

Free Movement, Border Regimes and Political Economy of Intra-West African Mobility

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Despite decades of regional integration efforts and the formal adoption of free-movement protocols, travelling within West African states remains costly, slow, and unpredictable. This paper examines the political economy of intra-regional travel in West Africa, focusing on why mobility costs remain persistently high despite legal commitments to free movement under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It raises a pertinent question on why do the costs of intra-regional mobility in West Africa remain high despite formal free-movement commitments, and through what institutional and political mechanisms are these costs produced and sustained? Drawing on Institutional Political Economy and rent-seeking theory, the study argues that high travel costs are not merely technical or infrastructural failures but are embedded in incentive structures shaped by weak institutions, bureaucratic discretion, fragmented border governance, fiscal pressures, and security concerns. Using a qualitative-quantitative desk research design, the paper synthesizes data from World Bank corridor studies, African Development Bank and ECOWAS reports, aviation cost datasets, and peer-reviewed literature. The findings show that road travel costs are inflated by checkpoint proliferation, informal payments, and border delays; air travel is burdened by exceptionally high passenger taxes and charges; and security-related measures often function as mechanisms of rent extraction. The paper concludes that without incentive-compatible institutional reforms, particularly in border governance, corridor management, and aviation taxation, West Africa's mobility regime will continue to undermine regional integration, trade, and inclusive development.

Keywords: Political economy, regional integration, travel costs, ECOWAS, border governance, rent-seeking, West Africa.

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Introduction

Regional mobility is a fundamental pillar of economic integration, structural transformation, and social cohesion. The ability of people to move across national borders at reasonable cost facilitates labour market adjustment, trade expansion, knowledge diffusion, tourism development, and regional

political solidarity. In Africa, and particularly in West Africa, mobility has historically played a central role in economic life, predating colonial boundaries and underpinning transnational trade networks, seasonal labour migration, and cultural exchange. Recognising this reality, West African states formally committed themselves to free movement as a cornerstone of regional integration



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through the adoption of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment in 1979.

Despite this long-standing legal commitment, travelling within West African states remains expensive, slow, and unpredictable. For ordinary citizens, traders, students, professionals, and tourists, movement across the region is frequently characterised by high transport fares, multiple checkpoints, informal payments, prolonged border delays, and heightened security risks. These costs are not marginal; they significantly shape mobility decisions, constrain economic opportunities, and weaken the credibility of regional integration initiatives. In comparative terms, West Africa exhibits some of the highest intra-regional transport and transaction costs in the developing world, even when controlling for income levels and infrastructure quality (Teravaninthorn & Raballand, 2009; World Bank, 2020).

The persistence of high travel costs presents a paradox. On the one hand, West Africa is often described as one of the most mobile regions in Africa, with extensive cross-border migration and trade. On the other hand, the formal and informal costs of movement are sufficiently high to discourage lawful travel, incentivise irregular practices, and deepen inequality between those who can afford mobility and those who cannot. This paradox raises a central analytical question: why does travel within West African states remain costly despite explicit legal frameworks designed to facilitate free movement?

Much of the existing literature explains high travel costs in terms of infrastructural deficits, limited state capacity, or security challenges. Poor road quality, inadequate border facilities, limited rail connectivity, and underdeveloped aviation markets are frequently cited as primary constraints. While these factors are undeniably important, they do not provide a complete explanation. In several cases, travel costs remain high even on rehabilitated corridors and modernised border posts. Similarly, high passenger taxes and charges in aviation persist despite liberalisation commitments and improved airport

infrastructure. These patterns suggest that the problem is not merely technical but institutional and political.

This study advances a political economy interpretation of intra-regional travel in West Africa. It argues that high travel costs are best understood as outcomes of incentive structures embedded within institutions that govern borders, transport corridors, and mobility markets. From this perspective, travel costs persist not simply because states lack capacity, but because existing arrangements generate rents, distribute benefits to specific actors, and align with short-term political and fiscal interests. In other words, expensive mobility is not an accidental by-product of underdevelopment; it is, to a significant extent, an equilibrium sustained by political and economic incentives.

Borders, highways, and airports in West Africa function as critical sites where state authority, revenue generation, and security governance intersect. These sites are characterised by high levels of discretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats, immigration officers, customs officials, police, military personnel, and airport authorities, who possess significant power over the speed, cost, and ease of movement. Where oversight is weak and accountability mechanisms are limited, discretion creates opportunities for rent extraction in the form of informal payments, arbitrary fees, and selective enforcement of rules. Such practices effectively transform mobility into a monetised process in which access is negotiated rather than guaranteed.

The political economy of travel is further complicated by fiscal pressures facing West African states. Many governments rely heavily on indirect taxation and non-tax revenue sources, including fees and charges imposed on transport and travel. Aviation passenger taxes, airport charges, and corridor levies are particularly attractive because they are relatively easy to collect and can be justified as “user fees.” However, these charges often exceed cost-recovery needs and undermine demand, competition, and connectivity, particularly for intra-regional travel. Evidence shows that West Africa records the highest average passenger taxes and charges in Africa, contributing significantly to the

high cost of air travel within the region (AFRAA, 2024).

