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**COMMODITY SMUGGLING IN SELECTED COASTAL COMMUNITIES
OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA: AN INVESTIGATION OF
THE NATURE AND TECHNIQUES**

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ABSTRACT

Smuggling is a prevalent form of transnational organised crime that poses significant threats to the economic development and security of Nigeria, particularly in Akwa Ibom State. Despite efforts by security agents, the menace of commodity smuggling continues to undermine national and regional stability. This study investigated the nature, techniques and associated constraints of commodity smuggling in selected coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The research was anchored on the Situational Crime Prevention Theory developed by Ronald V. Clark in 1983. An exploratory survey design was employed, with a purposive selection of 186 participants, including community leaders, opinion leaders, youth leaders, residents, security agents in Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas. Data were collected through focus group discussions and key informant interviews and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The study found that commodity smuggling in the coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State is widespread and involved a variety of goods, including dangerous and substandard items that pose risks to public health and national security. Smugglers employ diverse and increasingly sophisticated techniques, using both land and sea routes and often operate through informal networks that involve bribery and collusion with corrupt officials. Despite various strategies adopted by security agencies to curb smuggling, such as surveillance and inter-agency collaboration, the effectiveness of these efforts is hindered by systemic challenges. It was recommended that the government should use the mass media as key stakeholders in sensitisation and attitude change and as well invest in modern surveillance technology such as drones, marine radar systems, and satellite monitoring.

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INTRODUCTION

Commodity smuggling is a pervasive global challenge and is widely recognised as a form of organised crime. It poses significant threats to national economies, governance structures, and public safety. Security agencies, play a critical role in countering this illicit activity. In response to the increasing complexity and multiplicity of criminal activities in contemporary societies, numerous specialised security agencies have been established, each vested with specific mandates to combat various forms of crime. Within this framework, the fundamental responsibilities of security operatives typically include crime prevention, detection, apprehension, and control (Mboho & Tahirih, 2014). The effective discharge of these functions necessitates coordinated strategies such as inter-agency collaboration, intelligence sharing, routine surveillance, arrests, and the prosecution of offenders (Mboho & Udo, 2019).

Smuggling is broadly defined as the clandestine movement of goods, whether for import or export, in violation of national laws, particularly in evasion of customs duties (UNODC, 2016). In the Nigerian context, smuggled goods frequently include arms, ammunition, narcotics, petroleum products, foreign parboiled rice, vegetable oil, poultry products, and second-hand clothing, among others. According to Buehn and Farzanegan (2012) and Mozayani (2019), smuggling is alarmingly prevalent in countries such as Pakistan, Iran, the Philippines, Cameroon, Kenya, Mali, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.

In many African countries, the scale of smuggling and the persistent ability of smugglers to evade arrest underscore the inefficacy of border security measures (Ojo, 2015; Gallien & Weigand, 2021; Ogunaike, 2021). Conversely, Foster (2018) identified countries with the lowest incidences of smuggling and other crime-related offenses, including Switzerland, Finland, Singapore, Ireland, Costa Rica, Algeria, the United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, Iceland, Hong Kong, Norway, Portugal, Austria, Estonia, Qatar, Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, Bahrain, Canada, Japan, Nepal, and Sweden. These countries often combine strong institutional frameworks with stringent enforcement mechanisms and high levels of economic inclusion.

Nigeria, as a coastal nation, shares maritime boundaries with Cameroon, Benin Republic, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Ghana. The majority of smuggled goods entering the country are reported to pass through these maritime corridors (Golup, 2012; Abegunde & Fabiyi, 2019; Bilesanmi, 2021; Ikoh, 2021; Moronfolu, 2022; Oritse, 2022). In a bid to address smuggling, the Federal Government of Nigeria enacted the Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA) (LFN, 2004), which stipulates penalties for the possession and trade of smuggled goods. Section 3(1–3) of the Act criminalises possession of certain prohibited or duty-evaded goods and prescribes custodial sentences without the option of fines for offenders. Additionally, the International Trade Administration (ITA, 2023) outlined commodities prohibited or restricted from import and export in Nigeria. These include, but are not limited to, foreign parboiled rice, used clothing (*okrika*), frozen poultry products such as chicken and turkey, various edibles, and illicit drugs. To enforce these prohibitions, relevant security agencies have been mobilised to monitor land borders, coastal areas, and waterways. Their activities include surveillance operations, raids on storage locations, arrests, prosecutions, and confiscation of contraband. Despite these concerted efforts, smuggled commodities continue to circulate widely in

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Nigerian markets, raising concerns about the effectiveness of existing enforcement strategies.

