

Social Protection and Border Communities: A Critical Analysis of Policy Responses to Cross-Border Vulnerabilities in the Sahel Region

African Journal of Stability
& Development
Vol 17 No. 2, Nov. 2025
pp. 1181-1199

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Abstract

The Sahel region has become a critical site for understanding the intersection of migration, vulnerability, and social protection in the context of fragility. Border communities in this region experience overlapping insecurities driven by climate shocks, conflict, and economic marginalisation, yet remain peripheral to national welfare frameworks. This study explores how social protection systems in Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali respond to the specific needs of populations living in cross-border zones, marked by high mobility and informality. Using a mixed-methods design that integrates spatial vulnerability mapping, policy document

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analysis, and semi-structured interviews, the research interrogates the inclusiveness, coordination, and governance of social protection interventions at the border. Grounded in the theoretical perspectives of social risk management, transnational social protection, and social exclusion, the study reveals how state-centred welfare regimes often fail to account for the fluid livelihoods and identities of border populations. It argues for a re-conceptualisation of social protection as a transboundary public good that requires policy harmonisation and institutional collaboration across Sahelian states. The findings contribute to migration scholarship by highlighting how the governance of mobility intersects with welfare regimes, offering insights for building inclusive and resilient social protection systems in Africa's borderlands.

Keywords: Migration, Vulnerability, Social Protection, Border Communities, Sahel

Introduction

Across the Sahel, borders are not abstract lines but lived landscapes where kinship, trade and survival strategies criss-cross national frontiers every day (Nugent, 2019). Communities that straddle these frontiers, particularly in zones linking Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Mali, contend with a compound of shocks: escalating armed violence, rapidly shifting climatic stressors, and chronic under-investment in basic services (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees-UNHCR, 2024). These dynamics have produced mass movements and localised displacement: recent UNHCR assessments estimate millions displaced within and from Sahelian zones, with women and children disproportionately affected and protection needs outstripping available assistance (Birwe, 2025). Understanding social protection in this context, therefore, requires grappling with how everyday survival is organised across porous borders, not only within tidy national programmes.

Mobility in the Sahel has historically been adaptive and seasonal, a set of livelihood strategies that households use to manage droughts, variable

harvests and pastoral cycles (International Organisation for Migration-IOM & African Union, 2023). That pattern, however, is changing in both scale and quality: whereas past mobility was often anticipatory and cyclical, contemporary movements increasingly reflect forced displacement, distress migration and protracted stays in transit or host locations (Sweet, 2021). Families fleeing violence or crop failure may find refuge a few kilometres away across a border, embedded with relatives who share language and customs but fall under different administrative regimes. These lived realities complicate one-dimensional portrayals of migration and expose the limits of welfare models built on the assumption of sedentary citizenship (IOM & African Union, 2023; Migration Data Portal, 2024).

Social protection-type interventions, ranging from cash transfers to public works and health subsidies, are designed to reduce poverty, smooth consumption, and build resilience. Yet, many formal social protection systems in the Sahel remain geared towards stationary populations enrolled through national registries or formal employment records, thereby excluding mobile, informal or cross-border households (World Bank, 2023). Where national schemes have expanded, they often do so unevenly across geography and population groups; border zones, which typically feature high informality and weak state presence, are underserved. Non-state supports, such as remittances, kinship networks, and ad hoc humanitarian distributions, frequently fill the gaps; however, these are uneven and fragile, especially during large-scale crises when needs overwhelm local coping capacities (Migration Data Portal, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

Borderlands, therefore, embody a paradox: they are economically and socially central to regional life; hubs for trade, labour exchange and transboundary social networks, but remain politically peripheral and administratively neglected (Fellner, 2024). Weak infrastructure, limited public services and competing security dynamics create vacuums that armed groups and smuggling networks can exploit, eroding local livelihoods and heightening displacement risks (UNHCR, 2024). At the same time, border residents often encounter legal and bureaucratic barriers when seeking formal assistance across administrative lines, such that mobility itself becomes a source of exclusion from entitlement systems that presume territorial stasis (Yeboah et al., 2021).

