



Externally Driven Border Control in West Africa: Local Impact and Broader Ramifications

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Abstract

Over the last two decades and with notable increase since 2015, millions of euros have been invested in territorial border governance in West Africa. Targeting migration policy frameworks, capacity building, and the provision of material, the EU and individual European states have sought to improve control mechanisms along these vast and porous borders. This article explores the local impact and broader ramifications of primarily externally funded policy efforts as they are implemented along Ghana's three international borders with Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire, and Togo. Drawing on observations at official checkpoints and interviews with border control officers and border crossers, the article finds that recent initiatives have facilitated the modernization, expansion, and professionalization of border control. Yet, these enhancements have concurrently led to increased reliance on external support, altered local social relations in border checkpoint areas, and triggered the criminalization of legal emigration. The article situates these developments within its geopolitical landscape, illustrating how externally driven migration governance, when detached from local realities, yields both immediate and far-reaching ramifications. Drawing on and extending critical migration governance analysis and border theory, this study underscores the importance of scrutinizing not only explicit, but also the more subtle and rippling effects of European externalization policies in Africa, as they extend beyond local contexts to influence wider societal structures.

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Introduction

West African and European states collaborate on a range of migration and border control initiatives, many of which fall under the umbrella term of “externalization policies” (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). Such policies reflect longstanding priorities but rising anti-immigration sentiments across Europe and security concerns in the Sahel have intensified efforts to strengthen West African border control. Although West African states long have worked toward free regional mobility in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), policymakers have steadily reoriented regional borderwork to deter what is often labeled “irregular migration” from, and within, the region (see, e.g., Adam et al. 2020; Frowd 2022; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022). Rooted in the arbitrary divisions imposed by European colonizers, disrespecting geographic and cultural dynamics, many African borders today remain highly permeable. This persistent porosity underscores how the colonial legacy still complicates African border and migration management. While sound border control represents a key priority for many West African governments, postcolonial critiques underscore how current externalization initiatives extend historical power imbalances, recasting European strategies to border control in Africa as a mode of neocolonial influence (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Gaibazzi 2023; Xanthopoulou 2024).

With this political backdrop, I set out to untangle the local implications of recent border control strengthening. These initiatives are primarily externally initiated and funded through EU funds or European states’ aid budgets, though largely implemented by international organizations and West African agencies (Lavenex 2016). To understand how border control officers and border crossers experience these initiatives, I draw on fieldwork along the Ghana-Côte D’Ivoire, Ghana-Burkina Faso, and Ghana-Togo borders, focusing on reflections, practices, and local navigations of current border control as implemented by the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS).

Doing so, this article sheds light on how border strengthening is felt on the ground within the broader context of European externalization governance in Africa. Drawing on a theoretical-analytical framework informed by critical migration governance analysis and border theory, I delve into the local implications of these externally driven border control measures. This analysis highlights the modernization, expansion, and professionalization of the Ghanaian border agency, but also reveals the more subtle and rippling consequences of these measures, including increased reliance on external funding, shifts in local border dynamics, and the criminalization of legal emigration.

After presenting relevant research discourses on externalization, the article’s analytical approach and my research methods, I briefly outline migration and border control in West Africa and Ghana. The main analysis then targets external border

control initiatives in GIS and the interlinked implications as experienced by border controllers and border crossers. In conclusion, I situate the article in relation to current geopolitical dynamics, underscore the cross-scalar and broader ramifications of my findings, and reflect on the necessity of a critical and localized approach in research on European externalization policy in Africa.

European Externalization Policies in Africa

European externalization policies have become a key focus area in the discourse on African migration and migration governance. Advancing an Afrocentric perspective, alternative conceptualizations may refer to this as external interventions or — as in the title of this article — externally driven migration governance. These terms broadly refer to foreign states and institutions' attempts to govern migration beyond their own borders by funding and collaborating with states and nonstate actors in Africa (see, e.g., Cobarrubias et al. 2023). Within this realm, the boundaries between development assistance and security interventions are blurred, since a wide spectrum of measures is encompassed by the externalization agenda, including changes in states' laws and regulations, direct border control practices, and rescue, return, or development initiatives (Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022; Zanker and Altrogge 2022).

Over the past two decades and with a greater uptick since 2015, a vast cross-disciplinary literature has emerged, examining the foundations, content, and rationale of European externalization policy in Africa (see, e.g., Hyndman and Mountz 2008; Bialasiewicz 2012; Lavenex 2016; Martins and Strange 2019). This literature has largely taken a critical standpoint, problematizing the unequal power dynamics and harsh conditionalities imposed on partnership countries, while also exposing the agency and resistance of state actors and civil society groups (see, e.g., El Qadim 2017; Moutaah 2019; Frowd 2022). The evolution of this line of research may be seen as moving from preliminary focus on European governments' policy rationale and decisions, to practices of exporting migration and border controls (see, e.g., Lavenex and Uçarer 2004; Gibney 2005), up to examining collaborative policy making processes. In these more recent studies, both European and African perspectives are accounted for, and findings show that EU-driven migration policy initiatives and African policy responses often are mutually constitutive (see, e.g., Lixi 2019; Adam et al. 2020; Triandafyllidou 2020). Studies in this area have provided rich analyses on global and domestic dynamics, revealing that policies designed in one context and exported to another do not have straightforward outcomes (Gazzotti, Moutaah, and Natter 2022; Zanker and Altrogge 2022).