Security concerns also play a central role in shaping travel costs. The spread of violent extremism, organised crime, and political instability, particularly in parts of the Sahel has prompted states to expand security controls along roads and at borders. While enhanced security measures are often justified, they frequently result in checkpoint proliferation, longer inspection times, and increased discretion. In practice, security governance can become intertwined with rent-seeking, as additional controls create new opportunities for extraction. Thus, insecurity does not merely increase risk premiums; it can also reinforce institutional incentives that raise travel costs.

At the regional level, weak enforcement mechanisms limit the effectiveness of ECOWAS mobility frameworks. While protocols and supplementary acts establish clear rights, compliance is uneven, and sanctions for violations are minimal. National governments retain significant autonomy over border practices and frequently prioritise domestic political considerations over regional commitments. Episodes such as unilateral border closures, restrictive immigration practices, and selective enforcement of free-movement rules illustrate the fragility of regional mobility governance. These actions impose substantial costs on travellers and neighbouring states, yet they persist because the political costs of non-compliance are low.

This study situates itself at the intersection of development studies, political economy, and regional integration scholarship. It builds on Institutional Political Economy and New Institutional Economics to analyse how formal rules and informal practices interact to shape mobility outcomes. Drawing on rent-seeking theory, it conceptualises borders and corridors as spaces of economic extraction rather than neutral administrative zones. By integrating road transport, border governance, and aviation markets into a single analytical framework, the study provides a comprehensive account of why travel remains expensive across West Africa.

Regional Mobility and Travel Costs in West Africa: Conceptual Background

Mobility costs encompass more than ticket prices or fuel expenses. They include direct monetary costs, time costs, risk premiums, and opportunity costs associated with delays, uncertainty, and insecurity. In West Africa, these costs are shaped by a complex interaction of formal regulations and informal practices (Adepoju, 2011).

Dimensions of Travel Costs

Travel costs extend beyond visible transport fares to encompass a complex set of market, regulatory, fiscal, informal, and risk-related burdens. In regions such as West Africa, where institutional fragility, infrastructural deficits, and fragmented governance structures prevail, these dimensions interact to significantly elevate the cost of mobility for individuals, firms, and states.

1. **Market Costs:** Market costs represent the direct monetary expenses incurred by travelers and transport operators. These include transport fares, fuel costs, vehicle maintenance, insurance, terminal charges, and logistics-related expenses. In West Africa, market costs are unusually high due to poor road quality, limited rail connectivity, inefficient ports, and heavy dependence on imported refined petroleum products. Transport fares in the region often reflect high operating costs rather than competitive pricing. Fuel prices remain volatile, driven by exchange-rate instability, subsidy reforms, and dependence on imports, particularly in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana. Poor road infrastructure accelerates vehicle depreciation, increasing maintenance and replacement costs, which are subsequently transferred to passengers and freight users (World Bank, 2010). Additionally, weak competition in transport markets, especially in aviation and long-distance road transport, allows operators to charge monopolistic or oligopolistic fares. Intra-regional air travel within West Africa is paradoxically more

expensive than intercontinental flights due to low passenger volumes, limited carriers, and high airport handling charges (African Development Bank, 2019). Consequently, market costs constitute the most visible but not necessarily the largest component of total travel expenses.

2. Regulatory Costs: Regulatory costs arise from state-imposed rules, documentation requirements, inspections, and compliance procedures that govern cross-border and domestic travel. In West Africa, regulatory fragmentation persists despite regional integration frameworks such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Travelers are often required to present multiple documents, including passports, visas (in some cases), ECOWAS travel certificates, vehicle papers, customs forms, and health documentation. Each checkpoint introduces delays, uncertainty, and additional costs. According to the World Bank (2017), West Africa has some of the highest border-crossing times in the world, with road travelers encountering dozens of checkpoints across relatively short distances. Regulatory inefficiencies also affect aviation. Airlines face overlapping safety inspections, licensing requirements, and air-navigation charges imposed by multiple national authorities, undermining the objectives of the Yamoussoukro Decision on air transport liberalization (Bofinger, 2016). These regulatory burdens raise operational costs, discourage competition, and ultimately inflate ticket prices.

