

Cross-Border Trade and Socio-Economic Transformation in the Mambilla Plateau, Nigeria, 1960–2023

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Abstract : *This study examines the historical evolution of cross-border trade and its contribution to the socio-economic transformation of the Mambilla Plateau, Nigeria, between 1960 and 2023. It argues that commercial relations across the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier originated from pre-colonial networks of migration, kinship, pastoral mobility and commodity exchange that persisted despite the establishment of an international boundary. Using the historical research method, the study draws on oral evidence, government and administrative records, and relevant secondary literature to reconstruct changes and continuities in cross-border commerce. The findings reveal that agricultural produce, coffee, kola nut, livestock and consumer goods constituted important components of trade, facilitated by farmers, pastoralists, petty traders, commodity assemblers, transporters and merchants operating through markets and commercial centres such as Gembu and Nguroje and frontier communities including Mbamnga, Dorofi and Kan-Iyaka. Cross-border trade contributed to livelihood diversification, employment creation, agricultural commercialisation, market expansion, transportation development and increased inter-community interaction. However, its transformative potential was constrained by poor road infrastructure, inadequate processing and storage facilities, currency fluctuations, costly border procedures, insecurity and weak institutional coordination. The study concludes that the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier functioned not merely as a territorial boundary but also as an important economic space through which communities of the Mambilla Plateau maintained longstanding commercial relationships and participated in wider regional markets. Improved infrastructure, simplified legitimate trade procedures and stronger bilateral cooperation are essential for maximising the developmental potential of cross-border commerce.*

Keywords: Cross-border trade; Mambilla Plateau; Nigeria–Cameroon border; socio-economic transformation; borderlands; regional commerce.

Introduction

Cross-border trade has historically been an important feature of economic and social relations among African frontier communities. Before the establishment of modern states, communities exchanged agricultural produce, livestock and other commodities through networks connecting settlements and markets across territories. Colonial boundaries altered these relationships by placing previously interconnected communities under different administrations (Thomson, 2022). However, these boundaries did not eliminate older patterns of interaction; rather, border communities adapted their economic and social networks to new political circumstances.

The Nigeria–Cameroon frontier illustrates this historical continuity. The boundary divided communities whose kinship, migration and economic relationships predated colonial demarcation (Ayeni & Ogbang, 2026). The Mambilla Plateau, located in present-day Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, is particularly important because of its proximity to Cameroon and longstanding transboundary interactions involving people, agricultural products and livestock (Ali & Lawal, 2024). Commercial networks also connected the Plateau with markets further within Nigeria. Lenshie et al. (2021) show that Kambu and Panso traditions associate these communities with the commercial circulation of kola nut and coffee, with networks extending towards Yola, Borno, Zaria and Kano. The Plateau was therefore historically integrated into wider regional commercial networks rather than existing as an isolated highland economy.

Nigeria's independence in 1960 and the 1961 political settlement concerning the former British Cameroons transformed these relationships by subjecting cross-frontier movement to customs, immigration, taxation and separate national regulatory systems. Nevertheless, trade persisted because geographical proximity, established social networks and differences in commodity availability and market demand continued to encourage exchange. Comparative evidence from other sections of the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier similarly shows that cross-border commerce contributed to market integration and the development of border settlements (Bonchuk, 2011).

Between 1960 and 2023, cross-border commerce on the Mambilla Plateau involved farmers, pastoralists, petty traders, transporters and commercial intermediaries dealing in agricultural produce, livestock, cash crops and consumer goods. These activities expanded market opportunities, provided supplementary household income and connected producing communities with wider markets. However, difficult terrain, poor roads, insecurity and changing border regulations constrained commercial activities. Studies

elsewhere along the Cameroon–Nigeria frontier have similarly demonstrated how insecurity and border disputes can alter trading patterns and affect frontier economies (Kimengsi, Fogwe & Mende, 2018).

