heartland. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger collectively host and generate an estimated 7.5 million intraregional migrants, traders, seasonal labourers, students, displaced families, and informal workers, whose livelihoods, social ties, and survival strategies depend on relatively open borders. These three countries have historically served not only as sources of labour and mobility but also as key connectors within the ECOWAS migration framework. Their geographic centrality, political influence, and demographic dynamics position them at the heart of regional migration systems. The announcement of their withdrawal from ECOWAS in January 2024, a process referred to in this report as "Sahelexit", marked a pivotal moment, initiating shifts in governance, border relations, and migrant experiences.

Importantly, this study was initiated in late 2024, while the Sahelexit process remained in its initial, uncertain stages. The withdrawal had not yet resulted in a fully matured or institutionalised break from the ECOWAS system. Hence, the implications were not fully visible, but early signals from the field already pointed to significant stress on migration systems, governance frameworks, and human mobility. This study sought to capture first-hand insights and early warning signs during a transitional period, with the aim of informing proactive decision-making, policy design, and advocacy. In this context, the following findings reflect emergent trends not yet hardened into new legal regimes.

This chapter draws primarily on qualitative data gathered through FGDs and interviews in six key sites: Niankologo (Burkina Faso), Sikasso (Mali), Gaya, Konni, and Niamey (Niger), and Katsina (Nigeria). These locations represent critical border zones where migration is both a daily lived experience and a survival imperative. The stories captured reveal not only the challenges posed by Sahelexit but also the resilience, ingenuity, and evolving coping strategies of those living in the shadow of regional disintegration.

#### 4.1.1. Mali: Strained but Stable Pathways

In Sikasso, Mali's main southern hub, travellers noted that crossing into Côte d'Ivoire remains relatively smooth, while passages into Burkina Faso have become markedly more difficult, particularly for young people and small-scale traders lacking biometric IDs. This contrast highlights how ECOWAS members maintain the Free Movement Protocol as the AES enforces tighter controls. On 29 January 2025,

after confirming the withdrawal of the AES, ECOWAS urged its member states to continue applying the ECOWAS migration frameworks to migrants from the three Sahel states (*ECOWAS confirms exit*, 2025; Joshua, 2025). This is one of the open-door and bridge-building strategies designed by ECOWAS to facilitate discussions with each of the three AES members (Aboagye, 2025).

Although Côte d'Ivoire has not enacted formal restrictions on Malian migrants, withdrawal from ECOWAS has sown confusion and fear, with no interim legal framework to guide border officials. As a result, enforcement is inconsistent and largely ad hoc, varying sharply from one crossing point to the next. As a Malian community elder explained,

**"We used to have easier access with the ECOWAS card. Now, even market days are tense. Security patrols are stricter, and many young people are turned away."**

#### 4.1.2. Burkina Faso: From Cooperation to Constraint

In Niankologo, a border town in Burkina Faso, once-active trading relationships and cross-border cooperative projects with Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire have unravelled. Civil society representatives described the collapse of municipal partnerships, suspension of donor-supported market infrastructure, and informal workarounds. As one market leader shared,

**"We now pay a daily 'solidarity fee' to move millet across the border."**

Transport unions and village committees have begun issuing unofficial "community transit notes" as substitutes for ECOWAS travel cards. However, these are inconsistently recognised and frequently rejected by border officials, exposing traders, especially women, to harassment and financial loss. FGD participants also highlighted a sharp increase in undocumented migration towards North Africa. "Our youth are leaving for Libya and Algeria without papers," one youth leader observed. "They don't see another option."

#### 4.1.3. Niger: Bureaucracy, Borders, and Banditry

In Niger, the withdrawal has triggered new layers of bureaucracy, insecurity, and institutional voids. At Gaya and Konni, additional checkpoints operated by both state and local militias have rerouted traditional migration paths through unregulated bush corridors, heightening exposure to robbery, trafficking, and violence. Migrants in Niamey noted that access to basic services formerly guaranteed under ECOWAS, such as healthcare and public education, had

diminished or disappeared entirely. A participant from Niger explained,

**“If migration becomes more difficult legally, people will choose illegal migration.”**

This insight, echoed throughout the FGDs, underscores how restrictive environments are pushing migrants into more precarious and clandestine trajectories. The pastoralist community has been especially affected. Livestock herders now face dual registration requirements and overlapping permit demands when moving between Niger and Nigeria. These compounded administrative burdens have disrupted seasonal migration cycles and increased costs, putting economic stress on an already vulnerable sector.

#### 4.1.4. Nigeria (Katsina): Fractured Flows and Local Responses

As earlier mentioned, Nigeria’s inclusion in the research served to gauge the impact of the withdrawal from neighbouring ECOWAS member states. Katsina State, Nigeria’s northern border region, has long been a hub of family-based migration and trans-Saharan trade. Since Sahelexit, participants described a climate of confusion and constraint. Several noted being denied entry into Niger or forced to pay bribes to cross, despite historical kinship ties. A participant recounted,

**“We lost our African blood brothers from Niger Republic because of our Western conditional friends who influence our decision.”**

Women traders reported facing increasing verbal harassment and arbitrary documentation requirements, while youth expressed concern over being labelled “illegal migrants”. Local CSOs have responded by establishing temporary referral desks to assist with documentation and cross-border travel advice. Yet, these efforts are under-resourced and lack institutional legitimacy. Participants repeatedly emphasised the need for bilateral dialogue and community-level coordination to manage the fallout of the withdrawal.