Evolving further, another strand of research has sought to evaluate the impact of externalization policies. These studies have highlighted its explicit impact, or lack thereof, on migration patterns, often in line with established debates on policy successfulness (see, e.g., Raineri 2018; Bøås 2021; Hahonou and Olsen 2021); a general lack of local implementation of policies on paper, as often observed with

readmission agreements (Zanker 2019; Stutz and Trauner 2022); but also other societal dynamics affected by these policies (Norman 2020; Vammen, Cold-Ravnkilde, and Lucht 2022). Examples in the latter, third, tranche include political implications, such as the growing diplomatic leverage of neighboring gatekeeper countries (Ferrer-Gallardo and Gabrielli 2022); alterations in democratization processes (Faustini-Torres 2020); other societal concerns or wider consequences, such as impacts on the environment (Chemlali 2023); undermining of regional free movement in ECOWAS (Castillejo 2019); and reinforcement of gender-based violence (Tyszler 2019).

Targeting border control specifically, anthropological as well as securitization studies have pointed to a range of counterproductive consequences, including illegal trade and smuggling practices (Andersson 2016; Lucht 2022), and increased vulnerabilities created for individuals, including alterations in migrants' rights and risks (see, e.g., Lemberg-Pedersen 2015; Cold-Ravnkilde and Jacobsen 2020). Drawing on critical and poststructuralist border theory, including Rumford's notion of "borderwork" (2006), such complexities have been analyzed through a shift in perspective: from viewing borders as static, territorial lines to recognizing them as dynamic, socially constructed spaces, shaped by global social, economic, and political relations, including European externalization policies (Frowd 2022).

A Critical Approach to the Implications of Externalization

Synthesizing insights on European externalization policies in Africa reveals not only a broad range of policy implications but also a diversity of conceptualizations used to capture them. Terms range from straightforward descriptors such as "impact" and "consequences" to more nuanced terminologies, including metaphors such as "felt" externalization, "borderwork creep," "knock-on," and "rippling" effects (see, e.g., Bøås 2021; Frowd 2022; Augustova, Farrand-Carrapico, and Obradovic-Wochnik 2023; Chemlali 2023). These approaches suggest and theorize consequences that extend beyond the immediate impact of policy, much like ripples extending from a stone cast into water — initially striking but gradually extending outward, across scales, into more subtle and far-reaching societal effects.

Similar to the diversity in conceptualizations, which may be linked to the various methodological and disciplinary approaches within this field, the implications pointed to also manifest in various forms. Direct and indirect, positive and negative, and intended and unintended implications of externalization policies influence individuals, societies, and political structures across different scales and geographies. To understand the analytical and theoretical implications of such research findings, it is helpful to contrast these patterns with the more explicit effects found in traditional migration policy analysis. Although there are similarities, significant differences emerge. This, I argue, highlights the unique challenges and wider implications of externally driven migration governance, which underscores the need for a critical analytical approach.

Over the past 20 years, migration policy research has primarily focused on the alignment of policy impact with its stated objectives. Early analyses often dichotomized outcomes into policies effective at controlling immigration and those considered failures (Cornelius, Martin, and Hollifield 1994). Since this binary framework did not capture the nuance or breadth of policy impact, theoretical developments pushed the analytical frontier beyond this debate (see, e.g., Castles 2004; Boswell 2007). One approach to this has been the focus on policy gaps, used to understand migration policy ineffectiveness. These gaps may involve discrepancies between policy intentions and narratives (discourse gaps), divergences between written policies and their execution (implementation gaps), and conflicting goals that hinder effective policy implementation (efficacy gaps) (Czaika and de Haas 2013). Additionally, studies drawing on implementation research have explored different challenges with migration policy, and among others highlighted the crucial role of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010), emphasizing how their discretion and agency at the front lines can significantly shape the outcomes of migration policies (Bonjour 2011; Borrelli 2018).

Alongside these developments, a more critical perspective has emerged in migration governance research, influenced by the globalization and politicization of migration, and the reflexive turn in migration studies. This approach, which emphasizes the role of power and ideology, can be understood through the conceptualization of governance as provided by Carmel (2019) and Carmel et al. (2022). Governance is seen here as a collection of “practices of governing” that include efforts to simplify and regularize migration. These activities are seen as fundamentally political, and even when framed in universal or problem-solving terms, policies are understood as entrenched in power relations and social disputes.

Going back to the externalization research, it becomes clear that assessments of policy implications require multidimensional and political analysis. Indeed, the findings of many of the studies referred to above reflect complications that arguably arise from unequal geopolitical hierarchies and colonial legacies (Gaibazzi 2023). This suggests that outcomes are shaped not just by the array of actors and implementation gaps, but more profoundly by disparities in underlying aims and the superficial nature of partnerships. These policies are not developed from the ground up by those they affect, but are imposed top-down as part of an external initiative to govern migration. Externalization policies are also shaped by Eurocentric narratives on African migration — narratives that are not necessarily shared in local African contexts where policies are effectuated (Talleraas 2024).

These reflections resonate with Bacchi’s (2009) framework for critical policy analysis, calling for scrutiny by examining how problems are represented within policies. According to Bacchi, the way a problem is defined in a policy exposes underlying assumptions and steers potential solutions. This reflection is particularly pertinent to externalization policies; as the representation of what constitutes a problem varies significantly between the policy’s origin (European policymakers) and its place of implementation (African local contexts), this discrepancy is likely to lead to both explicit and more subtle local implications, beyond the formally stated policy aims.