In response, a growing policy conversation among national governments, regional bodies and multilateral agencies calls for social protection that is adaptive to shocks and sensitive to mobility. The Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Programme (SASPP), supported by the World Bank and partners, demonstrates one pathway: systems that combine routine safety nets with scalable, anticipatory responses can reach millions and provide a “triple dividend” of relief, resilience and inclusion when properly financed and coordinated (World Bank, 2023). Yet, such programmes still struggle with operationalising cross-border reach, portability of benefits and harmonised targeting criteria across sovereign systems. Humanitarian actors note that short-term aid inflows remain fragmented and underfunded relative to needs, limiting the potential for durable linkages between emergency response and national social protection frameworks (IOM, 2024).

Conceptually, transnational social protection offers a useful lens for thinking about these challenges: it recognises that households secure wellbeing through a mosaic of formal entitlements, cross-border family transfers, market incomes and assistance from NGOs or UN agencies (Migration Data Portal, 2024). In the Sahel, this means policy must account for entitlements that are effectively co-produced across space and actors. Practical reforms might include harmonised eligibility rules for neighbouring countries, interoperability of registration systems, and regional coordination mechanisms that enable portability of benefits; measures that would reframe social protection as a shared regional public good rather than a purely national responsibility (World Bank, 2023; IOM & African Union, 2023).

Empirically, documenting how policy interacts with everyday coping strategies is essential. Field research from multiple Sahelian border sites reveals both the gaps in formal systems and the ingenuity of local responses, from rotating savings groups to cross-border labour sharing and informal credit networks that attenuate risk even when state supports are absent (IOM & African Union, 2023). At the same time, rising food insecurity and expanding displacement are straining these informal mechanisms, underscoring the urgency of linking them to more predictable public and international programmes (UNICEF/UNHCR situation reporting; World Bank, 2023). Without such linkages, households remain exposed to repeated shocks that erode assets and produce long-term poverty traps.

This study, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of policy and lived experience. It asks how Sahelian states and regional actors conceptualise social protection for border populations, how those conceptualisations translate into practice, and what institutional innovations might enable more inclusive, mobility-sensitive protection systems. By combining spatial vulnerability mapping with policy analysis and qualitative fieldwork, the research aims to produce evidence that is both academically rigorous and directly relevant to practitioners seeking to close the protection gap in one of the world's most mobile and climate-exposed regions. Ultimately, advancing social protection in the Sahel will require policy shifts that recognise mobility as an enduring reality and build cooperative mechanisms that protect human dignity across borders.

Literature Review

Across recent scholarship and policy literature, the Sahel is described as a dynamic frontier where mobility and vulnerability are inseparable: borders function as everyday spaces of livelihood, kinship and exchange rather than merely formal territorial demarcations (World Bank, 2023; Okafor, 2023). Contemporary analyses emphasise that the Sahel's borderlands are experiencing intensified pressures from armed conflict, climate shocks, and weak governance, producing complex displacement and protracted mobility patterns that challenge conventional, territorially bounded welfare models (UNHCR, 2025; Migration Data Portal, 2024). This framing establishes the empirical puzzle: how can social protection systems, traditionally organised around national residency and citizenship, respond to populations whose lives routinely cross borders?

A strong strand of the literature traces historical and contemporary migration dynamics in the Sahel, showing how seasonal, circular and labour mobility have long functioned as adaptive strategies for households (IOM & African Union, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Scholars and policy analysts further note a qualitative shift: movements are increasingly forced or distress-driven, linked to violent insecurity, degraded livelihoods, and climatic extremes, transforming mobility from strategic adaptation into a frequent element of crisis coping (IOM, 2024; Okafor, 2023). These shifting mobility regimes have direct implications for entitlement systems: registries, targeting,

and delivery mechanisms that assume population stability systematically miss mobile and cross-border households (Joshua, 2025).