#### 4.1.5. What the Numbers Reveal

While the qualitative stories from the field offered human perspectives on the withdrawal, this chapter dives into the quantitative evidence underpinning those accounts. Conducted during the early stage of Sahelexit, the survey captured over 33 respondents from Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, primarily stakeholders with lived experience or policy engagement in migration governance. Though modest in size, this sample provides essential numerical grounding for decision makers, enabling them to validate, contextualise, and act upon emerging trends.

The demographic profile of respondents reveals significant insights. Men comprised 91.7% of the sample, highlighting a striking gender gap in formal migration governance dialogue, despite the often central role of women in informal trade and caregiving-related mobility. Most respondents were between 35 and 64 years old, suggesting that those shaping or informing migration policies are seasoned actors with decades of regional experience. Educational levels were also high; 70.8% of the participants held a bachelor’s or postgraduate degree. Notably, 75% of the respondents were affiliated with CSOs, reaffirming the frontline role CSOs play in advocacy, service delivery, and monitoring migration realities.

Over 80% of respondents had lived in their current countries for more than 10 years, indicating deep familiarity with evolving local contexts. These long-term community ties lend credibility and authority to their insights. Moreover, the spread of residence across the Sahel and neighbouring states helps reflect a sub-regional picture of perception and experience.

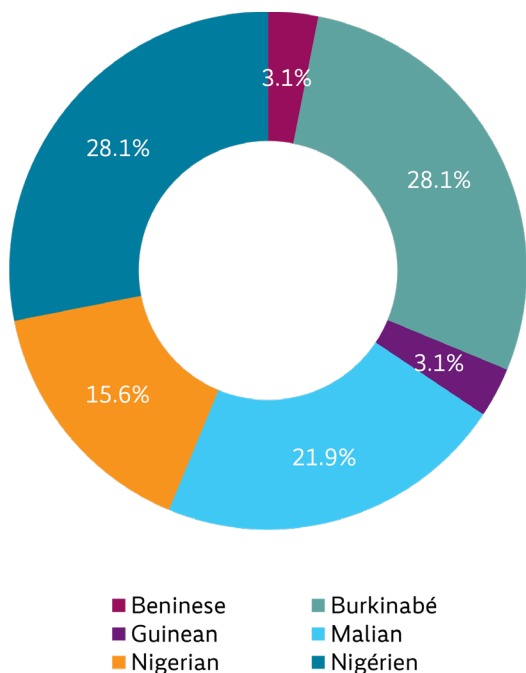
**Demographic Profile of Respondents**

**Table 2**

Demographic Indicator	Value
Male participants	91.7%
Aged 35–64	87.9%
Bachelor’s or postgraduate degree	70.8%
Affiliated with CSOs	75.0%
Lived in the country for over 10 years	80%+

**Nationality of Respondents**

**Figure 7**

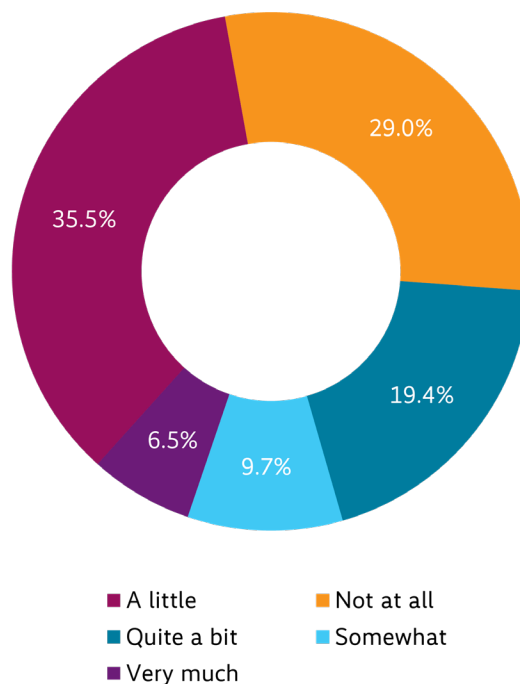


Turning to perceptions, the numbers are telling. Over one-fifth of respondents (21.6%) identified a decline in freedom of movement post-withdrawal. Another 15.7% noted reduced employment opportunities for migrants. Access to documentation and services also came under strain; 19.2% reported difficulty obtaining legal residency or work permits, while an equal share reported reduced support from civil society and humanitarian organisations. These challenges, though reported in the early stages of the withdrawal, signalled tangible breakdowns in the ECOWAS framework that had long facilitated seamless mobility.

irregular migration, 29% did not notice any change. This divergence suggests that irregular migration patterns may be highly localised, depending on enforcement intensity, community networks, and alternative migration routes. Similarly, on the question of whether barriers to regular migration had increased, respondents were nearly evenly split. About 43.4% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while over 34% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These polarised perceptions reflect the fragmented and evolving nature of migration governance during a period of political flux.

**Increased Irregular Migration**

**Figure 8**



**Challenges Faced Post-withdrawal**

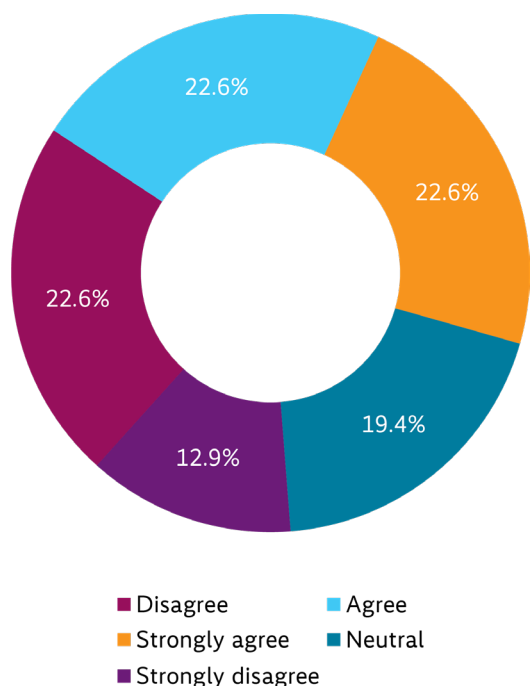
**Table 3**

Challenge Faced Post-withdrawal	% of Respondents Affected
Decline in freedom of movement	21.6%
Reduced employment opportunities	15.7%
Difficulty accessing legal residency/work permits	19.2%
Reduced civil society/NGO support	19.2%