Despite the importance of these activities, scholarship on the Mambilla Plateau has concentrated largely on ethnicity, migration, pastoralism, land relations and communal conflict, while the long-term relationship between cross-border commerce and socio-economic transformation has received comparatively limited historical attention. This paper therefore examines the evolution of cross-border trade in the Mambilla Plateau between 1960 and 2023, focusing on its commodities, actors, markets and trading networks, its contribution to livelihoods and market development, and the influence of state policies and border regulation. It argues that the Nigeria–Cameroon boundary did not terminate older commercial relationships; rather, traders adapted established networks to changing political and economic conditions. Consequently, cross-border trade contributed to livelihood diversification, agricultural commercialisation and market integration, although its transformative impact remained constrained by infrastructure, security, regulation and changing market conditions.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Concept of Cross-Border Trade

Cross-border trade refers to the exchange of goods, services and economic resources among individuals, communities and commercial actors located across an international boundary. In the African historical context, however, the concept extends beyond conventional international trade between sovereign states. Many contemporary cross-border commercial relationships originated before colonial boundaries divided previously interconnected communities into different political jurisdictions. Consequently, cross-border trade often represents both an international economic activity and the continuation of older systems of exchange under changing political and territorial conditions. This historical dimension is particularly relevant to the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier. Colonial partition created territorial divisions without completely eliminating older patterns of migration, kinship and commercial interaction. On the Mambilla Plateau, communities historically maintained relationships extending across territories that subsequently became parts of Nigeria and Cameroon. Lenshie et al. (2021) demonstrate that populations such as the Mambilla, Kaka, Kambu, Panso and Fulani have historical connections extending across the frontier. Thus, the international boundary constitutes a political division within a wider transboundary social and economic environment.

2.2 Concept of Socio-Economic Transformation

Socio-economic transformation refers to significant changes in the economic activities and social conditions of a society over time. It extends beyond increases in income or production to include changes in livelihoods, employment, agricultural production, markets, transportation, settlement patterns, mobility and social relationships. From a historical perspective, the concept is particularly useful because it enables an examination of both continuity and change within communities over an extended period. Commercial activities can generate wider socio-economic effects. Expanding markets, for example, may create opportunities for producers to sell agricultural surpluses, encourage the emergence of trading and transportation occupations, and stimulate services such as storage, food vending and accommodation. Market opportunities may also encourage agricultural producers to move from predominantly subsistence production towards greater commercial orientation. Cross-border commerce can therefore influence both production and livelihood strategies.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Borderlands Theory

This study is anchored on Borderlands Theory, which views international boundaries not merely as territorial divisions but as social and economic spaces where communities maintain relationships across national frontiers. The theory holds that border communities possess agency and may sustain kinship, migration and commercial networks despite state boundaries. Borders therefore perform a dual function: they separate states through different laws and regulations while simultaneously creating opportunities for trade arising from differences in prices, markets and commodity availability. This perspective also explains the coexistence of formal state-regulated trade and informal community-based exchange.

The theory is relevant to the Mambilla Plateau because the Nigeria–Cameroon boundary divided a historically interconnected region without eliminating established social and commercial relationships. It explains how farmers, pastoralists, traders and transporters adapted their activities to changing border regulations between 1960 and 2023. Thus, cross-border trade expanded market access, supported livelihoods and employment, encouraged agricultural commercialisation and market development, and thereby contributed to socio-economic transformation, although these benefits were influenced by infrastructure, security, market conditions and government policies.

3. Methodology and Sources

The study adopted the historical research method to examine cross-border trade and socio-economic transformation in the Mambilla Plateau between 1960 and 2023. Primary sources included oral interviews with traders, farmers, livestock dealers, transporters, community leaders and relevant officials, complemented by government reports, administrative records and archival materials. Secondary sources comprised scholarly books, journal articles, theses and other studies on the Mambilla Plateau and Nigeria–Cameroon border relations. The sources were critically evaluated and corroborated to establish their reliability, while the evidence was analysed chronologically and thematically to identify continuity and change in trade patterns and their socio-economic impact.