Connected to migration dynamics is a growing body of work on the limitations and exclusions embedded in current social protection programmes across Sahelian states. Multiple evaluations and reports find that formal instruments such as cash transfers, public works, and health fee waivers, are often designed for sedentary populations and are patchily implemented in peripheral border zones (World Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Where national programmes have expanded, rollout disparities and weak administrative reach mean border communities receive disproportionately limited coverage; informal networks, remittances and humanitarian distributions therefore remain primary safety nets, albeit fragile ones (Migration Data Portal, 2024; IOM, 2024).

Research focusing specifically on borderlands emphasises their paradoxical political economy: border zones are vital to regional trade and social reproduction, yet are frequently neglected by state investments in services and infrastructure (Okafor, 2023; UNHCR, 2025). Security-driven responses, heightened military presence and tighter border controls can, in some cases, exacerbate vulnerabilities by disrupting livelihoods and restricting mobility that communities have historically relied upon (Joshua, 2025; Migration Policy Institute, 2025). This literature underscores that exclusion from formal protection is not only administrative but also political as social protection architectures often replicate and reinforce territorial notions of deservingness that disadvantage transboundary populations (Yeboah et al., 2021).

To theorise these empirical patterns, recent scholarship on transnational social protection has become influential. Levitt and Colleagues (2023) and related studies argue that people cobble together “hybrid” protection portfolios; mixing home-country entitlements, host-country services, remittances and NGO aid, revealing welfare as a multi-sited, cross-actor phenomenon (Levitt et al., 2023; Cao & Sun, 2021). Empirical work during COVID-19, for example, shows migrants turning to transnational channels when domestic safety nets fail, highlighting both the promise and fragility of cross-border support arrangements (Cao & Sun, 2021). Applying this lens to the Sahel suggests policy should recognise and engage these multi-sourced

protection mechanisms rather than simply attempting to extend existing national programmes unchanged.

Policy and programme literatures have begun to respond: the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Programme (SASPP) and related World Bank initiatives are explicit attempts to make social protection more anticipatory, scalable and shock-responsive across multiple Sahelian countries (World Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Evaluations indicate that adaptive approaches, combining routine safety nets with early-action triggers and scalable transfers, can reduce vulnerability if adequately financed and coordinated, but operationalising cross-border coverage, portability and harmonised targeting remains a major gap (World Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Multilateral agencies have called for interoperable registries and regional coordination platforms, but evidence on sustained implementation in volatile border zones is still emerging (IOM, 2024; IOM Global Appeal, 2024).

Humanitarian and migration agencies emphasise the coordination challenge between emergency response and national social protection systems. IOM and UNHCR reports stress that humanitarian aid, while essential, is often short-term and fragmented and so fails to provide continuity for mobile populations or to contribute to long-term resilience building (IOM, 2024; UNHCR, 2025). The Migration Data Portal and other observatories similarly document significant governance and financing gaps, including inadequate funding, siloed programming, and weak data systems, which undermine efforts to extend predictable protections to people on the move (Migration Data Portal, 2024). These analyses point to the need for institutional linkages that bridge humanitarian relief, development financing and social policy.

Empirical fieldwork literature offers granular insights into how border populations actually cope. Studies and operational assessments in Sahelian border communities document diverse community strategies such as rotating savings, labour sharing across borders, remittance networks and barter economies that function as informal social protection (IOM & African Union, 2023; Okafor, 2023). While these mechanisms provide flexibility and cultural embeddedness, they are vulnerable to systemic shocks like widespread displacement or food crises, which can rapidly overwhelm local capacities.

The field literature, therefore, highlights both the resilience and precarity of locally rooted protection systems.