The issue of irregular migration revealed mixed sentiments. While 35.5% of participants observed a slight rise in

## Perception of Barriers to Regular Migration

Figure 9



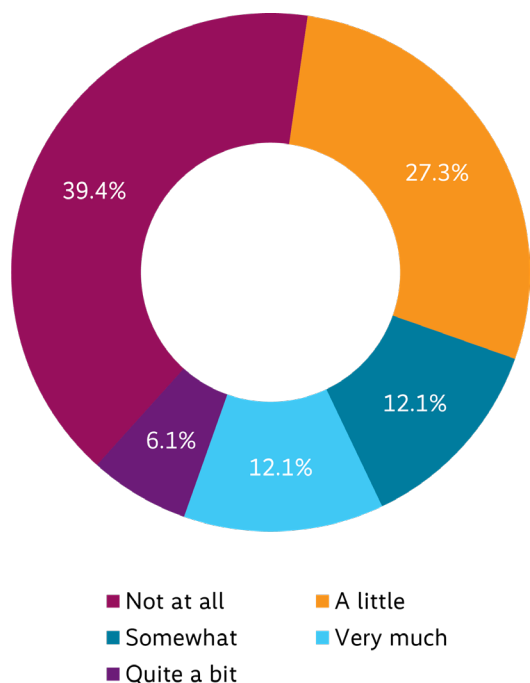
of residence emerged as the strongest predictor of both awareness and concern. Respondents in Mali and Niger, countries deeply embedded in the migration corridors and directly affected by the policy changes, were significantly more likely to perceive disruptions and express urgency.

This geographic impact was further underscored by respondents' understanding of rights erosion. For instance, awareness of reduced mobility, legal insecurity, and exclusion from public services correlated strongly with proximity to affected borders. The inference is clear: Those living closer to enforcement zones are more acutely aware of and impacted by policy shifts. This highlights the need for place-based policy-making and localised migration governance frameworks.

An ordered logistic regression provided further nuance. Respondents who reported being "very much aware" of changes in migration rights were substantially more likely to support expanded migrant services ( $\beta = 2.4276$ ,  $p = 0.073$ ). While this figure skirts the edge of statistical significance due to sample size limitations, it is analytically robust. Conversely, respondents who did not perceive an increase in irregular migration were significantly less likely to support service expansion ( $\beta = -1.9506$ ,  $p = 0.051$ ). These findings suggest that perceived urgency and awareness are key determinants of public support for inclusive migration policy.

## Effect of Withdrawal on Regional Migration Policy

Figure 10



## 4.2. Contextualising Country-Specific Relevance and Strategic Positioning

→ The withdrawal's implications are best understood through the distinct yet interconnected roles each of the three countries plays in regional migration dynamics:

→ Mali functions as both a country of origin and a transit hub for migration towards North and West Africa. With strategic migration corridors and a long history of cross-border mobility, Mali's withdrawal disrupts both internal and international flows, leaving governance gaps in place of what were once ECOWAS-coordinated pathways.

→ Burkina Faso serves as a critical labour-exporting country with robust ties to Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Niger. The breakdown of institutional trade and cooperative mechanisms here threatens informal economies, especially those dominated by women and youth. The absence of legal alternatives is encouraging irregular migration and increasing social vulnerability.

→ Niger holds exceptional geopolitical weight. As a cornerstone of EU-Sahel migration agreements and a central transit point for migrants heading northwards, Niger's exit introduces risks of regional destabilisation with global ramifications. The vacuum left by ECOWAS's absence weakens border management, security coordination, and migrant protection mechanisms.

Statistical testing adds sharper clarity. A chi-squared analysis showed that neither age nor nationality was significantly associated with awareness of changes in rights following the withdrawal. This debunks the assumption that identity factors alone determine engagement. Instead, the country

### 4.3. Shared Patterns and Local Innovations

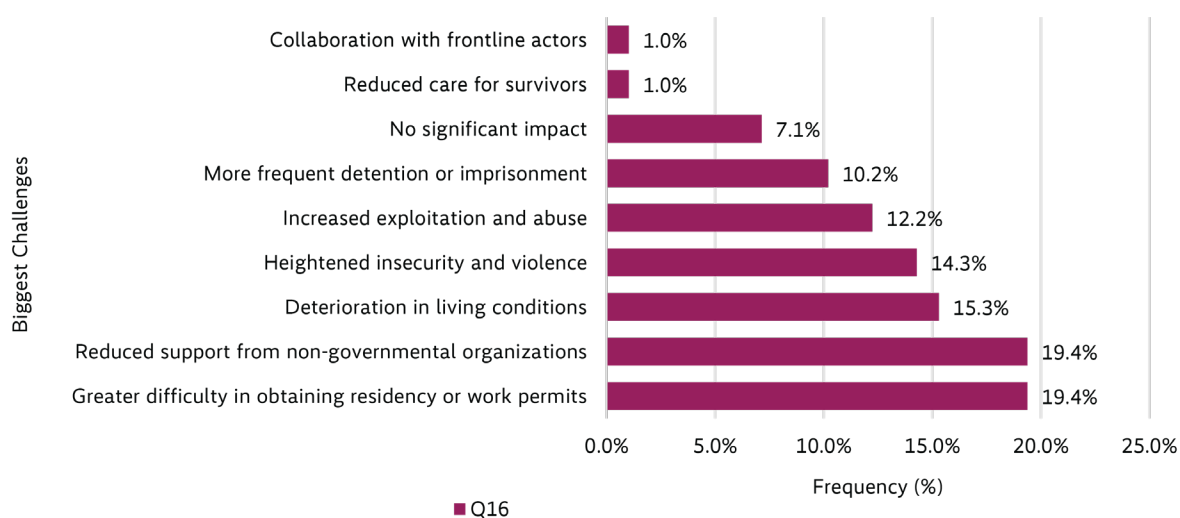
- While the specific effects of the withdrawal vary by context, several cross-cutting trends emerged:
- Stricter documentation requirements: Biometric checks, national IDs, and multiple permits are now required where a single ECOWAS card once was enough.
- Rising transportation and permit costs: These disproportionately affect traders, informal workers, and low-income migrants.