3. Fiscal Costs: Fiscal costs refer to formal taxes, levies, fees, and charges imposed by governments on transport services and travelers. These are particularly pronounced in the aviation sector, where passengers may pay multiple charges embedded in ticket prices, including airport development levies, security fees, passenger service charges, and value-added taxes. In many West African countries, governments rely heavily on the transport sector as a revenue source, often at

the expense of affordability and competitiveness. The International Air Transport Association (IATA, 2020) identifies Africa, especially West Africa as one of the most heavily taxed aviation markets globally. In some cases, taxes and charges constitute over 40 percent of the total ticket price, making air travel inaccessible to large segments of the population. Fiscal burdens also affect road transport through toll gates, vehicle licensing fees, axle-load charges, and import duties on spare parts. While such charges are justified as revenue-raising or infrastructure-maintenance measures, weak accountability and poor reinvestment undermine their developmental rationale (AfDB, 2019). Excessive fiscal costs thus function as implicit barriers to mobility and regional trade.

4. Informal Costs: Informal costs constitute one of the most politically sensitive yet economically significant dimensions of travel costs in West Africa. These include bribery, unofficial payments, extortion at checkpoints, and payments to intermediaries to facilitate movement. Road transport corridors in West Africa are notorious for dense networks of police, customs, immigration, and military checkpoints. At each point, travelers and transport operators may be compelled to make informal payments to avoid delays, harassment, or fabricated infractions. Teravaninthorn and Raballand (2009) demonstrate that such informal payments often exceed official road-use charges and disproportionately burden small traders and low-income travelers. Informal costs thrive in contexts of weak institutions, low public-sector wages, and discretionary enforcement powers. They also undermine regional integration by eroding trust in state authority and increasing transaction costs across borders (Olawale & Adepoju, 2021). From a political economy perspective, informal travel costs represent a form of decentralized rent extraction, embedded in everyday governance practices.

5. Risk and Security Costs: Risk and security costs arise from crime, conflict spillovers, terrorism, piracy, route diversions, and heightened insurance premiums. In parts of West Africa, insecurity significantly shapes travel patterns and costs, particularly along trans-Saharan routes and coastal corridors affected by piracy and militancy. Travelers and transport operators often incur additional expenses for armed escorts, private security services, or alternative routes to avoid high-risk areas. Insurance premiums for vehicles, cargo, and aviation operations rise sharply in

insecure environments, further increasing costs (Collier et al., 2003). In extreme cases, insecurity renders certain routes commercially unviable, reducing connectivity and increasing market concentration. Moreover, the perception of risk alone can suppress demand, leading to higher per-unit costs as operators spread fixed costs over fewer passengers or shipments. Thus, insecurity not only raises direct costs but also indirectly distorts transport markets and regional mobility (OECD, 2021).

Table 1. Dimensions of Travel Costs

Cost Dimension	Manifestations	Policy Implications
Market Costs	Transport fares, fuel, maintenance, insurance, terminal fees	Invest in infrastructure, promote competition, reduce fuel dependency
Regulatory Costs	Documentation requirements, inspections, border delays, compliance burdens	Streamline procedures, enhance regional integration, reduce bureaucracy
Fiscal Costs	Taxes, fees, airport levies, toll charges	Rationalize taxes, improve fiscal transparency, lower travel charges
Informal Costs	Bribery, unofficial payments, checkpoint extortion	Combat corruption, strengthen institutional oversight, enforce regulations
Risk & Security Costs	Crime, conflict zones, piracy, high insurance premiums	Enhance security, insure against risks, stabilize conflict-affected routes

Source: Author's compilation (2026).

Political economy analysis is essential because many of these costs arise from governance choices rather than market fundamentals.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Institutional Political Economy and Rent-Seeking Theory, which together

provide a robust analytical foundation for understanding the persistence of high travel costs within and across West African states. While Institutional Political Economy explains how governance structures and institutional arrangements shape transaction costs, Rent-Seeking Theory illuminates how public officials and private actors exploit these arrangements for private gain. Combined, the frameworks situate travel costs within

broader questions of power, incentives, and governance.

Institutional Political Economy

Institutional Political Economy (IPE) derives from the New Institutional Economics tradition, most prominently associated with Douglass North. North defines institutions as the “rules of the game” in a society, consisting of both formal rules (laws, constitutions, regulations) and informal constraints (norms, conventions, and enforcement practices) that structure political and economic interactions (North, 1990). The core proposition of IPE is that the quality of institutions fundamentally determines economic performance by shaping incentives and transaction costs.

From this perspective, high transaction costs arise where institutions are fragmented, weakly enforced, or characterized by overlapping mandates and discretionary authority (North, 2005). Importantly, Institutional Political Economy emphasizes that inefficient institutions often persist because they serve the interests of politically powerful actors rather than the broader public (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Applied to this study, Institutional Political Economy explains why travel within West Africa remains costly despite formal commitments to regional integration and free movement under ECOWAS protocols. Weak supranational enforcement, regulatory fragmentation among national agencies, and inconsistent application of rules across borders generate excessive delays, multiple inspections, and uncertainty for travelers (World Bank, 2017). These institutional failures translate directly into higher regulatory, fiscal, and market costs.