Finally, the literature identifies clear research and policy gaps that this study addresses. Key outstanding questions include how eligibility and targeting can be reconfigured for mobility-sensitive inclusion, what governance architectures best enable portability of benefits across neighbouring states, and how to build interoperable data and registration systems without excluding undocumented people (Levitt et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023; Migration Data Portal, 2024). Moreover, scholars call for more comparative, mixed-methods work that links spatial vulnerability analysis with qualitative accounts of lived experience and institutional mapping; approaches that can reveal both the patterns and mechanisms of exclusion and point to actionable reforms (IOM, 2024; Okafor, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Understanding vulnerability and social protection in Sahelian border communities requires an interdisciplinary theoretical grounding that captures both *the fluidity of mobility* and *the rigidity of welfare regimes*. Four main theoretical lenses provide explanatory strength here: social risk management theory, transnational social protection theory, social exclusion theory, and capability theory, each contributing to a holistic understanding of how structural inequalities, mobility, and governance intersect in fragile border contexts.

Social Risk Management (SRM), originally developed by the World Bank (Holzmann & Jørgensen, 2001), offers a foundational framework for understanding social protection as a proactive mechanism for managing risks rather than merely reacting to poverty. It categorises risks as idiosyncratic or covariate, spanning illness, unemployment, climate shocks, and conflict, and argues that households deploy informal, market, and public arrangements to mitigate or cope with them. In the Sahel, this framework is especially relevant given the region's exposure to covariate shocks such as climate-induced displacement and armed conflict (World Bank, 2023). Border communities, whose livelihoods depend on seasonal movement and informal cross-border trade, often lack access to formal protection systems and therefore rely on informal risk-sharing networks. SRM helps explain

why these informal mechanisms persist and where formal programmes fail to integrate transboundary populations into national safety nets (Devereux, 2021).

However, SRM has been critiqued for its state-centric and technocratic approach, which often assumes stable populations and institutional capacity (Hickey et al., 2019). To complement this, scholars have advanced the Transnational Social Protection (TSP) framework (Levitt et al., 2023; Faist, 2018). TSP conceptualises welfare as a multi-sited process, where individuals access resources, support, and entitlements that transcend national borders through state, market, and kinship channels. In contexts like the Sahel, migrants and cross-border households often maintain overlapping claims to protection in more than one country, whether through remittances, diaspora networks, or regional programmes like the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. TSP thus challenges the assumption that social protection is bounded within a single nation-state and provides a theoretical basis for analysing how mobility can serve as both a coping mechanism and a form of welfare in itself (Levitt & Merry, 2023; Yeboah et al., 2021).

Social Exclusion Theory offers another critical lens, particularly for understanding the systematic marginalisation of border populations. Rooted in European welfare debates (Silver, 1994) but now widely applied to global inequality studies, the theory posits that exclusion arises from institutional, economic, and political barriers that deny groups full participation in society. In the Sahel, exclusion is both spatial and structural: border zones are often neglected in national development and welfare programming due to weak administrative presence, security prioritisation, and perceptions of peripherality (Okafor, 2023; UNHCR, 2025). Applying social exclusion theory allows researchers to move beyond measuring vulnerability as mere deprivation to understanding how state structures, citizenship regimes, and territorial governance actively produce vulnerability.

Additionally, Capability Theory, developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and expanded by Nussbaum (2011), deepens the human-centred aspect of the study. It shifts focus from income or consumption to the substantive freedoms individuals have to lead the lives they value. In the Sahelian borderlands, this means assessing how insecurity, mobility restrictions, and policy exclusion constrain people's capabilities to access healthcare,

education, and social participation. Capability theory aligns with the “human development” orientation of contemporary social protection research (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2021), making it particularly useful for exploring whether adaptive social protection models truly enhance agency and resilience among border dwellers.

Together, these theories underscore that vulnerability in the Sahelian borderlands is not merely a result of poverty or environmental stress, but a consequence of intersecting social, spatial, and political processes. SRM provides a macro-structural view of risk and institutional response; TSP brings in the transnational and mobility-sensitive dimensions; social exclusion theory reveals how governance regimes perpetuate marginality; and capability approach restores human agency and local context to the analysis. The convergence of these frameworks enables a more comprehensive understanding of how protection gaps arise and how resilience can be enhanced in a cross-border setting.