Smuggling poses a direct threat to both economic stability and national security. As Ojo and Okonula (2014) contend, the importation of counterfeit pharmaceuticals and substandard consumables undermines public health; the evasion of duties erodes government revenue; and the influx of foreign goods hampers the growth of local industries. Furthermore, smuggling contributes to the expansion of informal and black-market economies, fosters corruption, and facilitates the activities of transnational criminal networks, including terrorist organisations. The negative externalities of smuggling include money laundering, unfair market competition, increased insecurity, and institutional decay (Oladiyi, 2023).

To combat these threats, successive Nigerian administrations have established and empowered multiple security and law enforcement institutions, such as the Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Navy, Department of State Services, Nigeria Army, and Nigeria Air Force. In addition, policy frameworks and legislation concerning anti-smuggling efforts are continually revised. A notable example is the temporary closure of all land borders in 2018 by the Federal Government as a drastic measure to curb illicit trade. During this period, security personnel were deployed for extensive surveillance and interdiction operations, which included house-to-house searches, seizures of contraband goods, and the prosecution of offenders (Ismail & Rabi, 2022).

Nonetheless, the persistence of smuggling across the country indicates that existing enforcement efforts may not have yielded the desired deterrent effect. The extent to which security operatives have been successful in preventing, detecting, and controlling smuggling activities remains an open question that warrants empirical investigation. Consequently, this study aims to examine the nature, techniques and associated constraints of commodity smuggling in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Crime prevention and control are constitutionally assigned responsibilities of law enforcement agencies (Brown & Okorie, 2015; Okorie *et al.*, 2021; Okorie, 2023). Across the globe, nations impose regulatory restrictions on both the import and export of commodities, and the role of security operatives in combating illegal trade is widely acknowledged. However, recent evidence suggests that commodity smuggling remains more pervasive in regions such as Asia and Africa (Buehn & Farzanegan, 2012; Ojo, 2015; Mozayani, 2019; Gallien & Weigand, 2021). Within Nigeria, both land and maritime borders have been exploited for the smuggling of various prohibited items, including arms (Ikoh, 2021). Nigeria's large population and the citizens' increasing demand for foreign goods have rendered it a prime destination for smugglers, who exploit this demand by establishing well-organised smuggling networks (Ojo, 2015; Lautensach, 2020).

Government authorities are mandated to inspect all commodities intended for import or export; however, in recent times, smugglers have adopted increasingly sophisticated methods to evade interception. These developments appear to have rendered the enforcement of the Nigerian Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA, 2004) ineffective, as smuggling continues largely unabated (Idoniboye-Ob, 2022). The smuggled items, ranging from foreign parboiled rice, petroleum products, and dangerous drugs to used clothing, consumables, arms, and ammunition, pose significant economic, security, and health risks. Despite the legal frameworks in place, enforcement efforts have been

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undermined by the evolving tactics of smuggling networks and the limited capacity of the responsible agencies.

Several studies have postulated varying causes for the prevalence of smuggling in Nigeria. Scholars such as Ismail and Rabi (2022) have attributed it to systemic corruption and weak law enforcement mechanisms, while others, including Nduti *et al.*, (2019), point to the complicity of local residents and some security personnel. High unemployment and underemployment (Musai & Mehrara, 2014), restrictive trade policies, high import duties, product bans, and lower prices of goods in neighboring countries have also been identified as contributing factors, though many of these claims remain largely speculative and lack robust empirical support. Accordingly, there is a need for grounded, localised research to interrogate these issues from the perspectives of both security personnel and residents of border communities.

The paradox of widespread smuggling, despite the significant deployment of joint security personnel, including the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Navy (NN), Nigeria Army (NA), Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) and Nigeria Quarantine Service (NQS), raises critical questions about enforcement efficiency. Smuggled commodities are frequently sold in local markets, grocery stores, and even utilised within households and government institutions, further highlighting the depth of the problem (Anagor-Ewuzie, 2019).