4. Historical Background of the Mambilla Plateau and Nigeria–Cameroon Border Relations

4.1 Geographical Setting and Pre-Colonial Relations

The Mambilla Plateau occupies a distinctive geographical and historical position in present-day Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, adjoining the Republic of Cameroon and covering approximately 3,765 square kilometres (Ahmed & Oruonye, 2016). Its cool highland climate, fertile land and extensive grasslands historically supported agriculture, livestock production and commercial activities. Its proximity to Cameroon also encouraged the movement of people and commodities, making the Plateau part of a wider regional economy rather than an isolated Nigerian highland.

Before colonial partition, the area was characterised by migration, kinship, pastoral mobility and commodity exchange across relatively fluid territorial spaces. The Mambilla, Fulani, Kaka, Kambu and Panso maintained relationships extending across territories that subsequently became Nigeria and Cameroon. Lenshie, Ezeibe and Ugwu (2021) demonstrate that the historical distribution and migration of these communities complicate rigid distinctions created by the modern international boundary. Agricultural produce, livestock, kola nut and coffee formed part of commercial networks linking communities on the Plateau with neighbouring territories and wider regional markets.

4.2 Colonial Administration and the 1961 Plebiscite

Colonial rule transformed these relationships by introducing more clearly defined territorial jurisdictions. Britain controlled Nigeria while Germany initially administered Kamerun. Following Germany's defeat in the First World War, Kamerun was divided between Britain and France, with the British territories subsequently administered under the League of Nations mandate and United Nations trusteeship systems. The Mambilla Plateau became part of British-administered Northern Cameroons, although older patterns of migration and economic interaction continued.

Nigeria attained independence in 1960, while a United Nations-supervised plebiscite held on 11 February 1961 determined the future of the British Cameroons. Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria, resulting in the formal incorporation of the Mambilla Plateau into the country. This development transformed previously established regional exchanges into international cross-border activities subject to separate currencies, customs and immigration systems. Nevertheless, longstanding kinship and commercial relationships survived the political transition.

4.3 Post-Independence Nigeria–Cameroon Border Relations

From 1961, cross-border interaction increasingly operated within formal Nigeria–Cameroon relations. Although both countries experienced disagreements concerning sections of their inherited colonial boundary, local communities continued everyday movements associated with farming, pastoralism, family relations and commerce. The increasing presence of customs, immigration and security institutions subjected these activities to greater state regulation, while small-scale exchanges continued through both formal and informal networks.

Administrative changes within Nigeria also influenced the Plateau's development, particularly its incorporation into Taraba State following the state's creation in 1991. Gembu subsequently consolidated its position as the headquarters of Sardauna Local Government Area and an important administrative and commercial centre. By 2023, therefore, the Nigeria–Cameroon boundary had become firmly established as an international frontier, but it had not eliminated older transboundary relationships. Instead, it transformed the institutional conditions under which people and commodities moved, providing the historical foundation for the subsequent development of cross-border trade and its contribution to the socio-economic transformation of the Mambilla Plateau.

EVOLUTION OF CROSS-BORDER TRADE IN THE MAMBILLA PLATEAU, 1960–2023

Cross-border trade in the Mambilla Plateau between 1960 and 2023 developed from commercial and social networks that predated Nigerian independence. The incorporation of the Plateau into Nigeria following the 1961 plebiscite did not create commerce between communities on the Nigerian and Cameroonian sides of the frontier; rather, it changed the political and administrative conditions under which existing exchanges operated. Communities connected through kinship, migration and commerce continued to interact

despite their incorporation into separate states. The post-1960 history of cross-border trade can therefore be understood in terms of continuity, adaptation and diversification.