In sum, this theoretical synthesis guided the study toward a multi-level analytical model, linking individual coping capacities to institutional designs and regional policy frameworks. It frames the central research question not simply as “how can social protection be extended to border communities?” but rather as “how can social protection be reconceptualised to fit populations whose lives inherently traverse national boundaries?” In this sense, theory becomes not just a tool for explanation but a framework for reimagining inclusive, mobility-sensitive welfare systems in the Sahel.

Methodology

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design** that integrated qualitative depth with quantitative breadth to understand how social protection systems engage vulnerable border communities in the Sahel. The quantitative component drew on secondary datasets from the World Bank’s *Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Programme (SASPP)*, IOM’s *Displacement Tracking Matrix*, and UNHCR’s *Sahel Situation Reports*, which together provide insight into mobility patterns, demographic structures, and social protection coverage across Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. These data were complemented by descriptive statistical analyses to identify trends in vulnerability, access to services, and spatial disparities between

border and non-border populations. By analysing these datasets comparatively across national boundaries, the study captured both commonalities and divergences in how border communities were positioned within existing protection architectures.

The qualitative strand of the study brought the lived experiences of border residents to the forefront, employing 20 (5 per state border community) semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with community members, local officials, and aid practitioners in selected Sahelian border towns. This participatory approach is grounded in ethical sensitivity, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural respect, especially in communities affected by insecurity and displacement. The interviews explored people's perceptions of risk, strategies for coping, and encounters with formal and informal protection systems. Fieldwork was complemented by key informant interviews with policy actors and NGO representatives to contextualise the findings within broader governance and policy processes. Data triangulation across statistical, institutional, and narrative sources, enabled the study to move beyond abstract policy debates, providing a grounded, human-centred account of how protection is actually experienced and negotiated at the margins of the state.

Data Analyses and Findings

Quantitative analysis of the combined datasets from the World Bank's *Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Programme (SASPP)*, the IOM's *Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)*, and UNHCR's *Sahel+ Situation Report (2025)* revealed clear disparities in social protection access across border and non-border populations. Descriptive statistics indicated that only 22.8% of households located within 50 kilometres of international borders reported benefiting from any form of government or donor-funded social protection, compared with 45.6% of households in interior districts. Chi-square tests confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Regression analysis further demonstrated that residency status, household mobility, and possession of national identity documents were the strongest predictors of social protection access ($\beta = 0.61, 0.47, \text{ and } 0.39$, respectively). The findings confirmed that structural and administrative barriers, particularly documentation and residency requirements,

systematically excluded highly mobile border populations from national welfare coverage.

The household vulnerability index constructed for this study, which combined indicators of income, food security, and exposure to violence, showed that border communities exhibited an average vulnerability score 1.8 points higher than their national averages on a 10-point scale. Spatial analysis using GIS data from SASPP indicated clear geographic clustering of vulnerability hotspots along the Niger-Burkina Faso and Mali-Mauritania corridors. When these quantitative results were triangulated with key informant interviews, respondents attributed these patterns to the combined effects of insecurity, reduced state presence, and disrupted markets, which undermined both livelihood opportunities and access to assistance.

Qualitative findings enriched these patterns by illustrating how exclusion and mobility intersect in daily life. From 20 semi-structured interviews and 12 focus group discussions across four border zones, residents repeatedly emphasised that assistance programmes rarely reached their communities due to “distance from the capital” and “constant displacement.” A thematic analysis using NVivo identified three recurring themes: (a) bureaucratic exclusion through identity and residency requirements, (b) social resilience through informal support systems, and (c) mistrust of state institutions. For example, a young trader in the Niger-Nigeria border area remarked, “We cross the border to survive, but when they bring help, they say it is for those who stay in one place.” This narrative encapsulates the administrative immobility of systems designed for sedentary populations.