→ Heightened exposure to corruption and abuse: Security forces were reported to engage in bribery, harassment, and extortion, particularly at informal crossings.

Informal support systems: Village chiefs, religious leaders, transport unions, and diaspora associations now play expanded roles in managing migration, issuing transit notes, and organising emergency aid.

**Biggest Challenges Faced by Migrants After the Withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS**

**Figure 11**



Despite the challenges, the emergence of informal and community-led coping mechanisms highlights the creativity and determination of border populations. In Sikasso, coalitions of CSOs and local government units have formed to register and assist displaced families. In Niamey, psychosocial support programmes are being revived, and efforts to clarify migration rules are underway in collaboration with municipal authorities. These examples demonstrate that while national and regional systems falter, local actors are stepping in, but not without strain.

The implications are far-reaching. First, **policy interventions must be geographically sensitive**. National governments and ECOWAS institutions should not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, border regions with acute awareness and greater disruption, such as Gaya, Niamey, and Sikasso, should receive targeted assistance and resources. Second, **awareness campaigns are not optional; they are foundational**. Where people understand their rights and the risks at stake, they are more likely to advocate for protection mechanisms. Third, **the role of CSOs must be recognised and institutionalised**. These

actors possess both the networks and credibility to mediate between state institutions and mobile populations.

This chapter illustrates that the decision of the AES to withdraw is not only a legal or technical issue but one rooted in broader political contestations within ECOWAS. The findings highlight the interplay between regional integration, sovereignty concerns, and shifting alliances, suggesting that mobility governance cannot be insulated from wider political currents. Ultimately, the withdrawal underscores the need for mechanisms of dialogue and dispute resolution that address grievances before they escalate into rupture.

Moving forward, these local insights must inform regional policy-making. The next chapters build on these lived experiences to propose context-sensitive and rights-based strategies for strengthening migration governance amid political realignments. It asks: What are the core policy gaps emanating from this conundrum? How can ECOWAS and the AES collaborate, even in partial disunity, to protect migrants, preserve regional ties, and uphold the foundational values of integration?

# 5. Policy Gaps and Regional Risks

## 5.1. Introduction

Migration remains a defining force in West Africa’s economic, social, and political life. The ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement has long opened opportunities for integration, mobility, and trade. Yet findings from field research, surveys, and interviews reveal persistent governance gaps and institutional weaknesses. These shortcomings expose migrants to heightened risks, undermine regional integration, and create deep uncertainty in borderland communities.

Earlier chapters showed how the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, which made up the AES, from

ECOWAS has accelerated these challenges. Free movement is eroding, people’s rights of residence and establishment are under threat, border communities face rising informal costs and exclusions, CSOs are overstretched, and irregular migration is increasing as legal pathways narrow.

This chapter moves beyond documenting these outcomes to examine their underlying causes. It identifies the policy gaps that have enabled such disruptions and the regional risks they generate. By laying bare these structural weaknesses, the chapter provides the foundation for the recommendations set out in Chapter 6.

## 5.2. Policy Gaps and Risks

**Key Policy or Institutional Gaps, Drawn from Both Qualitative and Quantitative Data and Amplified by Recent Evidence**

**Table 4**

Gap Area	What the Gap Is	Evidence and Implications
<b>Legal Implementation of Free Movement Protocol</b>	Although ECOWAS has a Free Movement Protocol (entry, residence, establishment), many member states have not fully or uniformly implemented all phases.	Less than half of the ECOWAS member states have fully implemented all three phases of the Free Movement Protocol (Nogueira, 2025). This legal incoherence undermines citizens’ rights and creates arbitrary barriers.
<b>Institutional Structures for Labour Migration Governance</b>	Interministerial coordination bodies are weak or missing; institutional capacity is poor, and accountability is weak.	According to recent reports, less than half of the countries have functional interministerial structures for labour migration governance (Nogueira, 2025). Without these, multipronged issues (trade, migration, security) are handled in silos.
<b>Statistical Data Gaps and Disaggregation</b>	Data are often outdated, sparse, and not disaggregated by gender, migratory status, sector, or region.	For example, informal workers (a large share of migrants) are “statistically invisible” (Nogueira, 2025; Amadi, 2025; IOM, 2024b). Also, the Migration Data Portal (2025) shows large numbers but weak breakdowns. This impedes evidence-based policy-making.
<b>Legal and Rights Protection Weaknesses</b>	Protection mechanisms (especially for irregular migrants, women, children, and displaced persons) are shaky; national legal frameworks often do not fully cover voluntary migrants in crisis.	A Central Sahel snapshot found that migrants traverse dangerous routes, where many report extortion and robbery (Mixed Migration Centre [MMC], 2024). Also, national protection/regulation frameworks often lag behind regional norms.