This critical approach to understand such patterns also reminisces border theory and border regime research, where a focus on the spatial and scalar dimensions of borders — where local, national, and global dynamics intersect — reveals how external interventions may exacerbate existing inequalities and reinforce neocolonial power structures (Rumford 2012; El Qadim 2017; Sadiq and Tsourapas, 2021; Frowd 2022). Such divides between the original policy intentions and realities on the ground underscore the need to examine the local impact of these policies, and how these ripple beyond immediate changes in border control and local dynamics, also to affect wider social structures.

Indeed, if we reconceptualize the border not as a mere line, but as a space (Green 2012; Kaşlı 2023), we can see how the border is shaped by, and shapes, material and political circumstances. The physical practices of bordering and migration control on the ground, combined with these circumstances, condition different mobility patterns and local social dynamics, which again may ripple outward, impacting broader and structural dynamics such as state sovereignty and the nature of state power (Vigneswaran and Quirk 2015).

This article does not delve into policy design and collaboration processes, but analyze the implications of border control strengthening in West Africa. I see these elements as crucial backdrops. Moreover, the aim of establishing causality in such discussions comes with a risk of oversimplification, and some of the on-ground realities revealed in my analysis are dynamically shaped and not solely the result of the policies themselves. Yet, for analytical purposes, it is important to highlight the connection between the policies in question and the following changes on the ground. Such an endeavor is especially justifiable given the geopolitical landscape, driven by historically rooted power inequalities, surrounding these policies. Any potential aversive implications and on-the-ground challenges resulting from European policies in Africa are of crucial importance to disclose and unravel. From this standpoint, I herein build on previous findings concerning the broader implications of European externalization governance in Africa, in combination with approaches from border theory and critical migration governance research. Taken together, these insights form the foundation of the article's theoretical-analytical framework, which critically analyzes both the explicit impact and the more subtle, rippling effects of externally driven border control in West Africa. This framework facilitates an understanding of how external interventions extend across scales, producing local as well as far-reaching ramifications.

Methods and Data

The research this article draws on was conducted in Ghana in October–November 2022 and May 2023. It centered on in-depth interviews spanning various tiers of Ghanaian migration governance; in total, 65 interviews captured insights ranging from top-level policymakers to grassroots practitioners. Twenty individual interviews and four group discussions were carried out with individuals who were, in

different ways, targeted by migration policy mechanisms. While the study draws on the totality of the data gathered, this article's empirical grounding comes primarily from interviews and observations carried out along the Ghana-Côte D'Ivoire, Ghana-Burkina Faso, and Ghana-Togo borders. Primarily collected in May 2023, these first-hand narratives are the linchpin around which other data sources revolve to provide a holistic understanding of border strengthening processes.

Data collection at the borders included eight formal interviews and several informal conversations with GIS officers working at six border checkpoints. I observed border control practices and was guided by officers to tour the GIS premises, walk along the borders, and cross the borders to observe processes and meet with officers on the opposite side (Togo and Burkina Faso only). I held two group interviews with local border residents and several informal conversations with border crossers and taxi drivers. Additional informal conversations were carried out at two popular unauthorized routes. Due to security concerns, more interviews were carried out along Ghana's border with Togo than Burkina Faso or Côte D'Ivoire. Some interviews with border officers were not recorded but documented through note-taking, which I expanded postinterview to capture key details. Given the low number of interviewees, I have not been able to compare border control practices across these six locations in detail. My observations and interactions were instead focused on understanding the overall dynamics at the Ghanaian borders and the specific work at each site, without drawing direct comparisons.

With one exception, I personally observed and spent some time at all the border checkpoints. I conducted most of the interviews myself, together with a research assistant, but one was a collaborative effort with another researcher. Twelve other officers, who at the time were not stationed at the borders, offered invaluable historical and operational insights owing to their vast tenured experience within GIS. One expert interview with a professor working on Ghanaian borderlands provided contextual foundation. Such perspectives added depth to my understanding of border dynamics and policies. My analysis also relied on close readings of GIS strategic plans (2011–2015; 2021–2022; 2023–2029), GIS annual reports (2006–2016), Ghana's Ministry of the Interior's budget for migration and border management (2019–2022), and current and archived versions of the GIS official website. Together, these readings provided a comprehensive view of border control practices as officially reported by GIS over two decades.

The study acknowledges potential biases in the research process. As a European-based researcher inquiring into border control practices and initiatives partly supported by European funding, I likely received biased reflections; border officers may have thought that I could sway funding opportunities or report on their behavior to superiors. To minimize the risk of biased data and account for ethical issues, I carefully considered anonymity and participant selection. For the overall fieldwork, official oral approval was sought. Some interviews were arranged by GIS headquarters, while others were impromptu upon arrival at borders. At one checkpoint, I was not granted permission to interview without written approval

and thus left without data. To protect confidentiality, I do not name checkpoints or specify officers' roles.