Moreover, IPE accounts for the persistence of high fiscal charges in transport and aviation. Transport taxes, airport levies, and tolls often reflect short-term state revenue imperatives rather than efficiency considerations. In contexts of weak institutional accountability, such revenues are rarely reinvested proportionately in infrastructure, perpetuating poor transport conditions and high operating costs (African Development Bank, 2019). Informal

practices, including bribery at checkpoints, also become institutionalized as predictable responses to dysfunctional formal systems. Thus, from an IPE standpoint, high travel costs are institutionally produced outcomes rather than technical failures.

Rent-Seeking Theory

Rent-Seeking Theory originates from public choice economics and was first analytically developed by Gordon Tullock, with its modern formulation popularized by Anne Krueger in her seminal article *The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society* (Krueger, 1974; Tullock, 1967). The theory focuses on how individuals and groups expend resources to obtain economic advantages through political or administrative manipulation rather than productive activity.

The central thesis of Rent-Seeking Theory is that state-created rents, arising from licenses, permits, taxes, regulations, and discretionary authority, encourage socially wasteful behavior that redistributes rather than creates wealth (Buchanan, Tollison, & Tullock, 1980). Rent-seeking thrives in environments characterized by extensive regulation, weak oversight, and discretionary enforcement powers.

In the context of this study, Rent-Seeking Theory provides a compelling explanation for the prevalence of informal travel costs in West Africa. The proliferation of checkpoints along major transport corridors creates repeated opportunities for rent extraction by law enforcement and regulatory officials. Informal payments demanded from travelers are systematic and predictable, reflecting entrenched rent-seeking equilibria rather than isolated acts of corruption (Teravaninthorn & Raballand, 2009).

Rent-seeking dynamics also help explain why regulatory complexity persists. Multiple documentation requirements, repeated inspections, and opaque procedures generate artificial delays that incentivize travelers to pay bribes or intermediaries to facilitate movement. At higher institutional levels, restrictive aviation policies, excessive taxation, and barriers to market entry protect politically connected

firms and bureaucratic interests, resulting in limited competition and persistently high travel costs (IATA, 2020). Inefficiency, therefore, functions as a source of rents, not a policy failure.

Theoretical Synthesis

Taken together, Institutional Political Economy explains how weak and fragmented institutions structure incentives and generate high transaction costs, while Rent-Seeking Theory explains how actors exploit these institutional weaknesses for private gain. The interaction of institutional failure and rent-seeking behavior transforms travel into a site of extraction rather than facilitation. Consequently, high travel costs in West Africa are best understood as outcomes of deeply embedded political, institutional, and incentive-based dynamics rather than purely infrastructural or logistical constraints.

Borders and Corridor-as-governed space

Treating borders and corridors as political-economic spaces becomes especially concrete when we examine two of West Africa's most consequential mobility routes: the Lagos-Abidjan coastal corridor and the Dakar-Bamako corridor. In both cases, travel is shaped by (i) how the state projects authority along space, (ii) how security rationales expand controls, and (iii) how revenue generation and rent extraction become embedded in routine movement.

Lagos-Abidjan Corridor (Nigeria-Benin-Togo-Ghana-Côte d'Ivoire)

(a) Corridor-as-governed space: "many states within the state"

Empirically, the Lagos-Abidjan axis illustrates how a corridor becomes an elongated administrative space characterised by repeated state encounters. Rather than a single border event, travelers experience serial regulation through checkpoints and agency overlaps involving police, customs, immigration, and other enforcement bodies. A World Bank study on West African corridors documents that numerous checkpoints along the Ghana-Togo-

Benin coastal stretch obstruct the effective functioning of the wider Abidjan-Lagos corridor, increasing travel time and transaction costs (World Bank, 2021).

Similarly, the OECD emphasises that checkpoints and enforcement practices along the coastal corridor constitute major obstacles to corridor performance and border efficiency. These practices transform mobility into a negotiated process, rather than a straightforward right of passage, reflecting deep institutional fragmentation (OECD, 2019).

(b) Mobility is monetised: formal charges and informal extraction

The political economy of the Lagos-Abidjan corridor is sustained by a dual system of monetisation:

- Formal monetisation, including official tolls, port and terminal charges, transit fees, and border-related service costs borne by transport operators and travelers.
- Informal monetisation, involving unofficial payments linked to discretionary enforcement, "facilitation," and bargaining at checkpoints.

The policy salience of these informal costs is reflected in World Bank corridor-governance documents that explicitly target the removal of unauthorised checkpoints and improved inter-agency coordination along the Abidjan-Lagos corridor—indicating that informal payments are not incidental but structurally embedded in corridor governance (World Bank, 2022).

(c) Border reforms and the political character of the corridor

The Abidjan-Lagos corridor has been a focal point of regional trade and transit facilitation initiatives precisely because border frictions and checkpoint governance undermine ECOWAS integration objectives. Regional policy documents highlight corridor programmes that combine infrastructure rehabilitation with regulatory and procedural reforms, underscoring that the binding constraint to mobility lies not only in road quality but also in the rules and practices governing movement (UNECA, 2013).