Gap Area	What the Gap Is	Evidence and Implications
<b>Inconsistency in Social Protection and Portability</b>	Social protection (health, pensions, etc.) often doesn't cover migrants across borders; few ratify conventions; benefits are rarely transferrable.	Only a small number of ECOWAS states have ratified International Labour Organization Convention No. 102, and portability systems are often nonexistent (Nogueira, 2025). This leaves migrants in precarious situations when crossing borders or returning.
<b>External Actors and Security Overemphasis</b>	Migration governance is increasingly influenced by external funding and agendas (especially from the EU), often with security framing overshadowing human rights/mobility/livelihood concerns.	The "On Shifting Sands" article articulates that regional migration governance is being pulled between openness for economic/social reasons and tightened border/security control influenced also by external partners (Minko, 2025). This can distort priorities, reduce protection, and increase restrictive policies.
<b>Political Fragmentation and Legitimacy Gaps</b>	The withdrawal of the AES, coups, sanctions, and weak trust among countries undermine regional agreements and the ability to enforce or coordinate regional migration policy.	The Amani Africa study notes that Sahel exits exposed a disconnect between ECOWAS institutional responses and regional realities, e.g., over security, sovereignty, or economic marginalisation (Aboagye, 2025). This undermines governance coherence.

### 5.3. Regional Risks

Because these gaps remain unfilled, there are several growing risks to migration governance, regional stability, and

socioeconomic well-being. These risks also deepen the consequences already observed in Chapters 3 and 4.

**Regional Risks and Why They Matter**

**Table 5**

Risk	Why It Matters
<b>Further Erosion of Free Movement and Regional Integration</b>	If member states continue to delay or half-implement protocol phases, citizens will lose more rights of residence and establishment, the economies of borderlands will suffer, trade will decline, and integration promises will be hollow.
<b>Increase in Irregular Migration Routes and Exploitation</b>	Without regular, safe channels and protection, migrants will be forced to use dangerous routes; the risk of trafficking, extortion, and abuse increases.
<b>Heightened Vulnerabilities for Marginalised Groups</b>	Women, children, displaced persons, and informal cross-border traders suffer more when protection is weak and documentation demands are high; they further lose access to services.
<b>Economic Dislocation and Loss of Livelihoods</b>	Cross-border trade partners, remittances, and labour mobility are disrupted; border economies and informal sectors are damaged; business costs rise.
<b>Instability, Insecurity, and Conflict Spillover</b>	Gaps in cross-border coordination (security, migration, health) may allow criminal networks, corrupt officials, and non-state actors to exploit porous borders; political tensions may rise among states over perceived "leakage" or abuse.
<b>Weakening Legitimacy of Regional Institutions</b>	If ECOWAS is deemed ineffective or unable to enforce its own decisions, citizens, civil society, and even member states may disengage; membership in regional frameworks may be seen as symbolic rather than substantive.
<b>Humanitarian Crises and Rights Abuses</b>	As protections shrink, people on the move may face abuses, as well as inadequate access to health, shelter, and due process; displaced persons may be more exposed; children may be without legal documentation.

West Africa stands at a critical juncture. The governance gaps outlined in this chapter, ranging from the incomplete implementation of free movement protocols to weak protection systems, fragmented border management, and political fragmentation, are eroding the credibility of regional integration. These weaknesses not only expose migrants to heightened insecurity and exploitation but also deepen uncertainty in borderland communities and strain the social fabric that underpins mobility across the region.

If left unaddressed, these gaps risk accelerating irregular migration, worsening humanitarian pressures, and undermining public trust in ECOWAS as an integration project. Recognising these vulnerabilities is essential for policymakers, as they underscore the urgency of building stronger legal, institutional, and political frameworks to safeguard migration as a driver of stability and development.

The next chapter builds on this diagnosis by presenting a forward-looking set of recommendations designed to close these gaps and chart a more inclusive, resilient, and people-centred approach to migration governance in West Africa.

# 6. Redefining Regional Integration and Migration Governance for a New Era

## 6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapters, this work identified critical gaps in migration governance across ECOWAS: the inconsistent recognition of identity and migration documentation, weak protection for migrant populations, insufficient data systems, fragmented policy implementation, and the limited participation of civil society. These gaps generate risks such as irregular migration, human rights violations, social exclusion, and lost opportunities for economic development and regional integration.

This chapter presents refined and prioritised recommendations aimed at addressing those gaps. The proposals are informed by evidence from the field research, interviews, survey data, and comparative regional/framework analysis. They are structured by actor, are rooted in guiding principles, and include considerations for implementation and monitoring to ensure they are not merely aspirational but actionable.

## 6.2. Guiding Principles

All of the recommendations in this chapter rest on the following principles, which are grounded in regional and international instruments and processes:

1. **Inclusivity and Participation:** Ensure migrants, especially vulnerable groups (women, children, displaced persons), have a voice in policy design and implementation. This principle echoes the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which emphasises multi-stakeholder approaches and migrant participation in governance (IOM, 2018a; United Nations General Assembly, 2018; United Nations Network on Migration, 2021).
2. **Harmonisation and Interoperability:** Align legal, institutional, and technical frameworks across ECOWAS member states to reduce fragmentation. This is consistent with the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration (2008a), which explicitly promotes policy harmonisation and interoperability among member states.
3. **Evidence-Based Policy and Data Governance:** Improve data collection, sharing, and analytical capacity to inform decision-making. The GCM underscores the importance of evidence-based migration policies and data systems (in the GCM outcome document) and has

been used as a benchmark in Africa for strengthening migration data and research (Tadesse, 2018; IOM, 2018a).