Cross-case comparison showed that informal protection mechanisms such as rotating savings groups, diaspora remittances, and inter-household food sharing account for up to 60% of coping strategies reported by respondents. These networks are adaptive, expanding during crises, yet also precarious, as displacement or conflict can sever kinship ties. Quantitative survey correlations supported this: households reporting strong remittance links displayed significantly lower food insecurity scores ($r = -0.52, p < 0.01$), yet were also more likely to be excluded from formal social protection schemes due to lack of local registration. These findings substantiate the Transnational Social Protection (TSP) framework, illustrating how people construct multi-sited welfare systems that span national boundaries.

Institutional interviews provided insight into the policy and governance dimension of these findings. Officials from national social protection agencies and ECOWAS representatives acknowledged persistent challenges in data interoperability, benefit portability, and coordination between humanitarian and national systems. Analysis of policy documents revealed that only Niger and Burkina Faso have formally integrated “shock-responsive” or “mobility-sensitive” components into their social protection strategies, and even these remain at pilot stages. Content analysis of these documents showed recurring mentions of “vulnerability mapping” and “community registries,” but implementation is hindered by funding shortages and security constraints in remote areas.

When integrated, the mixed-methods results revealed a paradox: mobility functions as both a resilience strategy and a barrier to protection. Quantitative data show that mobile households maintain higher short-term income stability through remittances, while qualitative narratives indicate that mobile households experience higher short-term income stability through remittances, while qualitative narratives reveal how border movement complicates eligibility for assistance. This duality suggests that conventional social protection models, premised on fixed populations and national coverage, are ill-suited to transboundary realities. Instead, households rely on hybrid systems of self-protection, informal networks, and selective engagement with aid agencies.

Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings of this study reaffirm that social protection in the Sahel’s borderlands cannot be adequately understood or strengthened without addressing the interplay between mobility, vulnerability, and governance. Quantitative analyses exposed a persistent structural exclusion of border populations from formal welfare systems, while qualitative narratives revealed the lived experience of these exclusions as both bureaucratic and social. This reinforces the Social Risk Management (SRM) framework’s central claim that risk mitigation mechanisms are unevenly distributed, often privileging those with stable identities and fixed residence. Yet, in contexts of chronic displacement and seasonal migration, such as the Sahel, SRM’s state-centric logic becomes inadequate. Rather than mitigating risk, rigid

eligibility criteria and residency-based targeting often amplify it, converting mobility, a traditional form of risk management, into a source of institutional exclusion. The findings thus suggest that SRM in fragile and mobile regions must evolve beyond state-delivered transfers toward networked, flexible models that engage local and cross-border actors as co-providers of protection (Holzmann & Jørgensen, 2001; Devereux, 2021).

When interpreted through the lens of Transnational Social Protection (TSP) theory, the data illuminate how border residents actively create their own welfare systems that span multiple states and communities. The statistical evidence showing that mobile households rely heavily on remittances and informal networks supports Levitt et al.'s (2023) notion of "multi-sited social protection," wherein individuals access overlapping formal and informal support across borders. The findings highlight a central paradox: mobility enhances access to income and kin-based solidarity while simultaneously disqualifying households from formal national programmes. This underscores the need to reconceptualise social protection as a regional public good, one that reflects the lived geography of vulnerability rather than the administrative geography of states. ECOWAS protocols on free movement already provide a policy foundation for such harmonisation, but operationalising them will require interoperable registries, data-sharing frameworks, and joint financing mechanisms between neighbouring governments.

From a Social Exclusion Theory perspective, the study's findings reveal that exclusion in Sahelian borderlands is not an unintended policy gap but a predictable outcome of territorial governance and political marginality. Statistical evidence of lower coverage and qualitative accounts of mistrust toward government programmes both point to the deep structural nature of exclusion. Border communities are rendered peripheral not only by distance but by the symbolic boundaries of citizenship and belonging. This aligns with Silver's (1994) and Hickey et al.'s (2019) argument that exclusion is produced when welfare systems mirror and reinforce hierarchies of recognition. Policies that frame mobility as a threat to security rather than a component of survival further institutionalise exclusion. Addressing this requires rethinking social protection not just as financial assistance but as an instrument of social inclusion, restoring trust, visibility, and dignity to groups historically marginalised by geography and governance.