5.1 Cross-Border Trade in the Early Post-Independence Period, 1960–1979

The years following independence represented an important transition in the commercial history of the Plateau. After the incorporation of Northern Cameroons into Nigeria in 1961, movements between the Mambilla Plateau and neighbouring Cameroon increasingly became international transactions subject to customs and immigration regulations. Nevertheless, established social relationships continued to facilitate trade by providing traders with information, contacts and access to markets across the frontier.

Agricultural commodities occupied an important position in these exchanges. The favourable highland environment supported food and commercial crops, while differences in production and market demand encouraged exchange between neighbouring communities. Coffee and kola nut were particularly significant in established trading networks. Lenshie, Ezeibe and Ugwu (2021) associate Kambu and Panso traders with the commercial circulation of these commodities and networks extending from the Plateau towards Yola, Borno, Zaria and Kano. This demonstrates that commerce linked the borderland not only with Cameroon but also with markets deeper within Nigeria.

Livestock also formed part of the commercial economy. The Plateau's extensive grasslands favoured cattle rearing, particularly among Fulani pastoralists, while livestock mobility connected grazing areas with settlements and markets. During the 1970s, commercial agriculture became increasingly diversified with the development of tea cultivation. Although tea production was more organised than everyday petty border exchange, its emergence reflected the broader commercialisation of the Plateau's agricultural economy. By the end of the 1970s, therefore, agricultural produce, cash crops, livestock and consumer commodities had become components of an expanding borderland trading system.

5.2 Expansion and Diversification of Trade, 1980–1999

Cross-border commerce became increasingly diversified during the 1980s and 1990s. Nigeria's economic difficulties including inflation, declining purchasing power and the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986 encouraged households to diversify their livelihood strategies. For border communities, proximity to Cameroon provided opportunities to respond to differences in commodity prices, availability and consumer demand.

The growth of Gembu and Nguroje was particularly important. Gembu increasingly combined administrative and commercial functions, while Nguroje developed an important agricultural and livestock market. Periodic markets brought together farmers, pastoralists, traders, transporters and consumers and provided collection and redistribution points for commodities. Cross-border commerce therefore contributed to the increasing integration of rural production with wider market networks.

The creation of Taraba State in 1991 further strengthened Gembu's administrative importance as the headquarters of Sardauna Local Government Area. Government institutions, population concentration and transportation services increased demand for food, manufactured goods and commercial services. Tea production also received renewed institutional attention during this period, while coffee continued to provide opportunities for smallholder farmers despite marketing and processing constraints. Formal and informal trade continued to coexist, with some small-scale traders relying upon customary commercial networks alongside officially regulated channels.

5.3 Cross-Border Commerce in the Twenty-First Century, 2000–2023

Between 2000 and 2023, cross-border commerce became increasingly connected with improvements in transportation, communication and expanding market settlements. Gembu consolidated its position as the principal administrative and commercial centre of the Plateau, while Nguroje retained its importance in agricultural and livestock trading. Commercial interaction involved local traders as well as participants from other parts of Nigeria and neighbouring Cameroon, reinforcing the transboundary character of the economy.

The commodity structure also became more diverse. Agricultural products such as coffee, grains, vegetables and other foodstuffs remained important, while livestock, particularly cattle, continued to support commercial activities involving dealers, transporters, butchers and market intermediaries. Manufactured and consumer goods, including clothing, household articles and electronics, became increasingly visible in commercial centres. Thus, the border economy evolved beyond predominantly agricultural exchanges into a more diversified system connecting rural production with consumer markets.

Coffee illustrates both the opportunities and limitations of this commercial development. The Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria (CRIN, 2014) identified active coffee production in Gembu, Maigoga and Nguroje but reported that inadequate processing facilities

constrained farmers' ability to respond effectively to market opportunities. This demonstrates that expanding trade depended not simply on production but also on processing, storage, transportation and organised marketing.