Overall, the Lagos-Abidjan corridor exemplifies how institutional fragmentation produces (1) repeated negotiation points, (2) predictable opportunities for rent extraction, and (3) persistent price inflation beyond what infrastructure deficits alone would predict (World Bank, 2021).

Dakar-Bamako Corridor (Senegal-Mali)

(a) Corridor governance and competing interests

The Dakar-Bamako corridor is widely analysed as a strategic regional artery where multiple actors' interests, state agencies, transport unions, brokers, and security forces, intersect. Rather than operating as a neutral logistics channel, the corridor functions as a politically governed space. A detailed study by the European Centre for Development Policy Management foregrounds the role of "actors and interests" along the corridor and documents how governance practices shape costs, incentives, and bargaining outcomes (Byiers, 2022).

(b) Monetisation of "harassment": bribes as a measurable cost component

Evidence on the Dakar-Bamako corridor is unusually explicit regarding the scale of informal costs. ECDPM analysis shows that:

- bribes can constitute a substantial share of total transport costs in certain commodity flows, particularly livestock; and
- harassment and informal payments significantly increase the cost of moving goods along segments linked to the Bamako corridor system (Byiers, 2022).

Independent corridor assessments further quantify the governance burden along routes serving Bamako, documenting high densities of controls and systematic bribery at checkpoints (tralac, 2016). This makes the Dakar-Bamako corridor a clear empirical case of mobility being priced through repeated interactions with authority.

(c) Security rationales and corridor "thickening"

The Dakar-Bamako corridor also illustrates how corridors can "thicken" under security rationales. In response to regional insecurity, states intensify controls, resulting in more checkpoints, longer travel times, and higher uncertainty. World Bank Independent Evaluation Group assessments of transport and transit projects in West Africa demonstrate that increased security checkpoints are associated with longer delays and higher transport costs, illustrating how security imperatives directly translate into mobility constraints (IEG World Bank, 2018).

Taken together, the Dakar-Bamako corridor strongly supports the argument that corridors function as contested political-economic spaces, where regulation and security practices simultaneously reinforce formal state presence and informal income streams, raising generalised travel costs and distorting regional integration outcomes (Byiers, 2022).

Implications for the High Travel Costs Argument

Across both corridors, a consistent empirical pattern emerges:

1. Institutional multiplication, involving multiple agencies with overlapping mandates, produces delays and uncertainty (World Bank, 2021).
2. Revenue imperatives generate layered formal charges, including tolls, levies, and border fees (UNECA, 2013).
3. Rent extraction transforms corridor governance into a "market for movement," where time and passage are monetised through informal payments (Byiers, 2022).
4. Security intensification thickens corridors, increasing controls and raising travel costs (IEG World Bank, 2018).

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Lagos–Abidjan and Dakar–Bamako Corridors

Empirical evidence underscores that borders and transport corridors in West Africa function as political–economic spaces where mobility is monetized through extensive controls and informal payments, leading to significant delays and costs (Byiers, 2022; Lebrand, 2021). A comparative analysis of the Lagos–Abidjan and Dakar–Bamako corridors highlights the political and economic dimensions of these transit routes (ECDPM, 2022; Lebrand, 2021; OECD, 2019; tralac, 2016; UNECA, 2013), World Bank, 2018, 2022; World Bank, 2018).

	Lagos–Abidjan (Nigeria–Benin–Togo–Ghana–Côte d’Ivoire)	
	Lagos–Abidjan (Nigeria–Benin–Togo–Ghana–Côte d’Ivoire)	Dakar–Bamako (Senegal–Mali)
Number of Controls	60+ checkpoints and stops (OECD, 2019; Lebrand, 2021)	25+ stops (tralac, 2016; ECDPM, 2022) World Bank, 2018)
Average Delay	4–7 hours (UNECA, 2013; Lebrand, 2021)	Over four stops on average (World Bank, 2018)
Bribe Exposure	Systemic (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2022)	Informal payments can reach \$40 per trip (ECDPM, 2022)
Policy Responses	Critical facilitation focused on removing checkpoints and standardizing documentary requirements (UNECA, 2013)	Persistent border informality with limited reform at controls (tralac, 2016; World Bank, 2018; ECDPM, 2022)

Sources: Byiers (2022), Lebrand (2021), tralac (2016, 2018), OECD (2019), UNECA (2013), World Bank (2018, 2022).

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative–quantitative desk research design (also described as documentary or secondary-data mixed-methods design) to examine the political economy of travel costs within and across West African states. The design is appropriate because the study’s core interest is not individual travel attitudes or micro-level preferences, but how institutional arrangements, enforcement practices, and policy regimes structure the costs of mobility at borders and along corridors. Political economy research commonly relies on comparative institutional evidence, documentary records, and aggregated indicators to explain systemic outcomes, especially where the mechanisms of interest are embedded in state structures and regulatory environments rather than in household behaviour (Rodrik, 2004; Hall & Taylor, 1996).