Ghana is a pertinent case study for examining border control practices in West Africa due to its diverse migration patterns and longstanding migration culture (Teye 2022; Kandilige et al. 2023). Unlike regional neighbors, Ghana benefits from stable governance and diplomatic relations, which minimize the distorting effect of conflict on policy implementation. Ghana has also been a major recipient of migration-related European funding, which has intensified the development of its national migration policy frameworks and led to a range of initiatives across several migration governance areas. While its policy discourses have been well-documented in scholarly literature (see, e.g., Moutaah 2019), there remains a significant gap in understanding the local-level implementation of these policies. The scrutiny in this article therefore targets the experiences of Ghanaian border control officers and, though to a lesser extent, the perspectives of people who cross the border or live close to it, providing valuable insights into the local and broader ramifications of border strengthening initiatives, which often escape policy discussions on externalization and border control.

West African Migration and Border Governance

Western Africa has been a hub of human mobility for centuries. However, colonialism dramatically altered traditional movement patterns, as colonial powers introduced borders and mobility regulations that altered existing flows of intraregional movement (Adepoju 2005; Flahaux and de Haas 2016). With the wave of independence in the early 1960s, colonial borders and labor migration practices remained, but self-initiated migration increased, and mobility patterns diversified (Kleist and Bjarnesen 2023). With the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975, the region promoted mobility across its member states, seeking to return to a precolonial state of more fluid intraregional migration. However, ECOWAS' free regional mobility regime was tested multiple times, for example, during the 1970's and 1980's economic crises that led to mass expulsions and large-scale return migrations. Conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire added complexity, with substantial numbers of displaced people moving within the region, bring humanitarian protection and border-security issues to the forefront (see, e.g., Teye 2022).

While championing regional integration ideals, West African states are constantly grappling with the realities of porous borders and blurred lines between what is often called "regular" migration and "irregular" migration. As the continent was divided without respect for linguistic or cultural dynamics, some ethnic groups exist across national borders. This includes the Bono and Nzema, who live across Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, and the Ewe, who live across Ghana and Togo (Adepoju 2002). Consequently, many migrants, both nowadays and in the past, have frequently crossed West African borders undocumented (Adepoju 2001; Bruni et al. 2017). As regional border management has intensified, control practices have notably — and

paradoxically — blurred the boundary between regularity and irregularity in the region (Deridder, Pelckmans, and Ward 2020). For example, what Agbedahin (2014) labeled “border parasitism” highlights how border agencies along the Ghana-Togo border legalize irregular migration by accepting bribes for unauthorized entry. Such practices also illustrate the power and politics inherent in migration governance. As elsewhere in Africa, West African governments assert their sovereignty and authority through the regulation of cross-border movement (Vigneswaran and Quirk 2015). Border agencies are provided with authority and power, not only by representing the state, but also as they translate policies and enact control measures on the ground (see, e.g., Chalfin 2010), affecting state power and other sociopolitical dynamics at the borders.

Understanding these local dynamics is critical for analyzing the wider ramifications of contemporary border control strengthening efforts, which have increasingly been shaped by European incentives. Driven by the EU’s intent to shift its territorial limits outward, externalization policies — border control mechanisms included — have been geared toward preemptive prevention of migration from Africa (Frowd 2022). Earlier interventions supported ECOWAS nations in enhancing frameworks for regional mobility, but more recent developments may represent a paradigm shift (Kandilige et al. 2023). The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF for Africa) underscored this change, by emphasizing border control strengthening to enhance migration management. This acceleration of border control mirrors not only Europe’s securitization agenda but also the greater focus on sound border control among African actors, seeking to ensure societal stability and protection of citizens (Zanker 2019). The increased focus on migration governance is also visible through the proliferation of migration policy frameworks, mostly externally incentivized. Ghana is a pivotal example, where external funds enabled the development of the “National Migration Policy” and related policy frameworks and the initiation of the “National Coordination Mechanism” in 2023 to oversee migration policy implementation (Mouthaan 2019; UNNM 2023).

Border Control in Ghana: External Influence and Internal Priorities

In Ghana, the GIS has the sole mandate to regulate and monitor the entry, residence, employment, and exit of foreigners. Operating under the mission to “operate a fair but firm immigration work system,” GIS’s key responsibilities include examining travel documents and managing border patrols (GIS 2023). Although GIS receives significant support from external partners, it is primarily funded by the Government of Ghana and internally generated funds. In 2021, GIS had a total budget of GHC 359 million, with the majority, GHC 339 million, allocated to salaries and GHC 12 million designated for goods and services (Ministry of the Interior 2020). Despite this, GIS’s 2011–2015 strategy noted the risk of developments being “donation-led” rather than “requirements-led,” raising concerns that external priorities could

overshadow local needs (GIS 2010, 19). This acknowledgment from GIS itself underscores the necessity of critically assessing the balance between external influence and internal priorities, ensuring that the enhancement of border management capabilities aligns with local contexts and needs, and is not merely a reflection of donor interests.