COMMODITIES AND FORMS OF CROSS-BORDER TRADE

Cross-border trade on the Mambilla Plateau developed around agricultural produce, cash crops, livestock, manufactured goods and small-scale commercial exchanges connecting Nigerian communities with neighbouring Cameroon. The character of the trade reflected the Plateau's agricultural potential, historical population mobility, market networks and differences in commodity supply and demand across the frontier. However, not every commodity traded on the Plateau necessarily crossed the international boundary. The available evidence therefore requires a distinction between commodities clearly associated with transboundary networks and those forming part of the wider regional economy.

6.1 Agricultural Produce and Cash-Crop Trade

Agricultural produce constituted a major component of the commercial economy of the Mambilla Plateau. Its favourable highland environment supported the cultivation of maize, beans, vegetables, potatoes and other food crops. Farmers sold surpluses through village and periodic markets, while traders assembled produce for redistribution to larger commercial centres. For communities close to Cameroon, neighbouring markets could provide additional outlets, particularly where geographical accessibility and favourable prices made cross-border exchange economically attractive.

Coffee and kola nut occupied distinctive positions in these commercial networks. The Plateau's ecological conditions favour *Coffea arabica*, making coffee an important commercial crop. Historically, Kambu and Panso traders were associated with the circulation of coffee and kola nut and with commercial networks extending beyond the Plateau. Coffee required buyers, processing and transportation, thereby creating relationships among farmers, assemblers and merchants. Its commercial potential, however, was constrained by inadequate processing and marketing facilities. The Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria (CRIN, 2014) identified coffee production in locations including Gembu, Maigoga and Nguroje and noted processing as an important constraint confronting producers.

Kola nut similarly formed part of older commercial networks linking the Plateau with wider Nigerian markets. Thus, cash-crop commerce was multidirectional rather than exclusively Nigeria-to-Cameroon or Cameroon-to-Nigeria. Commodities could move towards whichever markets offered accessible buyers and favourable returns. Agricultural trade consequently linked household production with a wider regional economy and contributed to the gradual commercialisation of farming.

6.2 Livestock and Cattle Trade

Livestock constituted another important component of the border economy. The extensive grasslands of the Mambilla Plateau encouraged cattle rearing, particularly among Fulani pastoralists. Cattle represented both productive assets and valuable commercial commodities, while their mobility enabled connections between grazing areas and markets.

Nguroje became particularly significant as an agricultural and livestock market. Cattle markets brought together pastoralists, livestock dealers, intermediaries, butchers, transporters and consumers. Livestock commerce therefore generated economic activities extending beyond pastoral households. Food vendors, transport operators and other service providers also benefited from the concentration of traders and consumers around market centres.

The proximity of Cameroon made the international frontier relevant to pastoral mobility and livestock commerce, although a distinction must be maintained between cattle movement for grazing and movement specifically for commercial purposes. Cross-border livestock transactions were also subject to customs, veterinary and security regulations. Formal and informal forms of livestock movement could therefore coexist, particularly where pastoral networks and grazing patterns predated the international boundary.

TRADE ROUTES, BORDER MARKETS AND ACTORS IN CROSS-BORDER COMMERCE

The development of cross-border trade on the Mambilla Plateau depended not only on the commodities exchanged but also on the routes, markets and human networks through which goods moved. The Plateau's mountainous terrain, valleys and difficult escarpments shaped commercial mobility, especially before the expansion of motorised transport. Nevertheless, its proximity to Cameroon encouraged the development of routes connecting farms, settlements, periodic markets and frontier communities. These routes evolved from older footpaths and community tracks into wider road networks linking local production with both Nigerian and Cameroonian markets.

7.1 Trade Routes and Commercial Corridors

Historically, farmers, pastoralists and itinerant traders used footpaths and community tracks to move agricultural produce, livestock and other commodities between settlements and markets. With the gradual expansion of road transport, Gembu became the principal commercial and administrative hub of the Plateau. The Bali–Serti–Gembu corridor strengthened the connection between the Plateau and other parts of Taraba State, while secondary routes extended from Gembu towards production areas and communities close to Cameroon.