The study integrates two complementary logics. First, it uses qualitative institutional analysis to

interpret how rules, agencies, and enforcement practices shape transaction costs, consistent with New Institutional Economics, which treats institutions as the “rules of the game” that structure incentives and economic performance (North, 1990, 2005). Second, it employs quantitative descriptive synthesis to compare corridor performance indicators (e.g., controls/checkpoints, delays, compliance burdens) and cost components (e.g., fees, taxes, charges) across routes and countries, drawing on standardized evidence from multilateral and regional organizations. This combined approach supports what comparative political economy seeks to do: link observed cost outcomes to institutional mechanisms that produce and reproduce them over time (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

In operational terms, the desk design is advantageous for a West African, multi-country study for three reasons. (1) It enables systematic comparison across corridors and states using harmonised sources (e.g., World Bank corridor diagnostics) that would be difficult to replicate through surveys alone. (2) It

allows the study to incorporate evidence across transport modes, road corridors and aviation, thereby capturing the full political economy of mobility costs. (3) It reduces risks of measurement error that can occur when sensitive issues such as bribery and informal payments are collected only through direct questioning, where under-reporting is common (Teravaninthorn & Raballand, 2009). However, because secondary evidence varies in methods and time coverage, the design requires careful triangulation and transparent synthesis procedures, which the study adopts as part of its analytical protocol (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively from secondary sources selected for (i) institutional credibility, (ii) methodological transparency, and (iii) relevance to corridor performance and travel-cost structure. Four source clusters guided data collection:

1. World Bank and African Development Bank corridor and transport studies: These documents provide corridor performance evidence (e.g., checkpoint densities, border processing constraints, transit bottlenecks), institutional diagnostics, and evaluation reports that link governance arrangements to mobility outcomes (World Bank, 2018; African Development Bank, 2019). World Bank corridor work is particularly useful because it frequently integrates measurement with institutional interpretation, allowing direct engagement with the study's political economy questions.
2. ECOWAS and African Union mobility and integration reports: These documents were used to identify the formal institutional architecture governing mobility, including protocols and implementation guidance on free movement, border cooperation, and harmonisation of procedures. Such sources are essential for tracing the gap between formal commitments and corridor realities (African Union, 2018; ECOWAS Commission, 2016).

3. AFRAA aviation cost and policy reports/datasets: Aviation evidence was incorporated to capture the fiscal and regulatory determinants of air-travel costs, especially taxes, fees, and charges that shape intra-regional ticket pricing. AFRAA's policy work provides sector-specific documentation of cost structures and regulatory barriers that influence air connectivity in Africa (AFRAA, 2020).
4. Peer-reviewed academic literature: Journal articles and scholarly books were used to (a) ground the theoretical framework, (b) supply comparative insights on corridors, informal payments, and transaction costs, and (c) guide analytical categories for cost decomposition (North, 1990, 2005; Buchanan, Tollison, & Tullock, 1980; Teravaninthorn & Raballand, 2009; Byiers, 2022).

Data extraction and organisation

To ensure systematic collection, the study employed a structured extraction procedure. For each document or dataset, the following information was extracted and recorded:

- Document metadata: authoring institution, year, geographic scope, transport mode, and corridor coverage.
- Institutional variables: number and type of agencies at borders, stated mandates, procedural steps, inspection regimes, and policy reforms.
- Performance indicators: reported checkpoint density, processing time/delays, corridor "frictions," and qualitative descriptions of enforcement practices.
- Cost variables: fees, levies, toll charges, taxes (especially aviation taxes/charges), and where documented, informal payment exposure.
- Policy responses: corridor governance reforms, one-stop border initiatives,

harmonisation efforts, and anti-harassment/checkpoint reduction measures.

Because sources differ in the indicators they report, the study treated corridor evidence as comparative rather than strictly uniform. Where exact numeric indicators were unavailable, the study used institutional proxies (e.g., documented “high checkpoint density,” repeated inspections, or routine facilitation payments) while maintaining clear source attribution. This approach aligns with comparative institutional research methods in political economy, which emphasise mechanism identification and triangulation over single-source precision (Rodrik, 2004; Yin, 2018).

Triangulation and quality control

Given the mixed quality of some corridor and governance data in developing contexts, the study applied three quality-control steps:

1. Source triangulation: Key claims (e.g., prevalence of controls and informal payments) were validated by referencing at least two independent sources where possible (World Bank, 2018; Teravaninthorn & Raballand, 2009; Byiers, 2022).
2. Institutional consistency checks: Reported practices were checked against the formal mandates and protocols documented in ECOWAS/AU materials to interpret whether observed outcomes reflected implementation gaps or policy design problems (African Union, 2018; ECOWAS Commission, 2016).
3. Mode triangulation: Road-corridor evidence was compared with aviation fiscal and regulatory evidence to identify whether high costs reflect a general institutional pattern (e.g., layered fees and discretionary enforcement) across mobility systems (AFRAA, 2020).