4. **Accountability and Monitoring:** Embed mechanisms for performance-tracking, periodic reviews, and stakeholder feedback. Both the GCM (through review forums) and ECOWAS migration frameworks envisage regular review, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms for policy effectiveness (IOM, 2024c).
5. **Human Rights and Protection:** Uphold the rights of migrants, address vulnerabilities, and enhance protection mechanisms. This principle is consistent with the normative obligations in the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration (which mandates the protection of migrant rights), broader human rights, and the migrant rights instruments referenced therein (e.g., International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers) (ECOWAS, 2008a).

## 6.3. Recommendations

The findings from the study were shared with ECOWAS commission and member states, as well as other relevant regional stakeholders, external partners, and donors in a workshop held in Abuja. Participants reaffirmed the study's findings and contributed additional insights and priority actions to strengthen their practical relevance and alignment with current regional realities. The consolidated recommendations below reflect the key recommendations that emerged from this stakeholders' presentation workshop.

Below are the priority recommendations, grouped according to the key actor responsible for implementation. Each recommendation offers advice on *what to do*, *why it matters*, and *how to do it/next steps*.

### 6.3.1. National Governments Across AES and ECOWAS States

**Priority Recommendations, Grouped According to the Key Actors Responsible for Implementation for National Governance Across ECOWAS States**

**Table 6**

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>1. Harmonise identity and migration documentation recognition across ECOWAS.</b>	The non-recognition of IDs/documentation leads to delays, harassment, and an inability to access services, encouraging irregular migration. Harmonisation builds trust, mobility, and ease of cross-border movement.	Establish national working groups to review existing documentation laws vs. ECOWAS protocol; secure political commitment through formal agreements; invest in interoperable digital ID/verification systems; train border and immigration officials; pilot mutual recognition in a subset of states before scaling region-wide.
<b>2. Enhance legal/social protection for vulnerable migrants.</b>	Migrants often face exploitation, trafficking, discrimination, and a lack of legal redress. Strong protection builds safety and fosters social inclusion.	Enact/strengthen national legislation guaranteeing access to basic services regardless of migration status; support legal aid clinics; train law enforcement and judiciary; ensure shelters and psychosocial support; integrate protections in national migration strategies.
<b>3. Integrate migration into national development planning and frameworks, linking migration, trade, and security.</b>	Migration is often treated as a side issue; absence in national plans leads to underfunded responses and weak coordination. This reduces institutional silos and promotes the coherent national implementation of regional commitments.	Include migration hotspots in national development plans; align migration policy with labour, health, education, and infrastructure planning; allocate budget; ensure coordination among interministerial committees; ensure alignment with ECOWAS strategies. There is also a need to establish interministerial committees on migration and trade with quarterly reporting to the cabinet.
<b>Prioritise human-centred migration and border policies.</b>	This protects livelihoods, promotes social cohesion, and reduces irregular migration drivers.	Integrate social protection clauses into national migration laws and allocate budget lines for migrant support services.
<b>Deepen bilateral agreements to sustain mobility and trade (e.g., Niger–Nigeria, Mali–Guinea).</b>	These agreements allow for maintaining functional economic corridors and cross-border cooperation during political realignment.	Renew or update MoUs on trade and labour mobility; establish joint border committees for dispute resolution.
<b>Ensure gender-inclusive engagement in migration governance.</b>	Women and youth are disproportionately affected but underrepresented in decision-making.	Set gender quotas in national migration boards and fund targeted consultations with women traders and youth groups.

### 6.3.2. ECOWAS and Regional Bodies

**Priority Recommendations, Grouped According to the Key Actors Responsible for Implementation for ECOWAS and Regional Bodies**

**Table 7**

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>7. Accelerate full implementation of all three phases of the Free Movement Protocol.</b>	Since many member states have not abolished the 90-day stay requirement (Phase 2) nor allowed full right of establishment (Phase 3), incomplete implementation limits mobility, promotes irregular movement, and creates legal uncertainty.	ECOWAS should issue clearer enforcement mandates, set deadlines, support legal reforms in member states, provide technical and financial assistance, and create peer review/naming-and-shaming for laggards.
<b>8. Fully operationalise the ECOWAS Labour Migration Strategy and Action Plan (2025–2035).</b>	This regional strategy provides a framework for coordinated policy across member states on labour mobility, rights protection, regional governance, and gender inclusivity. Implementation will address many of the identified gaps.	Set up or reinforce a dedicated technical coordination committee; define clear roles and responsibilities; develop implementation timelines and milestones; mobilise funding; ensure domestic policy alignment in each member state; and monitor progress annually.
<b>9. Strengthen and institutionalise migration data governance and harmonise data management.</b>	Without reliable, shared data, monitoring, evidence-based policy, and the tracking of gaps (e.g., who is excluded) remain weak. Proper data handling improves accountability and helps target interventions. The Guidelines for the Harmonization of Migration Data Management provide a useful framework.	Member states should adopt the IOM/ECOWAS guidelines, establish national migration data units, define/agree on key regional indicators, build or upgrade digital data platforms, and ensure public reporting (profiles, annual briefs). Establish a regional data taskforce under the ECOWAS Directorate of Free Movement to collect and publish harmonised migration and trade data.
<b>10. Institutionalise capacity-building and funding for regional oversight.</b>	Without resources (human, technical, financial), regional frameworks remain on paper. Strong institutions ensure coherence, consistency, and enforcement.	Allocate regional budgets; seek donor/partner support; establish or strengthen the ECOWAS divisions responsible for free movement and migration; undertake regular peer reviews of member states' migration governance; develop capacity-building programmes for national ministries and border authorities.
<b>11. Align national migration/mobility laws and employment codes with ECOWAS regional frameworks.</b>	Discrepancies between national policies and the ECOWAS protocols weaken harmonisation, impede cross-border trade and labour mobility, and create variable protections for migrants.	Conduct legal audits in member states; prepare model laws; provide capacity-building for legislators and ministries; ensure the inclusion of establishment rights in national labour codes; provide regional legal advisory support.
<b>Integrate the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework into migration and trade analyses.</b>	This aligns regional integration with continental trade liberalisation and mitigates post-withdrawal disruptions.	Create a joint ECOWAS-AfCFTA working group to assess policy intersections and propose harmonised trade-mobility instruments.
<b>Establish structured ECOWAS-AES dialogue platforms.</b>	This sustains diplomatic engagement and prevents further political fragmentation.	Convene quarterly dialogue forums co-chaired by ECOWAS and AES foreign ministries with observer status for AU and UN agencies.