The Gembu–Mbamnga–Yang (Lip) axis became an important frontier corridor linking the central Plateau with settlements near the international boundary. Other significant frontier points included Dorofi, Kan-Iyaka, Yerimaru, Tamnya, Mbamnga, Mayo Ndaga and Njimtilo. Their existence demonstrates that cross-border commerce did not depend on a single route but operated through several interconnected channels. The Dorofi–Kan-Iyaka axis also became important for movements towards Cameroon. These routes facilitated legitimate commercial exchange but could equally be used for unrecorded transactions, which increased the involvement of customs, immigration and security agencies.

Accessibility strongly influenced the choice of markets. For some border communities, a Cameroonian market could be geographically closer than a Nigerian commercial centre. Traders therefore made decisions according to distance, road conditions, commodity prices and social relationships rather than nationality alone. The development of these routes illustrates how geography shaped the everyday commercial logic of the borderland.

7.2 Gembu, Nguroje and Border Markets

Gembu occupied a central place in the commercial geography of the Mambilla Plateau. As headquarters of Sardauna Local Government Area, it developed beyond an administrative centre into an important market, transit and distribution point. Agricultural produce from surrounding communities could be assembled in Gembu before being moved towards larger markets, while manufactured and consumer goods arriving from other parts of Nigeria or Cameroon were redistributed to surrounding settlements. Its growth also supported occupations such as shopkeeping, transportation, food vending and other commercial services.

Nguroje developed a complementary role, particularly in agricultural and livestock commerce. Its market brought together farmers, pastoralists, cattle dealers, commodity assemblers, transporters and consumers. The livestock component was especially important because cattle production on the Plateau required organised markets where pastoralists and buyers could interact. Agricultural commodities from surrounding communities were similarly assembled and redistributed through the market.

Gembu and Nguroje therefore performed different but complementary functions. Gembu was more strongly associated with administration, distribution and transit commerce, while Nguroje was closely linked to agricultural and livestock exchange. Smaller frontier settlements, including Dorofi, Kan-Iyaka, Mbamnga and Mayo Ndaga, provided direct points of interaction with Cameroon. These communities served not only as geographical crossing points but also as social spaces where traders relied on kinship, ethnic ties and personal contacts for information, accommodation and market access.

CROSS-BORDER TRADE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE MAMBILLA PLATEAU

Cross-border trade contributed to the socio-economic transformation of the Mambilla Plateau between 1960 and 2023 by linking local producers and communities with wider Nigerian and Cameroonian markets. Its influence extended beyond commodity exchange to livelihoods, agricultural commercialisation, employment, transportation, market development and social interaction. The growth of commercial centres such as Gembu and Nguroje demonstrates how transboundary exchange increasingly integrated the Plateau into wider regional economic networks.

8.1 Livelihoods, Income and Occupational Diversification

Cross-border commerce diversified household livelihoods by providing farmers and pastoralists with opportunities to convert agricultural and livestock surpluses into monetary income. Many households combined farming with petty trading, livestock sales and transportation rather than depending entirely on subsistence production. Commerce also generated employment for traders, commodity assemblers, drivers, motorcycle operators, livestock dealers, loaders, mechanics, food vendors and shopkeepers. Nguroje's development as an agricultural and livestock market illustrates this multiplier effect, as cattle trading created opportunities for dealers, brokers, butchers and transporters alongside pastoral producers.

8.2 Agricultural Commercialisation and Market Expansion

Access to wider markets encouraged greater commercialisation of agriculture. Farmers producing coffee, maize, beans, vegetables and other commodities could sell surpluses through traders and intermediaries connecting rural communities with larger markets. Coffee was particularly important because the ecological conditions of the Plateau supported its production as a cash crop.

Nevertheless, inadequate processing, storage and marketing facilities restricted producers from obtaining the full value of their output.