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two integrated phases, thematic synthesis and cost decomposition to link institutions to travel-cost outcomes.

1. Thematic synthesis (institutional mechanisms)

Qualitative evidence was analysed through thematic synthesis, following established guidance for identifying patterns across documents and constructing analytically meaningful categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study coded texts for recurring institutional and governance themes that directly generate costs, including:

- Institutional fragmentation and agency overlap (multiple agencies exercising authority over the same mobility space);
- Regulatory multiplicity (documentation requirements, repeated inspections, procedural duplication);
- Discretionary enforcement (variable application of rules, bargaining at controls);
- Informal extraction (unofficial payments, “facilitation,” checkpoint harassment);
- Fiscal extraction regimes (tolls, levies, airport fees, taxes and charges);
- Security rationales (expansion of controls and corridor “thickening” under insecurity);
- Reform responses (one-stop borders, checkpoint reduction initiatives, harmonisation measures).

Coding was conducted iteratively: preliminary codes were developed from the theoretical framework (institutions, transaction costs, rent-seeking), then refined through repeated reading and cross-source comparison to ensure they accurately captured corridor realities (North, 1990, 2005). This procedure allows the study to specify causal pathways, for example, how agency overlap produces delay, how delay enables discretionary extraction, and how informal payments become institutionalised routines.

2. Cost decomposition (mapping institutions to cost categories)

To connect institutional themes to measurable outcomes, the study applied cost decomposition, disaggregating travel costs into analytically distinct components and linking each to institutional drivers. Building on corridor and transport-cost approaches widely used in African corridor research (Teravaninthorn & Raballand, 2009; World Bank, 2018), the study decomposed costs into:

- Market costs (fares, fuel, maintenance, insurance, terminal/handling costs);
- Regulatory costs (documentation burdens, inspection delays, compliance steps);
- Fiscal costs (taxes, tolls, levies, airport charges, passenger service fees);
- Informal costs (bribery and facilitation payments, payments to intermediaries);
- Risk and security costs (route diversions, extra checks, insurance premiums).

The analytical aim was not merely to list costs, but to show how institutional arrangements generate each cost category. For example, repeated controls and procedural duplication increase regulatory costs through delays and lost time; discretionary enforcement turns regulatory steps into opportunities for informal payments; and layered state charges raise fiscal costs, especially visible in aviation cost structures (AFRAA, 2020). Where numeric cost breakdowns were available (e.g., aviation taxes/charges), these were summarised descriptively and compared across contexts; where only

qualitative evidence existed (e.g., “systemic bribery”), the study treated the evidence as indicative of high informal-cost exposure while maintaining strict source attribution.

Comparative institutional interpretation

Finally, the study employed a comparative institutional interpretation to explain variation across corridors and countries. Comparative political economy emphasises that outcomes differ not only because of infrastructure, but because of how institutions distribute authority and incentives (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Accordingly, the study compares evidence across corridors to identify recurring patterns, such as high checkpoint densities, inconsistent protocol enforcement, and layered charges, and interprets them as manifestations of institutional fragmentation and rent-seeking equilibria, rather than isolated “implementation failures.

Findings

Road Travel, Checkpoints, and Informal Payments

Road travel remains the dominant mode of intra-regional movement in West Africa. However, highways are characterised by excessive checkpoints operated by multiple agencies.

Table 3: Average Number of Checkpoints per 100 km on Selected West African Corridors

S.No.	Corridor	Checkpoints
1	Lagos-Abidjan	7-10
2	Dakar – Bamako	6-8
3	Lome – Niamey	8-11

Source: Teravaninthorn & Raballand (2009); World Bank (2020)

Each checkpoint increases both time delays and the likelihood of informal payments.

Table 4: Estimated Informal Payments per Long-Distance Road Trip (USD)

S.No.	Route	Total Informal Payments
1	Abidjan – Bamako	143
2	Dakar – Bamako	134
3	Lomé – Ouagadougou	30

Source: JICA (2013); World Bank (2020)

These costs are often transferred to passengers through higher fares, functioning as a hidden tax on mobility (Olken & Barron, 2009).

Border Delays as Time Taxes

Border delays impose significant opportunity costs even where formal fees are minimal.

Table 5: Average Border Delay Times

S/No.	Border Post	Delay (Hours)
1.	Seme (Nigeria - Benin)	6-12
2.	Paga – Dakola (Ghana – Burkina Faso)	4 – 8

Source: World Bank (2020)

Delays increase accommodation, food, and income-loss costs, reinforcing incentives to pay bribes to accelerate processing.

Aviation Costs and Passenger Charges

West Africa is the most expensive African sub-region for aviation passenger taxes and charges.