Indeed, over the past two decades, GIS has steadily boosted its collaboration with foreign states and international organizations, serving as donors for numerous initiatives aimed at enhancing Ghanaian migration governance and control capabilities. Early, and notable, externally funded activities include the EU-funded and British-, Spanish-, and Dutch-supported AENEAS Programme (2007–2009), providing GIS over €2.4 million to counter document fraud (GIS 2010). Another is the EU-funded Thematic Programme on Migration and Asylum, partially implemented by GIS in 2012 (GIS 2012). Border control became a primary focus of external initiatives with the Ghana Integrated Migration Management Approach (GIMMA) project (2014–2017) (GIS 2014), and subsequent projects included the EU-funded Frontex project Strengthening Africa – Frontex Intelligence Community (2019 onwards); the German-funded project Strengthening Border Security and Border Community Resilience in the Gulf of Guinea (2021 onwards); the EUTF-funded €5 million project Strengthening Border Security in Ghana (SBS Ghana) (2021–2023); and the Danish-funded project Strengthening Border and Migration Management in Ghana (SMMIG) (2018–2024), which in its second phase alone (2021–2024) supported GIS with €2.4 million.

By and large, these projects reflect the European interest in combating irregular migration by strengthening Ghanaian border control capacities. While the specifics of each initiative differ, most include some form of capacity building through extensive training of GIS officers in, for instance, new technologies, document fraud detection, migrant profiling, or French language proficiency. In addition, large funds are targeted at improving border control infrastructures and technology (including hardware and software) and providing vehicles and devices, such as air conditioners and generators. Foreign states have also contributed with smaller ad hoc donations at seemingly accelerating speed. To mention some, in 2010, the Italian government donated 20 “new Toyota vehicles of various types” (GIS 2010). In 2016, the Chinese and the US embassies donated protective gear and GPS equipment; Japan Motors donated 20 motorbikes; and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) donated camp beds, tents, and generators (GIS 2016). In 2020, the Spanish government donated “six cross-country vehicles, 23 desktop computers and 10 printers” (GhanaianTimes 2020); and the German government donated six pickups and a minibus (GhanaWeb 2020). In 2021, the Spanish government donated three pickups, four “all-terrain vehicles,” and computer accessories (GhanaWeb 2021). And in 2023, the Spanish Embassy donated four Ford Rangers (GIS Twitter/X [@Immigrationgh1] 2023); and the British High Commission donated two pickups (GH Headlines 2023).

Despite the fact that the lion’s share of the GIS budget is covered by Ghanaian funds, these investments form a central contribution. Taken together, the figures above and my own insights from the field reveal that a very large portion of the border control capacity building, infrastructures, and equipment are sourced from

external donors. This dynamic is visibly reinforced at the checkpoints, where EU, IOM, and Frontex logos and stickers were widely displayed across various assets, including computers, information material, and office furniture. Although European and Ghanaian stakeholders share a mutual interest in managing migration effectively, the emphasis often differs, with European concerns more focused on controlling irregular migration toward Europe. In line with GIS's self-reported risk of donor-led development, this disparity in agendas is relevant when scrutinizing the implications of externally driven border control. As the analysis below illustrates, there has been a shift in focus from controlling immigration — the agency is, after all, named the GIS — to controlling emigration. Although immigration remains the main concern among border officers, the increased focus on emigration highlights a significant reorientation in GIS's operational priorities. This shift, along with the other findings presented in the analysis, illustrates how the impact of these external forces manifests in both local border control practices and broader sociopolitical dynamics.

Mismatched Modernization and External Reliance

A recurrent theme emerging from the data is the huge leaps taken to modernize border control. At the largest border control offices I visited, I was told about major improvements in terms of equipment, such as hardware and software, the erection of buildings or barracks, or newly arrived vehicles. However, it was clear that the more modern amenities did not permeate all areas and offices uniformly. While larger checkpoints boasted state-of-the-art technologies, other and more remote offices only had a few computers in otherwise empty, small, and/or torn-down buildings.

At two checkpoint offices, I was invited to look at their latest profiling, biometric, and document checking software. Junior officers giving demos underscored its usefulness, explaining how it enabled stronger security provision by stopping listed criminals from entering or leaving. At the same time, the officers revealed that the systems were not always suitable, for instance, for people coming from French-speaking countries as they tended to travel with no documentation or invalid types. Talking about identity documents that could not be checked with their current software, the officer in charge at one of the major authorized border checkpoints said:

Some people come with ID cards and others with no ID card [...]. An ID card is not an endorsable travel document to allow a person entry, [but if] we don't allow them entry on the basis of the ID card, they become surprised. This is where we are forced to allow them entry just because they are members of the ECOWAS, and upon realizing they are not a security threat to the country.

This type of mismatch, wherein equipment provided was not what they needed or could not be used as intended, was also cited in relation to other devices and initiatives. Besides hearing this in officers' explanations, I could see it for myself: officers would register border crossers using pen and paper, while new computers sat behind

the counters turned off. These circumstances were explained by an inability to use the computers due to frequent power cuts or the need for repairs. At some offices, I noticed that GIS cars, all marked with the European flag, were parked without any apparent movement from day to day. Explanations included the lack of budget for fuel, or again, the need for repairs.

While the modernization efforts were praised by officers, there was a clear mismatch between the equipment provided and actual needs on the ground. These issues stemmed not just from inadequate infrastructure but from a lack of contextualization of challenges such as terrain, language barriers, and documentation trends. This reflects a broader disconnection between European governance policies and local realities, leading to functionality issues — such as relying on pen and paper instead of computers. This misalignment extends beyond immediate inefficiencies, as they reinforce Ghana's dependence on external resources and undermine the long-term sustainability of border control. Although externally led projects, such as those from the ICMPD, IOM, and EU, envision aid as fostering self-reliance, the inability to fully utilize the provided infrastructure reveals a paradox: infrastructure meant to promote independence has, instead, reinforced dependency due to gaps in functionality and unfulfilled maintenance needs.