Commercialisation also contributed to the growth of market centres. Gembu developed as an important administrative, distribution and commercial hub, while Nguroje became particularly significant for agricultural produce and livestock. These markets brought producers, traders and consumers together and stimulated related activities such as transportation, retailing, accommodation and food vending. Cross-border trade therefore supported both agricultural production and the expansion of service activities.

8.3 Transportation, Settlement Growth and Mobility

The growth of trade increased the importance of transportation. While earlier commercial exchanges depended heavily on footpaths and traditional means of movement, commercial vehicles and motorcycles gradually expanded the geographical reach of commodity circulation. Motorcycles became particularly important in connecting remote communities with larger markets because of the Plateau's difficult terrain and inadequate feeder roads.

Commercial activities similarly influenced settlement growth. Gembu attracted traders, transporters and service providers, while Nguroje drew farmers, pastoralists and livestock dealers. Frontier settlements such as Mbamnga, Dorofi and Kan-Iyaka also benefited from their strategic positions along routes towards Cameroon. Regular movement of traders, producers and transporters between Nigerian and Cameroonian communities further reinforced the transboundary character of the Plateau.

8.4 Social Interaction and Consumption

Cross-border commerce encouraged interaction among different ethnic, linguistic and national groups. Markets provided spaces where farmers, pastoralists, traders and consumers established relationships based on economic cooperation. Kinship and personal networks were particularly important in informal trade because they facilitated access to market information, accommodation, credit and trusted commercial partners. Although trade did not eliminate disputes over land, grazing and other resources, it created relationships of economic interdependence across communities.

Trade also broadened access to manufactured and consumer goods. Clothing, processed foods, household products and other merchandise entered Plateau markets through Nigerian and Cameroonian commercial networks. Increasing consumption of these goods reinforced the monetisation of the local economy by encouraging households to obtain cash through agricultural sales, livestock trading, petty commerce and other economic activities.

8.5 Constraints on Socio-Economic Transformation

Despite these contributions, cross-border trade did not produce complete socio-economic transformation. Poor roads and difficult terrain increased transportation costs and restricted market access, while inadequate storage and processing facilities reduced the value obtained from agricultural commodities. Customs and immigration procedures also imposed additional costs, particularly on small-scale traders. Consequently, traders with better access to capital, transport and market information were generally better positioned to benefit from transboundary commerce.

The historical relationship can therefore be summarised as:

Cross-Border Trade → Market Access → Income and Employment → Agricultural Commercialisation → Market and Service Growth → Socio-Economic Transformation

This process was influenced by infrastructure, border regulation, security, processing capacity and prevailing market conditions. Cross-border commerce thus contributed significantly to livelihood diversification and market integration on the Mambilla Plateau, although longstanding infrastructural and institutional weaknesses prevented the region from fully exploiting its commercial potential.

STATE POLICIES, BORDER REGULATION AND CHALLENGES TO CROSS-BORDER TRADE

The development of cross-border trade on the Mambilla Plateau between 1960 and 2023 was influenced by changing government policies and border regulations. Following the 1961 plebiscite and the incorporation of the Plateau into Nigeria, commercial relations with Cameroon became international transactions subject to customs, immigration, taxation and security regulations. This created tension between historically established patterns of movement and the regulatory responsibilities of the Nigerian and Cameroonian states. While border communities continued to regard the frontier as an economic and social space, governments increasingly treated it as an international boundary requiring territorial control.

9.1 Border Administration and Economic Policies

Post-independence border administration increased the involvement of customs, immigration and security agencies in regulating the movement of people and commodities. These institutions were necessary for revenue collection, security and the control of prohibited goods, but documentation, inspections and charges could increase transaction costs, particularly for petty traders. Consequently, formal commerce continued alongside informal exchanges based on longstanding community networks.