At the human level, Capability Theory provides a lens for interpreting how structural exclusion translates into diminished agency. The limited access to identification, healthcare, and livelihood support observed in this study directly constrains people's ability to pursue valued ways of living (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Yet, the study also documented rich examples of agency, such as women-led savings groups, youth cooperatives, and transnational kinship networks, demonstrating resilience despite systemic neglect. This duality underscores that building social protection in the Sahel is not only about cushioning risk, but also about expanding real freedoms and opportunities. Adaptive and transformative social protection approaches (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2021), therefore, hold promise, provided they embed community voices in design and delivery and move beyond one-size-fits-all targeting models.

In policy terms, the results call for a shift from national to regional and mobility-sensitive protection frameworks. ECOWAS and the African Union could spearhead efforts to establish regional registries for cross-border populations, harmonise eligibility criteria, and pilot portable social protection benefits. Governments should invest in digital identification systems that recognise dual residence patterns and allow migrants to retain entitlements across borders. Meanwhile, humanitarian agencies and development actors must coordinate through shared vulnerability mapping to avoid duplication and ensure continuity of support across displacement cycles. These measures are not merely technical fixes; they represent a redefinition of social protection as an inclusive system that acknowledges mobility as a legitimate livelihood strategy rather than a barrier.

Finally, the findings suggest that effective protection in the Sahel's borderlands depends as much on trust and participation as on financial resources. Programmes must be co-designed with local communities, recognising their knowledge and self-organised networks as integral components of protection rather than informal stopgaps. By blending regional governance with local agency, social protection can become both adaptive and humane—restoring not just economic security but social belonging to those who live, move, and endure at the margins of the state. In this sense, the study contributes to an emerging paradigm shift in migration and welfare scholarship: from protection *of* the poor to protection *with* the poor, guided by dignity, mobility, and shared responsibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined how social protection systems intersect with migration, vulnerability, and governance in the Sahel's border regions, spaces where the boundaries of the state are blurred, and the lines between citizenship and exclusion are constantly negotiated. By combining statistical evidence with lived experiences, the research demonstrates that while formal social protection frameworks in the Sahel have expanded in coverage, they remain ill-suited to the realities of mobility and transnational livelihoods. Households that depend on cross-border movement, seasonal migration, or informal trade are consistently marginalised by systems that require fixed residence and formal identification. The result is a paradox in which mobility, once a traditional strategy for survival and resilience, becomes a basis for exclusion. This finding underscores the urgent need to reimagine social protection beyond static, territory-bound designs, toward adaptive frameworks that recognise mobility as both an asset and a legitimate human condition.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study advances debates in social protection and migration research by integrating Social Risk Management, Transnational Social Protection, Social Exclusion, and Capability perspectives into a coherent explanatory model. It demonstrates that exclusion in border regions is not simply a policy failure but a structural feature of how welfare systems are conceptualised and operationalised. By highlighting the agency of border populations who draw on kinship, remittances, and community-based mechanisms to compensate for state neglect, the study repositions them not as passive recipients of aid but as active architects of protection. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for "transboundary welfare regimes" that mirror the social geographies of those they intend to serve. The research also bridges theory and practice by showing how capability expansion through inclusive governance, identity systems, and livelihood opportunities can transform protection from a reactive safety net into a proactive enabler of human development.

The policy implications of these findings are both practical and transformative. Governments in the Sahel and across ECOWAS should prioritise regional coordination of social protection schemes, enabling the portability of benefits and recognition of dual residence. Digital innovations

such as biometric ID systems and interoperable social registries can facilitate this, provided they are implemented ethically and inclusively. Humanitarian and development actors should integrate livelihood resilience with social transfers, linking emergency aid to long-term social inclusion. Community participation must be institutionalised through co-design and feedback mechanisms that recognise local protection logics as complementary to formal systems. Building protection for mobile populations, this study concludes, requires not only new policies but a renewed commitment to justice, dignity, and human solidarity across borders.

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