This phenomenon corresponds to the understanding of migration governance as deeply political, even when framed in general problem-solving terms (Carmel 2019). Such framing oversimplifies the picture and obscures the power relations at play, where the introduction of infrastructure catered to external priorities (e.g., advanced technologies) fails to address the most pressing needs of local officers. As Gaibazzi (2023) and others have pointed out, this may signal disparities in underlying aims and the enduring legacy of colonialism. In this way, the external interventions extend beyond their explicit impact, producing sociopolitical ramifications such as the persistence of neocolonial power structures in migration governance and challenging Ghana's long-term border control autonomy. This broader context was not lost on the border officers themselves: during one of the group interviews, two officers acknowledged the political motivations behind Europe's effort to strengthen border control in Africa, but they also noted that it was European colonial powers that had originally created the porous borders they now aimed to control.

Hasty Expansion and Social Dynamics

When I asked officers in charge about major changes at the border checkpoints in recent years, many mentioned an expansion in the number of officers and the opening of new border checkpoints. Explaining GIS's internal staff system, whereby most officers transfer elsewhere after being stationed for four years, an officer told me: "We have new sets of officers coming in almost every year. Although some also move out to other places, those who come in are normally more than those who leave." These remarks correspond with staff numbers included

in GIS annual reports. From a modest 150 officers in 2006, the team expanded to over 3,000 by 2010, to more than 5,500 by 2018, and surged to over 9,700 by 2021 (Ministry of the Interior 2021). In 2023, the Ghanaian Vice President, Mahamudu Bawumia, stated that GIS boasted 14,300 officers, facilitated by increased “training, accommodation and other facilities” (The Ghana Report 2023).

Although staff expenses are funded by internally generated funds, the capability of GIS to rapidly increase its workforce is likely augmented by the influx of external funding, as inferred from the Vice President’s remarks. Officers told me that the escalation in staff numbers had enhanced the effectiveness of border patrols, allowing officers to cover more ground more frequently. At one border post, this was illustrated by an obsolete watchtower once used for border surveillance, now redundant, I was told, due to improved patrol capabilities.

The surge in staff undeniably bolstered border control capabilities, but it also brought about logistical issues and other concerns. While GIS strategic plans have long emphasized the necessity for improved accommodation for stationed officers, the interviewees reported that this issue had intensified recently. The shortage of adequate housing or barracks — echoing the wider issue of “mismatched modernization” — also compelled border agents to integrate into local communities by renting or sharing accommodations. One senior officer recounted how his subordinates found such arrangements precarious, given their roles in curbing illegal cross-border activities. “It’s difficult to check people because we are living with them,” another officer shared, highlighting the inherent conflict of interest. On the other hand, some officers found that fostering relationships with locals could be beneficial. As one said: “If we befriend them, it is easier to gather intelligence.”

The dramatic increase in personnel therefore had both tested the existing infrastructure and deepened the border officers’ interactions with local communities. This integration into local communities illustrates how borders are socially constructed spaces (Rumford 2006, Frowd 2022), shaped by local dynamics, and not merely lines of control. The expansion of personnel reflects the tension where global interventions reshape not only border management but also the social fabric of border areas. In areas where government presence previously was minimal, border officers explained that by living among the border communities, they now took on a broader community role, from resolving disputes to addressing crimes. This was also reported among the locals. During a group discussion with locals living near a checkpoint, for instance, an elderly woman explained how her family felt safer due to the increased presence of GIS personnel.

However, this also sparked tensions, particularly when border control activities disrupted local livelihoods and cross-border economic activities. In an interview with a group of motorcyclists stationed a few meters from a border checkpoint, I heard how their relationship with GIS had evolved over time. Working to transport people and goods across the border, also irregularly, they were dependent on good relations with the officers, the group explained. Yet, as they hinted, the officers were also dependent on good relations with them. As GIS interviewees relayed,

the officers thus often forged cordial relationships with locals — ensuring the sustenance of local economies and cross-border activities — although that meant they sometimes chose to overlook regulations or guidelines, such as by allowing someone to cross without checking their documents.

These insights suggest that while the policy intent to strengthen border control by expanding the staff is evident, the lack of parallel infrastructure development reflect a lack of comprehensive planning. Moreover, the complex, yet changing, relationship between GIS staff and border communities signals an underestimation of the relevance of local social dynamics, as well as the agency of regular border crossers. This reinforces the idea of borders as spaces of social negotiation, where both officers and civilians affect — and are affected by — the enactment of border control. An experienced project leader, charged at the time with implementing a large-scale externally funded project to counter document fraud, emphasized the importance of respecting local contexts. After explaining the difficulty of controlling borders that divided families and ethnic groups, he said:

Everyone crossing the border has to present a document, but some people live in Togo and work in Ghana, and I don't mean, like, they just cross the border. They trade, so they cross it several times a day. [...] So you can't insist "because now we have a travel document project" to say they should come and be made to present the travel document. It's not going to work. They are going to rebel. So, we always have to situate projects within the context.

This account emphasizes the critical need to align border management strategies with the realities of those who cross the border. This is especially important as externally driven initiatives risk imposing rigid frameworks that overlook the dynamic nature of border spaces, where local social relations and informal economic activities intersect with formal border control. Indeed, border control requires more than just increased staff and modern equipment; it necessitates an understanding of and adaptation to local dynamics.