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>Conduct an internal, self-reflective evaluation to identify lessons learnt and design structured reintegration or cooperation frameworks with AES countries.</b>	This encourages adaptive governance and regional learning and helps design a road map for reintegration or structured cooperation.	Commission an independent evaluation team; present findings to the ECOWAS Council of Ministers within 12 months.

### 6.3.3. Civil Society and Community Actors

**Priority Recommendations, Grouped According to the Key Actors Responsible for Implementation for Civil Society and Community Actors**

**Table 8**

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>15. Facilitate community participation and integrate lived experience into policy-making.</b>	Policies that neglect the real experiences, needs, and voices of migrant communities risk being ineffective or causing unintended harm.	Organise stakeholder consultations; include civil society in national/regional migration strategy development; fund community-led research; set up feedback mechanisms (e.g., migrant forums and hotlines); ensure gender and vulnerable group representation.
<b>16. Strengthen legal aid, information access, and awareness campaigns.</b>	Many migrants lack basic knowledge of rights and access to legal recourse. Awareness reduces exploitation and irregular migration.	Support CSOs to provide legal aid clinics; produce multilingual, culturally appropriate information materials; leverage media and social media; encourage partnership between governments and CSOs for information dissemination; monitor the impact of awareness efforts.
<b>17. Develop community-based early warning and monitoring systems.</b>	Border closures, securitisation, and irregular migration shifts often first affect local communities. Early detection can prevent abuses and humanitarian crises.	Train community monitors to track migration trends, abuses, or trafficking risks; set up channels for reporting to local CSOs and authorities; collaborate with media to raise alerts.
<b>18. Promote cross-border community dialogue and trust-building.</b>	The withdrawal from ECOWAS and tightened borders have strained communal ties and disrupted informal trade. Dialogue reduces tensions and strengthens resilience.	Organise community forums across border towns; involve traditional leaders, women's groups, and youth; build local agreements on trade, safe passage, and conflict resolution.
<b>19. Provide psychosocial support and reintegration assistance for returnees.</b>	Many migrants face trauma, debt, or stigma upon return; without support, they are vulnerable to remigration or exploitation.	Establish CSO-led counselling services, peer-support groups, and vocational reintegration programmes; link with local businesses for apprenticeships and job placement.
<b>Support CSOs to monitor and document border-area mobility trends and rights violations.</b>	Civil society offers ground-level intelligence and early-warning capacity.	Provide micro-grants and digital reporting tools for CSOs operating along major corridors.
<b>Promote the inclusive participation of women, youth, and informal traders in policy dialogues.</b>	The inclusion of marginalised groups strengthens legitimacy and ensures that interventions reflect community realities.	Institutionalise CSO representation in ECOWAS MIDWA and national migration policy forums.

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>Encourage knowledge-sharing and peer learning among border communities.</b>	This facilitates the replication of successful local coping mechanisms.	Organise regional CSO exchange workshops and online knowledge platforms hosted just like the annual Civil Society Forum hosted by CSOnetMADE.

#### 6.3.4. International Partners and Donors

**Priority Recommendations, Grouped According to the Key Actors Responsible for Implementation for International Partners and Donors**

**Table 9**

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>23. Align technical and financial support with prioritised action areas and locally defined priorities rather than security-first models.</b>	Donor interventions sometimes focus on research or small projects rather than sustained implementation. Better alignment ensures sustainability and impact and enhances ownership, sustainability, and community trust.	Use joint planning frameworks with ECOWAS and national governments; fund infrastructure for data systems, legal protection, and border management; support capacity-building; and ensure funds are flexible and tied to milestones. This requires local consultation benchmarks in all donor-funded border management or migration projects.
<b>24. Foster cross-border cooperation and learning exchanges.</b>	Problems (migration flows, border issues, trafficking, and irregular migration) are cross-national. Peer learning helps share good practices and solutions.	Facilitate workshops among member states; support south-south exchanges; sponsor pilot programmes in multiple countries; promote platforms for sharing lessons; support collaborative research.
<b>Invest in context-specific livelihood programmes.</b>	Disrupted trade and seasonal labour push youth into risky migration.	Fund small-scale, locally designed projects (agriculture, markets, apprenticeships) with community co-management.
<b>26. Support local governance and civil society.</b>	Local actors understand border realities and community needs better than external contractors.	Provide direct grants and training to CSOs, women's groups, and municipal councils to manage mobility challenges.
<b>27. Expand legal mobility pathways.</b>	Containment without alternatives heightens irregular flows.	Negotiate seasonal labour schemes with safer mobility corridors, especially for youth and skilled workers.
<b>28. Rebalance donor funding away from security-first models.</b>	Heavy militarisation increases abuses and displacement.	Earmark development and protection funds that support local context specifics and regional mobility; integrate capacity-building at least equal to security allocations; monitor conditionality.
<b>29. Strengthen safeguards for humanitarian access and rights.</b>	Migrants face abuses in detention and return processes.	Tie border/security cooperation to independent monitoring; mandate protection clauses in all agreements.
<b>Fund evidence-based research and data systems on mobility and socioeconomic impacts.</b>	Evidence-based analysis allows for the generation of credible, shared datasets for joint programming and evaluation.	Support an annual <i>Sahel Mobility Report</i> co-authored by ECOWAS, international partners such as Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, IOM, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, etc., and national research institutes.