The persistence of smuggling is also influenced by broader geopolitical and economic dynamics. Scholars such as Mark and Iwebi (2019) and Golup (2012) argue that neighboring countries, including Benin Republic, Togo, and Cameroon, often view smuggling as a source of livelihood and economic survival. Colonial trade legacies, systemic corruption, poor governance, unequal resource distribution, and institutional weaknesses have compounded these issues (Adeola & Oluyemi, 2012; Ojo & Okonula, 2014). The porous nature of Nigeria's borders, combined with inadequate manpower, limited equipment, youth unemployment, absence of government presence in coastal communities, and cultural glorification of wealth acquisition, further complicates efforts to stem smuggling (Bilesanmi, 2021; Mukhtar, 2021; Nzechi, 2022). Although previous studies including Hoffman and Melly (2015), Abegunde and Fabiyi (2019), Aliu *et al.* (2021) have examined the causes and implications of smuggling on national security and economic development in Nigeria; Olomu *et al.* (2019) and Nduti and Idhiambo (2020) examined the effectiveness of border enforcement in various parts of Nigeria, none of these studies employed a qualitative method of data collection and analysis to investigate the nature, techniques and associated constraints of commodity smuggling in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this study was to investigate the nature and techniques of commodity smuggling in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The specific objectives were to investigate:

- (i) the nature of commodities smuggled via coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State;
- (ii) the techniques employed by smugglers in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State,
- (iii) the associated constraints in curbing commodity smuggling in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

- (i) What nature of commodities is smuggled via coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State?
- (ii) What are the techniques employed by smugglers in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State?
- (iii) What are the associated constraints in curbing commodity smuggling in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Commodity Smuggling

Smuggling has been broadly conceptualised in the literature as an illicit economic activity that undermines national trade regulations and fiscal policies. Buehn and Farzanegan (2022) describe smuggling as a means through which individuals generate income by transporting goods across state borders in contravention of established legal frameworks. It is characterised by the surreptitious movement of goods designed to circumvent customs duties, often flourishing in environments where tariffs are particularly high. While this perspective underscores the economic incentive structure that enhances smuggling, the correlation between high customs duties and smuggling prevalence remains a subject of academic debate.

Gallien and Weigand (2022) offer a more inclusive definition, conceptualising smuggling as the deliberate cross-border movement of goods or persons in violation of prevailing legal provisions. This broader definition aligns with the provisions of Article 3(a) of the Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, an instrument adopted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and supported by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC, 2001). The inclusion of human smuggling within the broader discourse on transnational illicit flows underscores the multidimensional nature of smuggling as a global security concern.

Mozayani (2018) further expands the scope of smuggling to encompass clandestine commercial exchanges intentionally executed to circumvent trade agreements and regulatory standards. According to this definition, such exchanges are concealed from foreign trade authorities, such as customs agencies, and are excluded from formal commercial records. This view emphasises the informal and unregulated dimensions of cross-border trade, particularly in regions with porous borders and weak enforcement mechanisms.

Similarly, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI, 2016) defines commodity smuggling as the unauthorised movement of goods that are either outright prohibited or otherwise lawful but subject to evaded customs or excise duties. This definition underscores the dual nature of smuggled goods, encompassing both contraband and dutiable items whose importation or exportation fails to meet regulatory compliance. Collectively, these definitions converge on the central notion that smuggling represents a deliberate violation of trade laws, motivated by economic gain and facilitated by gaps in enforcement. However, the varying emphases, from the evasion of tariffs and trade controls to the clandestine movement of people and goods, illustrate the complexity of smuggling as both an economic and security phenomenon.

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Nature of Commodities Smuggled in Nigeria

Smuggling remains a persistent challenge across Nigeria's borders, with various commodities regularly trafficked in defiance of import and export regulations. The dynamic nature of smuggling activities means that the list of prohibited goods is regularly updated and difficult to exhaust. Studies have examined smuggling patterns in different parts of Nigeria, offering insight into the types of commodities involved and the underlying drivers.

Malachi and Mathias (2021), in their study on cross-border crimes in the Idiroko Border Community of Ogun State, revealed the presence of numerous unaccounted contrabands. Despite using a robust population sample of 23,258 residents, the findings pointed to limited enforcement and inadequate documentation of smuggled goods. The study recommended stronger enforcement strategies, infrastructural development, and stiffer penalties as deterrents to cross-border crime.

Similarly, Abegunde and Fabiyi (2019) investigated rice smuggling along the Nigerian seacoasts, particularly in Lagos and Ogun States, covering the period between 2006 and 2016. Utilising both primary and secondary data, their research found that rice was frequently smuggled due to socio-economic pressures such as unemployment, poverty, financial greed, and the allure of foreign products. Their findings highlighted the inefficiency of previous anti-smuggling efforts and proposed multi-faceted solutions including the creation of a specialised anti-smuggling agency, policy reform, empowerment programmes for youth, and the strengthening of security capacities.