The influence exerted by individuals who frequently cross the border, along with the importance of relationships between border controllers and locals, was seemingly not accounted for in externally driven border control initiatives. This lack of recognition for local cultures and agency significantly impacts how these policies are enacted and affect everyday practices on the ground. As communities and GIS staff adjusted to new border control measures, pre-existing patterns of authority and cooperation appeared to shift. In some cases, such as with the motorcyclists transporting people and goods across borders, the evolving control and staff dynamics fostered informal practices that, to some extent, challenged formal state authority.

Professionalization and Criminalization

Talking about recent developments, officers praised the greater focus on capacity building and professionalism. They highlighted skills training initiatives, including

compliance with migration regulations, questioning techniques, and profiling. Many emphasized questioning and profiling at checkpoints as a way to determinate if a person should be allowed to cross the border. However, one senior officer mentioned “training fatigue” among the officers due to frequent workshops, while others stressed the ongoing need for training in areas such as arms use and language skills. While the “fatigue” may reflect a disconnect from local needs, or an uneven distribution of professionalization, the demand for more training underscores gaps in skills the border controllers themselves identified as key for improved control capacity.

Developments in professionalization could also be observed by the improved quality and scope of GIS reports and strategy documents from 2006 to 2023. Progressive efforts were made toward a better-managed organization taking on an expanding set of activities, such as executing migration information services. According to information relayed by reports and in interviews, the scope of GIS activities had skyrocketed over the past decade, and a great deal of attention was patently devoted to the differing potential security threats that came with cross-border migration. This aligns with broader critiques of externalization policies, where the emphasis on security often misaligns with local needs and imposes top-down governance structures that overlook social and political realities on the ground (Deridder, Pelckmans, and Ward 2020). The securitization also mirrors previous research finding a growing tendency to criminalize migration practices, including in West Africa and particularly after the implementation of European external border control practices (Carlotti 2021).

Some officers noted becoming increasingly vigilant to criminal cross-border activity, as this was a central aspect of their training. Everyone I spoke with emphasized thorough profiling and/or background checks of migrants as a fundamental safety concern. While irregular activities were reported to be undertaken by different nationalities, Nigerian migrants, in particular, were often mentioned as a potential threat to Ghana. I heard this, for example, from a senior officer explaining how his smaller border checkpoint dealt with criminality:

If we are not careful, the rate at which these Nigerians are prying into our country [...] things will not turn out well for us [...]. A whole lot of them want to survive by involving themselves in criminal activities, and the immigration service monitors them, a lot. [Earlier today] they brought in some people from Kumasi, and they were Nigerians to be repatriated. [...] They were just involved in Sakawa [online scamming], but because we do not have special training in determining cybercrimes, we use the immigration law on both the illegal entry and illegal residence to deal with such persons. Also, by our law and the instruction from the Controller General, we can immediately repatriate such persons. Hence, instead of going through the cybercrime aspect where they go through court [...], we can just push them out using our own law.

From this and other officers’ accounts, I observed how the objectives of avoiding criminal activity and of avoiding irregular migration sometimes got conflated. I also heard about officers’ practices that prohibited entry on the basis of trust; even if an

individual presented valid documentation, they were stopped at the border if the officer did not find their planned activities, length of stay, or some other element credible. As some officers noted, the enhanced professionalization at the border checkpoints made some travelers, particularly locals, prefer crossing unauthorized, e.g., during night or in safe distance from the checkpoints. They did so to avoid tedious document checks or lengthy queues, such as those that would form after the arrival of packed buses. Yet, as some travelers themselves reported and some of the engaged cross-border motorbike taxis hinted, people also traveled unauthorized to avoid bribery practices at the border, especially if they came and went frequently. While this is not surprising given the context, it is noteworthy, since one does not expect bribery to play a role in professionalized border control practices (Agbedahin 2014).

When focusing on criminal activity, the officers mostly referred to immigration and foreigners in Ghana. Yet, when asked about irregular migration, officers at the borders to Burkina Faso and Togo highlighted challenges concerning emigration. They explained how they had experienced a previous spike in young Ghanaians traveling unsafe routes toward Libya or Europe, often traveling via Niger. While my interviewees noted that Ghanaian migration to Europe was a concern for Europeans, they added a different explanation for why this had become of major importance to GIS. When I asked a junior officer to confirm his statement that they did not allow Ghanaians going to Libya to cross the border, he said:

We are mandated to protect our citizens. Also, looking at what goes on in Libya, one cannot be convinced to allow our citizen to go there. So, we do not allow people to journey to Libya using this place.

Indeed, many officers explained that this phenomenon corresponded with the objective of stopping irregular migration. In one of the group interviews, two other officers also cited this as being part of GIS's "mandate to protect Ghanaians." Therefore, they continued, when thorough profiling led them to discern that Ghanaians were heading for dangerous destinations, they had to ensure their safety and stop them. I asked how this related to the Ghanaian constitution, which states that Ghanaians have the right to exit their country, and mentioned that the right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Ghana is a signatory. To this, they repeated that they had a duty to ensure the safety of Ghanaians, including those outside the country. They could exit if the officers were certain that they would be safe but, if not, they would stop them. I probed further as to whether they thought individuals they stopped would then opt for irregular crossings. The two border guards exchanged looks while laughing and confirmed that, surely, they expected such people to turn to irregular routes.