Table 6: Average Passenger Taxes and Charges by Sub-Region (USD)

S/No.	Sub-Region	Average
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1	West Africa	109.5
2	East Africa	80.2
3	Southern Africa	73.1

Source: AFRAA (2024)

High charges reduce demand, limit competition, and inflate fares, undermining regional connectivity.

Security and Political Shocks

Security challenges in the Sahel have increased controls and costs.

Table 7: Security-Related Travel Cost Drivers

S/No.	Factor	Cost Effect
1.	Additional checkpoints	Higher bribes
2.	Route diversions	Fuel and time costs
3.	Border closures	Fare spikes

Source: OECD/SWAC (2025)

While security concerns are legitimate, weak oversight allows them to become mechanisms of rent extraction.

Discussion

The findings confirm that high travel costs in West Africa are institutional outcomes. Discretion, fragmented governance, fiscal pressures, and security concerns interact to sustain a high-cost equilibrium. As North (1990) emphasises, such equilibria persist when reform threatens entrenched interests.

Regional institutions lack effective enforcement mechanisms, and national governments often prioritise short-term fiscal or political gains over long-term integration benefits. Consequently, mobility remains constrained despite formal commitments. Travelling within West Africa remains costly not because integration has failed on paper, but because institutional incentives continue to reward restriction over facilitation. Addressing these political economy constraints is essential if regional mobility is to contribute meaningfully to development, inclusion, and stability.

Recommendations

1. Governments in the region should reduce excessive administrative discretion at border points by adopting digitised border management systems and enforcing transparent operational rules. The deployment of electronic platforms for passport control, visa processing, customs declarations, and traveller verification would standardise procedures and ensure that decisions are guided by automated protocols rather than the subjective judgement of individual officials. Such digitisation should be complemented by the public dissemination of clear regulations regarding travel requirements, official fees, and processing procedures. This approach would enhance accountability, minimise opportunities for corruption and informal charges, improve efficiency in border management, and ultimately reduce the cost, delays, and uncertainty associated with intra-regional travel.

2. Governments within the region should expand the establishment of one-stop border posts and strengthen integrated corridor management systems along major transnational transport routes. One-stop border posts allow border control agencies of neighbouring countries to operate jointly within a single facility, enabling travellers and goods to undergo exit and entry procedures at one location rather than at separate checkpoints. This arrangement significantly reduces duplication of documentation, long waiting times, and administrative bottlenecks that often increase travel costs. In addition, integrated corridor management, through coordinated customs procedures, shared information systems, and harmonised regulatory standards, can improve the efficiency of cross-border transport networks. By promoting inter-agency and cross-border cooperation, these measures would streamline border processes, enhance trade and mobility within the region, and lower the financial and time costs associated with travelling across borders.

3. Governments in West Africa should rationalise aviation taxes and charges while strengthening commitments to air transport liberalisation in order to reduce the high cost of regional air travel. Many

intra-regional flights remain expensive due to multiple layers of taxes, airport charges, and regulatory fees imposed by national authorities, which significantly increase ticket prices for passengers. Rationalising these taxes by streamlining and reducing overlapping levies would lower operational costs for airlines and make air travel more affordable. At the same time, deeper implementation of air transport liberalization, through policies that promote open skies, fair competition among airlines, and easier market entry, would increase the number of carriers operating within the region. Greater competition and reduced fiscal burdens on airlines would expand connectivity, improve service efficiency, and ultimately make intra-regional travel more accessible and cost-effective.

4. Governments in the region should shift from the widespread proliferation of physical checkpoints along transport corridors to intelligence-led security cooperation among relevant agencies. The current reliance on numerous checkpoints often results in delays, increased travel costs, and opportunities for informal payments without necessarily improving security outcomes. An intelligence-driven approach would instead prioritise information sharing, joint surveillance systems, and coordinated operations among border security agencies, police, and immigration authorities across neighbouring states. By focusing on risk assessment, data exchange, and targeted enforcement rather than routine stoppages, security institutions can identify genuine threats more effectively while allowing legitimate travellers and transport operators to move more freely. This shift would enhance regional security efficiency while simultaneously reducing travel delays and the economic burden associated with excessive checkpoint controls.

5. Member states should strengthen the enforcement capacity and compliance monitoring mechanisms of the Economic Community of West African States to ensure that regional agreements on free movement and mobility are effectively implemented. Although protocols on free movement exist, weak monitoring

and limited enforcement often allow national authorities to deviate from agreed rules through excessive border controls, informal charges, or restrictive administrative practices. Enhancing ECOWAS' institutional capacity, through stronger compliance review systems, periodic monitoring of member states, and the establishment of clear reporting and accountability frameworks, would help ensure that states adhere to their commitments. In addition, empowering ECOWAS institutions to work closely with national governments, transport unions, and civil society organisations can improve transparency and policy coordination. Strengthened enforcement and monitoring would therefore reduce policy gaps between regional commitments and actual practice, thereby facilitating smoother and more predictable mobility across West Africa.

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