While existing literature has provided substantial insights into smuggling activities in regions such as Ogun and Lagos States, there remains a paucity of research focused on the unique dynamics in coastal border communities of Akwa Ibom State, particularly in Mbo Local Government Area. The current study aims to fill this gap by exploring the specific types of commodities smuggled in Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas, examining the role and effectiveness of security agents, and analysing the socio-economic and institutional factors driving smuggling in this under-researched but strategically significant region. By focusing on Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of smuggling trends across Nigeria's diverse border environments.

Smuggling Techniques

Smuggling in Nigeria is characterised not only by the diversity of goods trafficked but also by the sophisticated and evolving techniques employed by smugglers. Omo (2012), cited in Ihenetu and Nwosi (2020), provides a comprehensive typology of the various methods adopted by smugglers across Nigeria. These methods include:

- i. Circumvention of Customs Jurisdiction: Utilising unapproved land borders, waterways, and even airspace to avoid official customs checkpoints.
- ii. Under-declaration of Merchandise: Declaring fewer goods on official import documents than are actually imported.
- iii. Under-valuation of Goods: Attaching a lower value to goods in order to reduce tariff obligations.
- iv. Misclassification of Goods: Intentionally categorising goods under incorrect tariff headings to attract lower import duties.
- v. Document Forgery: Altering import documents and manifests to conceal the true nature or value of imported goods.

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- vi. False Country of Origin Declaration: Misrepresenting the source country of goods to benefit from preferential tariff arrangements or avoid sanctions.
- vii. Short Landing and Re-export Evasion: Re-routing goods intended for one country through nearby ports to avoid import duties or smuggling them out again without proper re-export procedures.
- viii. Concealment: Hiding contraband goods inside legitimate products or packaging.
- ix. Bribery: Offering money to customs and border officials to facilitate illegal passage.
- x. Intimidation: Threatening enforcement agents to deter them from taking action.
- xi. Deception (Subterfuge): Using misleading or deceptive tactics to evade detection.
- xii. Diplomatic Cover: Exploiting diplomatic privileges and vehicles to move goods unnoticed.

These multifaceted smuggling tactics reflect the organised and often well-connected nature of smuggling networks operating across Nigeria's borders. Although prior studies, particularly those by Omo (2012) and others, have outlined in detail the general smuggling techniques used across Nigeria, there is limited empirical research examining how these techniques manifest specifically in the Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas, being coastal areas with unique maritime smuggling vulnerabilities. The current study sought to bridge this gap by investigating the localised techniques of commodity smuggling in Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan LGAs. This localised focus contributes to the broader literature by providing contextual insights into smuggling practices along Nigeria's southeastern maritime border.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the assumptions of Ronald V. Clarke's Situational Crime Prevention Theory (SCPT) developed in 1983 (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2012). The foundation of SCPT relies on the assumption that more opportunities lead to more crimes; easier ones attract more offenders, and such an existence of easy opportunities makes it possible for a life of crime (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2012). The central tenets of the situational crime prevention theory are deeply rooted in and influenced by other theories, like the rational choice theory, the routine activity theory, and the crime pattern theory (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2012). At the heart of every crime is a rational decision designed to weigh the risks and benefits for the offender, and in the absence of severe risk, offenders will focus on the benefits.

Routine activity theory relies on the occurrence of three key characteristics: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of security control. Prevention techniques are thus, aimed at neutralising the offenders and decreasing the number of suitable victims by increasing control at every given time. Advocates of situational crime prevention theory argued that it is necessary to forestall the crime from occurring in the first place, as opposed to concerning themselves with detecting the crime or punishing the criminal after the crime has occurred. They argued that crime prevention is achieved by influencing the would-be criminal's decision-making process through various environmental and protection measures (situational factors).