Recommendation	Why It Matters	How/Next Steps
<b>Invest in capacity-building for human development in border areas.</b>	Focusing on human development builds resilience, reduces dependency, and addresses the root causes of irregular migration.	Scale up training, entrepreneurship, and livelihood diversification programmes targeting border youth and women.

## 6.4. Implementation and Monitoring

- Timeline and Milestones:** Set short-term (one to two years), medium (three to five years), and long-term (beyond five years) goals for each recommendation.
- Institutional Anchors:** Identify and empower lead entities per recommendation (e.g., national ministries, ECOWAS Commission, CSO networks).
- Data and Indicators:** Define the key performance indicators tied to each recommendation (e.g., percentage of migrants with recognised IDs, number of legal aid centres established, number of states publishing migration data profiles).
- Feedback and Review Processes:** Conduct annual reporting at the ECOWAS level, peer reviews among member states, periodic stakeholder consultations, and grievance redress mechanisms for migrants.
- Risk Mitigation:** Acknowledge challenges (political will, resources, capacity). Include contingency plans: pilot projects, phased implementation, the leveraging of donor support, Q&As with border authorities, and the managing of legal harmonisation complexities.

## 6.5. Conclusion

Migration and free mobility are central to ECOWAS's ambitions for integration, shared prosperity, and regional cohesion. However, without intentional reforms, persistent gaps in documentation recognition, protection, data systems, policy coherence, and participation will continue undermining these goals.

Thus, this moment is an opportunity. The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger is not an end but a stress test of West Africa's commitment to solidarity. The findings suggest that while ECOWAS's foundational principles are under strain, they are not obsolete. With political will, practical reforms, and localised interventions, the spirit of integration can be preserved, even reimaged. These numbers are not only evidence; they are a call to refine, reinforce, and relaunch the project of regional migration governance.

Most crucially, the study's statistical results reveal a potential road map for continued cooperation between ECOWAS and the AES bloc, even in partial disunity. Shared challenges such as human trafficking, youth unemployment, and irregular migration demand collaborative solutions.

To strengthen migration governance in ways that are equitable, rights-based, and forward-looking, the recommendations outlined can offer a pivotal pathway only if the national government, ECOWAS bodies, civil society, and international partners can commit to action, accountability, and collaboration. With these in place, ECOWAS can move from fragmented efforts towards a truly integrated migration future, where mobility is safe, fair, and beneficial for all.

The recommendations presented here are grounded in evidence and shaped by the experiences of states, civil society, and communities most affected by the withdrawal. They call for pragmatic steps, bilateral and regional cooperation, strengthened protection frameworks, empowered local governance, and renewed dialogue within ECOWAS, designed to safeguard rights and restore confidence in integration. By charting both immediate actions and long-term priorities, this chapter sets out a road map for migration governance that is inclusive, resilient, and capable of withstanding political uncertainty.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The study survey was administered during a volatile and politically sensitive period. Several potential respondents, especially from government institutions and border security agencies, expressed discomfort or outright refusal to participate. This reluctance stemmed from both security concerns and fears of political reprisal, limiting our ability to fully capture all political and administrative perspectives. Furthermore, because the withdrawal process was still unfolding, many respondents, especially in official circles, were hesitant to speak definitively about policy changes. This was particularly so with ECOWAS officials, as they claim that the commission has not withdrawn its privileges from the three states, as contained in the ECOWAS press statement on 29 January 2025. As such, while the data collected reflects grounded and valuable community-level insights, it does not capture the full spectrum of institutional views or border management practices. These limitations underscore the need for continued research, more secure spaces for dialogue, and broader stakeholder engagement in future assessments.

# 7.

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## Rethinking Regional Integration and Migration Governance

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – established in 1975, evolved to adopt free movement protocol in 1975 has long implemented frameworks for mobility and regional integration that has allowed millions of West Africans to live, work and trade across borders with minimal or no visa restrictions. Now the framework faces an immense challenge by the decision of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger’s withdrawal from the regional community. The “Sahelexit” threatens the frameworks for mobility in the region and millions that depend on ability to move across borders to sustain their livelihoods. The human cost of “Sahelexit” is immediate and unevenly distributed. Migrants, traders, and displaced populations report declining livelihoods, increased exposure to exploitation, bureaucratic obstacles and reduced protection along transit while women and youth disproportionately affected. Revitalising mobility governance requires coordinated, multi-level action. Strengthening bilateral agreements, reinforcing legal protections at national level, and revitalising ECOWAS mechanisms for data harmonisation and political coordination are critical. Empowering local authorities and civil society as front-line actors, alongside international support that prioritises regional integration and rights-based mobility over security-first approaches, is essential to sustaining mobility as a pillar of trade, stability, and development in West Africa.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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