National economic policies also affected the direction and profitability of trade. Nigeria's economic difficulties during the 1980s and the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986 produced currency depreciation, inflation and changes in commodity prices. Differences between Nigerian and Cameroonian prices and currencies sometimes encouraged cross-border exchange, while rising transport costs and restrictive policies reduced profitability. Nigeria's membership of ECOWAS also provided limited direct advantage because Cameroon belongs to the Central African regional economic system. Although the African Continental Free Trade Area later offered possibilities for greater integration, its practical impact on the Mambilla frontier remained limited by 2023.

9.2 Informal Trade and Border Restrictions

The difficult terrain and numerous customary routes across the frontier complicated effective regulation. Informal trade therefore remained important, particularly among small-scale traders. Such commerce should not automatically be equated with smuggling, since some traders exchanged lawful agricultural produce and household commodities through customary routes without completing formal procedures. Immigration requirements also affected traders, pastoralists and families whose social relationships predated the international boundary.

Government border restrictions could further disrupt local livelihoods. Nigeria's land-border closure beginning in 2019 demonstrated how national policies designed to address smuggling and protect domestic production could negatively affect communities dependent on neighbouring markets. This revealed the difference between national perceptions of borders as instruments of security and the everyday experience of border communities that depended upon regular transboundary interaction.

9.3 Infrastructure and Institutional Challenges

Poor roads remained a major obstacle to cross-border commerce. The mountainous terrain of the Mambilla Plateau increased transportation costs, restricted farmers' access to markets and contributed to post-harvest losses. Inadequate storage and processing facilities similarly limited value addition, particularly for agricultural commodities such as coffee. Currency fluctuations between the Nigerian naira and the Central African CFA franc further created uncertainty for traders.

Weak coordination among customs, immigration, security agencies and local authorities also contributed to delays and additional transaction costs. These problems encouraged some small traders to remain within informal commercial networks. Thus, the major constraints to cross-border trade were **poor infrastructure, inadequate processing and storage facilities, currency fluctuations, costly border procedures, insecurity and weak institutional coordination.**

Overall, state policies both regulated and constrained cross-border commerce. Effective border governance therefore required a balance between territorial control and commercial mobility. The historical experience of the Mambilla Plateau demonstrates that the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier was not merely a security boundary but also an important socio-economic space. Improved infrastructure, simplified legitimate trade procedures and stronger Nigeria–Cameroon cooperation would consequently enhance the developmental potential of historically established cross-border commerce.

Conclusion

This study has shown that cross-border trade was a significant component of the socio-economic transformation of the Mambilla Plateau between 1960 and 2023. Its roots predated Nigerian independence and were embedded in older networks of migration, kinship, pastoral mobility and commodity exchange linking communities across what later became the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier. Although the 1961 plebiscite transformed these relationships into formally international exchanges subject to customs, immigration and state regulation, earlier commercial ties persisted and adapted to new political conditions. Over time, agricultural produce, livestock, coffee, kola nut and consumer goods circulated through networks involving farmers, pastoralists, petty traders, transporters, intermediaries and merchants. Gembu and Nguroje emerged as important commercial centres, while frontier communities such as Mbamnga, Dorofi and Kan-Iyaka connected the Plateau more directly with Cameroon. These activities contributed to livelihood diversification, employment creation, agricultural commercialisation, market expansion, transportation services and increased social interaction.

However, the transformative impact of cross-border trade remained constrained by poor infrastructure, difficult terrain, inadequate processing and storage facilities, currency fluctuations, costly border procedures and weak institutional coordination. State regulation was necessary for security, sovereignty and revenue collection, but restrictive or poorly adapted policies sometimes increased

transaction costs and encouraged informal commerce. The study therefore concludes that the Nigeria–Cameroon frontier functioned simultaneously as a political boundary and an economic opportunity zone. Cross-border trade contributed substantially to the integration of the Mambilla Plateau into wider regional markets, but its full developmental potential was not realised. Greater investment in roads, agricultural processing, market infrastructure, simplified trade procedures and stronger Nigeria–Cameroon cooperation would enhance the capacity of historically rooted border commerce to support more sustainable socio-economic development.

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