The situational crime prevention theory can be applied to this study in the sense that security agents are saddled with the responsibility of neutralising the opportunities available for crime through effective crime prevention, detection and control mechanisms. The preventive role of security agents could lessen the anticipated rewards from crime (commodity smuggling). The theory is apt in this study given the fact that strategies like

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the deployment of security personnel to Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan territorial waters to mount surveillance in the waterways, hinterlands, and other strategic locations; inter-agency collaboration and community partnership, among other tactics have been a veritable means of preventing and controlling activities of commodity smuggling. Hence, Brown and Okorie (2015) and other scholars have employed the situational crime prevention theory in their studies and they concluded that the presence of security agents at any given time and space has the propensity of deterring potential offenders.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State. The study locations were Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas. This study employed an exploratory survey research design, deemed suitable for its capacity to facilitate the collection of in-depth data necessary to address the stated research questions. The exploratory approach enabled the researcher to pose open-ended questions and gather responses from participants. This design was particularly effective in eliciting qualitative data through direct, face-to-face interactions with respondents. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), qualitative research offers valuable insights into the thoughts, emotions, and perspectives of participants, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the meanings individuals attribute to their live experiences.

Table 1: Distribution According to Selected LGA, Villages, Population and Methods of Data Collection

LGA	Village	Population					Total
		Community Leaders (FGD)	Youth Leaders (IDI)	Residents (FGD)	Opinion Leaders (IDI)	Security Agents (FGD)	
Mbo	Unyeghe, Akai Ebughu and Enwang	24	3	24	3	8	62
Ikot Abasi	UtaEwa, Edem Aya and Ibekwe	24	3	24	3	8	62
Uruan	Mbiakong, Ifiayong and Issiet	24	3	24	3	8	62
Total		72	9	72	9	24	186

Source: Field data (2025)

Table 1 presents how participants were distributed across three Local Government Areas (Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan). Each LGA includes three selected villages, and respondents were drawn from five key groups: community leaders, youth leaders, residents, opinion leaders, and security agents. These groups were engaged using two primary qualitative methods: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), with community leaders, residents, and security agents participating in FGDs, while youth and opinion leaders were involved through IDIs. Each LGA contributed an equal number of participants, totaling 62, resulting in an overall study population of 186 respondents. This distribution reflects a balanced representation of stakeholder groups relevant to the focus of the study.

The sample size for the study consists of 186 participants drawn from three Local Government Areas (Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan) in Akwa Ibom State. The selection was done using purposive sampling method. The use of purposive sampling allowed the

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researcher to focus on participants who are directly involved in or affected by the issues under investigation, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the data collected. The consistency in the number of participants across the selected LGAs also ensured balanced representation and comparability in the findings. The discussions and interviews were conducted in local dialect and English language. Each FGD session lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet and distraction-free environment. Discussions were audio-recorded using a tape-recording device, and supplementary field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors.

An interview guide was developed to facilitate the collection of primary data. The guide consisted of unstructured, open-ended questions organised into sections aligned with the research objectives. Section A addressed the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, while subsequent sections focused on issues directly related to the study's thematic concerns. Socio-demographic data were analysed descriptively using frequency tables and simple percentages. Qualitative data obtained from the FGDs were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. This approach allowed for the identification of recurrent themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. Field notes taken during interview sessions served as a supplementary data source to mitigate memory bias and provide contextual depth. All participants were briefed on the purpose, nature, and scope of the research. Verbal informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information provided. Participation was strictly voluntary, with individuals informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their socio-demographic characteristics (N=186)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	126	67.74
Female	60	32.26
Age		
20-29 years	40	21.51
30-39 years	65	34.95
40-49 years	31	16.67
50-59years	30	16.13
60+	20	10.75
Marital status		
Married	100	53.76
Single	60	32.26
Widowed	25	13.44
Divorced	1	0.54
Level of education		
Primary	50	26.88
Secondary	110	59.14
Tertiary	26	13.98
No formal education	0	0.00
Occupation		

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Paid Employment	40	21.51
Farming/Fishing	85	45.70
Business/Trading	31	16.67
Others	30	16.13
Religion		
Christianity	163	87.63
Islam	13	6.99
African Traditional Religion	8	4.30
Others	2	1.08

Source: Field data (2023)

The analysis of the socio-demographic data reveals a respondent population that is predominantly male, with a significant proportion between the ages of 30 and 39. Most respondents are married and have attained at least a secondary level of education, with none indicating a lack of formal education. The dominant occupation is farming and fishing, reflecting the coastal and agrarian nature of the study areas. Christianity is the most practiced religion, indicating a relatively homogenous religious background among participants.