This critical shift from focusing primarily on incoming immigration to actively controlling emigration, particularly by defining certain types of emigration as "irregular," highlights a significant transformation in operational practices and represents a

broader ramification in terms of Ghanaian state autonomy. This change is externally driven, influenced by European political agendas to stem irregular migration, and though it has seemingly merged with GIS's own objective to safeguard Ghanaian citizens, the approach challenges Ghanaian border control sovereignty, as it led border officers to break national and international regulations. The border controllers stopped and criminalized what legally was a form of regular, documented migration at an authorized border crossing within ECOWAS.

Concluding Discussions

The local practices and experiences of border control revealed in this study fit into a broader conversation on the implications of migration policy externalization. Prior research has established that migration policies designed in Europe do not yield straightforward outcomes when implemented abroad, and there is evidence of a disregard for local contexts and a mismatch in the understanding of the issues at stake (see, e.g., Adam et al. 2020; Talleraas 2024). While the discourse has focused on a critical evaluation of externalization and its impact on actors in Africa, there has been a lack of empirical research on the experiences of individuals performing, and those affected by, initiatives aimed at strengthening border control. This article addresses that gap by offering glimpses into the local experiences at three territorial borders within West Africa while elucidating the workings of the Ghanaian border control agency.

The multifaceted landscape of border governance in West Africa, as laid bare in GIS' activities along Ghanaian borders, highlights the intertwined nature of externally driven policy priorities and on-the-ground implications. One of the crucial insights from this study's analysis aligns with its point of departure, namely, the continued need to critically assess externally driven migration governance by focusing on local changes and firsthand experiences of people on the ground. By approaching these borders as dynamic spaces where local, national, and global dynamics intersect, this article shows how external interventions can ripple through the local contexts, creating both explicit, on-the-ground effects and far-reaching societal implications across various scales.

In this analysis, I have demonstrated that the ongoing efforts to strengthen Ghanaian border control — characterized by modernization, expansion, and professionalization — cannot be separated from the associated challenges they bring about. In Ghana, a particularly severe consequence is the criminalization of certain legal emigration practices, which directly contradicts both Ghanaian and international laws. As external priorities shape the normative understanding of irregular migration in ways that misalign with legal frameworks, this affects border enforcement accordingly. This development represents a tension between Ghana's sovereignty and external influence, which ultimately undermines state autonomy.

Additional changes, though also influenced by pre-existing local relations, include shifts in social dynamics in border areas. In some places, these changes have led to

tensions and challenged formal border control procedures, but they have also fostered stronger connections between locals and border controllers. These shifts risk altering longstanding social structures and relationships in border regions. As local communities adapt to changing border control practices, traditional dynamics of cooperation and authority may be redefined. These changes not only influence how border control is perceived and enforced but also lead to more localized informal arrangements, challenging formal state authority.

For border controllers, expansion and modernization have brought mixed results. While new technologies were welcomed, they often did not align with practical needs or failed due to infrastructural shortcomings, leading to frustrations. While this has improved GIS' operational capabilities in the short term, it has also perpetuated reliance on external assistance for repairs, fuel, and equipment. These externally driven projects highlight a growing dependence on outside resources. Although I did not directly explore long-term implications in interviews, it is clear that this reliance shapes the direction of Ghanaian border control efforts and may constrain the state's ability to develop self-sufficient systems.

Taken together, the analytical findings illustrate that external interventions and their local impact extend state capabilities and reinforce Ghana's presence at its borders. This dynamic reaffirms Ghanaian statehood, with practical and "felt" implications for everyday life at, and crossings of, the border. Yet, this reinforcement comes with tensions, as reliance on external resources and political agendas also undermines the state's autonomy and may — as discussed — affect how the state governs and relates to its borders and citizens in the longer term.

Based on these insights, this article emphasizes the importance of evaluating the implications of migration policies while scrutinizing the geopolitical contexts in which they are applied. No policy process operates in a vacuum; instead, a complex array of political and social realities influences migration policy development and outcomes. Reconfirming previous findings from critical migration and border research (e.g., Frowd 2022; Zanker and Altrogge 2022), an additional layer of complexity arises when policies are driven by external actors, neglecting local contexts. This article applies the concept of rippling effects to understand how externally driven migration governance not only produces immediate, explicit outcomes but also generates more subtle consequences that spread across scales. In doing so, it reveals how external interventions, shaped by Eurocentric narratives and priorities, reshape and challenge local border governance practices while extending their impact to wider sociopolitical structures. Through this analysis, the article contributes a theoretical-analytical framework to migration governance and border studies, tracing both explicit and cross-scalar rippling effects to understand the complex interplay and overall implications of external governance agendas on local realities.

Considering the differing narratives on migration and migration governance, such as those concerning irregular migration, and differing understandings of the problem at stake in local West African contexts versus in European policy agendas, I argue for the urgent need for more systematic and localized research on European

externalization policies. As European states continue their efforts to manage migration within Africa, including strengthening border control capacities at African borders, it is imperative to unearth and critically analyze both the explicit and more subtle — yet significant — implications of these efforts. To do so, further research is needed to encompass a broader range of African actors, their experiences, and the rippling effects of externally driven migration governance, both at the local level and across wider societal scales.

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