These characteristics have important implications for the study. The predominance of males and individuals in their economically active years suggests that the population surveyed is directly involved in or affected by commodity smuggling activities, either as participants, observers, or stakeholders. The educational background, particularly the high rate of secondary education, implies a basic level of awareness and capacity to understand and engage with the issues under investigation, enhancing the reliability of responses gathered through focus group discussions and interviews.

The high proportion of respondents engaged in farming and fishing further contextualises the study, as these occupations are closely tied to the coastal environment where smuggling is prevalent. It also highlights the potential economic motivations behind community involvement or tolerance of smuggling. The religious and marital profiles suggest a socially stable population that can potentially be mobilised for community-based interventions. Overall, the socio-demographic composition supports the study's qualitative findings by demonstrating that the participants are well-positioned to provide informed insights into the dynamics of smuggling, the techniques employed, and the systemic constraints affecting anti-smuggling efforts in the coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State.

The Nature of Commodities Smuggled via Coastal Communities in Akwa Ibom State

The findings from focus group discussions and key informant interviews underscore a complex understanding of commodity smuggling among residents of Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Area. While many participants acknowledged the existence of smuggling activities, their perspectives often reflected a nuanced interplay between legality, morality, and socio-economic necessity. For several community members, the practice of smuggling is not merely perceived as an illegal enterprise, but rather as a vital means of economic survival in a context marked by chronic unemployment, underdevelopment, and absence of viable economic alternatives.

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Nonetheless, participants demonstrated a clear awareness that many of the commodities being transported through Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan coastal corridors are classified as contraband under Nigerian law. Items most frequently cited included foreign parboiled rice, used clothing (commonly referred to as *okrika*), frozen foods, refined vegetable oil, petroleum products, tobacco, alcoholic beverages (such as brandy and gin), cosmetics, and electronic gadgets. More sensitive and prohibited items such as illicit drugs, unlicensed pharmaceuticals, arms and ammunition were also mentioned, albeit with more caution. The respondents noted that many of these goods arrive in the night when security presence is either minimal or compromised, with smuggling activities peaking during the late-night or early-morning hours.

Security personnel corroborated these reports, confirming the regular interception of several of these items. They noted that smuggling operations in Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan are often organised and strategic, taking advantage of unguarded waterways, insider collusion, and low enforcement visibility. In addition, several informants indicated that these smuggling activities are not confined to isolated individuals, but involve coordinated networks that may include unemployed youths, local traders, and, at times, corrupt security officials who facilitate smuggling operations in exchange for financial inducements.

When asked to identify the primary actors involved in smuggling activities, nearly all respondents pointed to the youth population as the dominant group engaged in this practice. Given the high rate of joblessness in the area, smuggling was described as a practical response to economic hardship. Informants noted that these youths possess a high level of familiarity with the terrain, including unapproved entry points and escape routes, and often operate in syndicates with well-defined roles. Some smugglers, according to the reports, employ speedboats and other maneuverable vessels capable of evading security patrols, while others rely on community-based storage facilities to temporarily hold goods until safe transport can be arranged.

Techniques Employed by Smugglers in Coastal Communities in Akwa Ibom State
Insights from focus group discussions and key informant interviews revealed that smugglers in Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas, employ a wide range of methods shaped by factors such as the type of commodity, environmental conditions, socio-cultural practices, and the level of community complicity. The tactics adopted are often fluid and adaptive, reflecting the evolving dynamics of the smuggling landscape. Respondents consistently emphasised that smuggling methods vary according to the nature of goods involved. For instance, perishable or lightweight items may be moved using motorcycles, wheelbarrows, or manually carried, while larger consignments are typically conveyed via motor vehicles, speed boats, wooden canoes, fishing trawlers, and, in some cases, cargo vessels navigating the Atlantic coastline. These sea-based routes are particularly significant in Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan, given its geographical location and proximity to numerous unmonitored waterways.

Beyond transportation, concealment techniques such as false declaration of goods, underpayment of customs duties, and the forging of customs documentation are frequently employed to evade detection. Smugglers also rely on unauthorised routes and informal ports, often collaborating with insiders or enablers to facilitate passage through checkpoints. In some instances, shops, stalls, residential buildings, and makeshift storage facilities are used to temporarily hold contraband until a favorable opportunity arises for onward distribution. This method allows smugglers to exploit gaps in surveillance and operate under the guise of legitimate commerce.

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Another dimension highlighted was the role of communication and intelligence-sharing within smuggling networks. Efficient coordination and timely information, particularly about security patrol schedules were described as essential for successful smuggling operations. Respondents also noted that demand and supply dynamics influence smuggling behavior, with peak activities often aligning with market needs and periods of lax enforcement. A troubling aspect reported by several informants was the occasional violent confrontation between smugglers and security operatives. Armed resistance and ambushes have occurred, particularly during seizures, indicating that smuggling operations are not only economically motivated but also increasingly militarised.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first research question of the study sought to investigate the nature of commodities smuggled via Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas. The findings revealed that a wide range of goods, primarily consumer and household items are routinely trafficked through this region. These include, but are not limited to, foreign parboiled rice, vegetable oil, pharmaceutical products, tobacco, second-hand clothing (commonly referred to as *okrika*), toiletries, cosmetics, footwear, used automobile tyres and spare parts, electronics, various textiles (such as towels and bed sheets), beverages, fresh and frozen meat, as well as endangered species like pangolins. These commodities are frequently sold in local markets and are widely used within households. However, it was noted that some of these goods, particularly food and pharmaceutical items are expired or substandard, thereby posing significant health risks to consumers. The findings of this study corroborated those of Abegunde and Fabiyi (2019) and Malachi and Mathias (2021), who identified similar categories of smuggled goods in Nigeria's border regions.

The second research question addressed in this study focused on uncovering the techniques employed in the smuggling of commodities within Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas. The findings revealed that smuggling activities are strategically conducted during periods of low security presence, particularly at night or during security shift changes. A variety of transportation means are employed to facilitate the movement of contraband goods, including speed boats, cargo vessels, lorries, commercial buses, taxis, motorcycles, tricycles, and even head-portage by local hustlers. In many instances, smuggled goods are temporarily stored in residential houses within the communities before being transported to their final destinations, highlighting the level of local complicity in the smuggling network.

The findings also suggest a troubling level of collusion between smugglers and security agents. Respondents reported instances where security personnel not only accepted bribes to overlook smuggling activities but also actively participated by providing escorts for smugglers or facilitating the safe passage of goods. This indicates a breakdown in enforcement and an erosion of institutional integrity. These results supported earlier work done by Ihenetu and Nwosi (2020), who identified similar smuggling tactics and the complicity of enforcement agencies in contraband movement across borders. Furthermore, the findings aligned with the propositions of the Situational Crime Prevention Theory, which emphasises the importance of proactive and context-specific interventions by security agents.

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CONCLUSION

The study investigated the nature, techniques and associated challenges of commodity smuggling in coastal commodities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study locations were Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas. Findings from the study revealed a wide range of commodities being smuggled into and through the coastal communities of Mbo, Ikot Abasi and Uruan Local Government Areas, such as dangerous and expired drugs, petroleum products, foreign parboiled rice, arms and ammunition, frozen foods, vegetable oil, used clothing, pharmaceuticals, and various processed food items. These goods, often expired or substandard, pose significant threats to public health and national security.

The methods employed by smugglers were found to be diverse and often sophisticated, involving the use of marine and land-based transportation such as wooden boats, speed boats, cargo vessels, lorries, tricycles, and motorcycles. Additionally, smuggling was facilitated through informal networks involving bribery, concealment, under-invoicing, and collusion with corrupt security personnel.

This study has made a significant contribution to knowledge by offering an insight, into the nature, techniques, and associated constraints of commodity smuggling in the coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State. By focusing on specific local government areas and using a qualitative approach, it illuminated the complex dynamics of smuggling, including the types of illicit goods, the evolving techniques employed by smugglers, and the systemic weaknesses that hinder effective enforcement. The study also exposes the complicity of some security personnel and the reluctance of community members to cooperate with authorities, revealing critical gaps in anti-smuggling efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's objectives and findings, the following recommendations were proposed:

- i. Given the porosity of our borders wide range of commodities being smuggled, including hazardous and substandard goods, the government should invest in modern surveillance technology such as drones, marine radar systems, and satellite monitoring. These tools will enhance real-time tracking of illegal movements across coastal borders and help identify concealed smuggling operations.
- ii. Since smugglers use sophisticated techniques and often rely on corrupt networks, there is a need for stronger collaboration among customs, marine police, navy, and other security agencies. This should be complemented with strict enforcement of anti-corruption protocols, regular audits, and the prosecution of compromised officials to restore public trust and institutional credibility.
- iii. For community engagement and education, government and security agencies should use the mass media as key stakeholders in sensitisation and attitude change.

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