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# THE MANO RIVER UNION AND IMPACT ON CROSS-BORDER SECURITY AND TRADE FACILITATION IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION

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**Abstract**

The Mano River Union (MRU) was a product of Liberian and Sierra Leonean formalization of cooperation in the harmonization of cross-border trade and peaceful relations. Though other states of Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire became members in 1980 and 2008, expanding the Union's reach and complexity. Previous studies centred on the AU's bold steps on security in Africa with little attention paid to the MRU's mandate on maintenance of cross-border trade and security for peaceful relations within the region. The paper is therefore designed to examine: the evolution of Mano River Union, the role on cross-border security and trade in Africa, and implications for regional security. Drawing on the "regional security complex" theory, this study analyses three critical dimensions of the MRU's security architecture. Using a qualitative design and relying on secondary sources such as policy documents, regional agreements, and media reports. Findings reveal that the Mano River Union was a product of Liberian and Sierra Leonean formalization of cooperation in the harmonization of cross-border trade and peaceful relations. Also, the MRU has played a critical role of enhancing regional security cooperation and facilitated trade and cultural exchange among member states in Africa. Also, the implementation of the 15th Protocol on Peace, Security, and Defence has given more attention to the effectiveness of the Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units (JBSCBU). The paper concludes that a "security-development" hybrid paradigm that combines high-level diplomatic collaboration with grassroots community policing and cross-border social cohesion measures is necessary for long-term stability in the Mano River subregion. The paper therefore recommends that the strategy must enable local stakeholders to serve as border guardians, guaranteeing that communities themselves are essential to maintaining peace.

**Keywords:** Cross-border trade, Manor River Union, Regional security, Africa

## Introduction

The Mano River Union (MRU), founded on October 3, 1973, by Liberia and Sierra Leone and later joined by Guinea in 1980 represented a pioneering effort in West African regional cooperation. Its core

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mission was to foster economic integration and development, driven by a shared vision of improving citizens' lives through collaboration fuelled by a shared commitment to enhancing the lives of citizens through collaborative efforts (Adebajo, 2002). The MRU's ambitious agenda included the creation of a unified customs system, the synchronization of tariffs, the stimulation of intra-regional trade, and the promotion of cooperation in areas such as agriculture, food security, natural resource management, and infrastructure development (Albrecht, 2011).

Scholars have characterized the MRU's early years as embodying an "economic amity complex," characterized by a deep-seated faith in the benefits of collective action and shared development. While internal political instability and Cold War dynamics posed challenges, interstate threats were minimal. Cooperation prevailed, with member states focusing on institution-building and policy alignment. Even porous border regions served more as conduits for informal trade and cross-border exchange than as sources of conflict, reflecting a security environment where economic collaboration was viewed as a stabilizing force (Bangura, 2017). The MRU's early achievements, such as harmonized external tariffs and joint programs—embodied its cooperative spirit, fostering both shared prosperity and interstate trust. The Mano River Union Secretariat in Freetown, though constrained by limited resources and institutional capacity, played a pivotal coordinating role. These formative years set a significant precedent for West African regional integration, modelling a cooperation framework centred on economic development and mutual trust (Conteh, 1975).

The Impact of the Liberian Civil War on the MRU (1989-1997). This violence undermined the MRU's original economic purpose as Charles Taylor's NPFL took advantage of weak borders, the use of child soldiers, and illicit resource trading, turning Liberia's civil war into a wider regional crisis (Barrie, 2024). As the conflict spilled into Sierra Leone and Guinea, waves of refugees, the spread of weapons, and cross-border rebel activity particularly the NPFL's support for the RUF—bound the security of these states together in deeply destructive ways. Sierra Leone, initially a haven for Liberian refugees, became a battleground after NPFL-supported RUF incursions in 1991, targeting the ECOMOG-hosting government. Guinea, both a troop contributor and refugee host, faced similar vulnerabilities (Bøås,& Dunn, 2013). The war created a regional crisis, characterized by the displacement of populations, the proliferation of weapons, and the rise of cross-border rebel activity. The MRU's economic mission was rapidly undermined, as trade and infrastructure projects stalled, and mutual suspicion replaced trust among member states.

By the mid-1990s–early 2000s, the security enmity complex deepened. The Sierra Leone Civil War, marked by extreme brutality and Taylor's support for the RUF in exchange for blood diamonds, drew Guinea into the violence, especially in the Parrot's Beak region. Non-state armed groups destabilized all three states, replacing the amity pact with zero-sum security logic (Aning, 1999). The MRU's paralysis was evident: its Freetown headquarters was threatened, staff evacuated, and its mandate eclipsed by ECOWAS and UN interventions, which assumed the role of regional stabilizers.


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**Effectiveness of Security Mechanisms and Their Impact on Cross-Border Trade in the Mano River Union (MRU)**

The Mano River Union (MRU), established in 1973 by Liberia and Sierra Leone, and later expanded to include Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, was founded with the goal of promoting regional integration, peace, and economic cooperation (Conteh, 1975). However, the region has historically been characterized by fragile state institutions, civil conflicts, and highly porous borders that facilitate illicit activities such as arms trafficking and smuggling. Over time, the MRU has evolved beyond economic cooperation to prioritize collective security. This shift reflects the reality that sustainable trade and development cannot occur in an environment of instability. Consequently, mechanisms such as the 15th Protocol on Peace, Security, and Defence and the Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units (JBSCBU) were introduced to address shared security challenges and strengthen regional resilience (ECOWAS Commission, 2018).

However, the 15th Protocol represents one of the MRU's most significant institutional responses to insecurity. It emphasizes joint defence cooperation, intelligence sharing, coordinated border management, and trust-building among member states. The importance of this protocol became particularly evident during the Liberian Civil War, a devastating conflict that destabilized the entire Mano River basin. Rebel groups frequently crossed national borders, spreading violence into neighbouring countries such as Sierra Leone and Guinea (Engel & Olsen, 2005). This highlighted the deeply interconnected nature of security in the region.

During this period, the protocol played several important roles. First, it provided a framework for coordinated military and security responses, helping to contain the spread of violence, even if border control remained weak. Second, it fostered regional diplomacy by facilitating regular meetings among defence ministers and military leaders, thereby reducing mistrust (Gnanguênon, 2020). Third, it complemented broader peacekeeping efforts led by organizations such as Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations. Despite these contributions, the protocol faced significant challenges, including weak institutional capacity, limited funding, and the persistent problem of porous borders. Nonetheless, it laid a critical foundation for post-war peacebuilding and regional cooperation (International Organization for Migration, 2019).

**Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units (JBSCBU): A Hybrid Security Model**

To operationalize its security objectives, the MRU established the Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units (JBSCBU). These units represent an innovative, hybrid approach to security governance, combining military personnel, police forces, and local community actors. Their core functions include joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and community engagement. By conducting coordinated patrols, JBSCBU units help deter armed groups, smugglers, and traffickers (Albrecht & Drew, 2011).

At the same time, their emphasis on dialogue and community policing fosters trust between border communities and security agencies (Poole & Mohammed, 2013). What makes the JBSCBU particularly effective is their grassroots orientation. Rather than relying solely on state-centric approaches, they actively involve traditional leaders and civil society


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actors in peacebuilding efforts. This has helped prevent local disputes from escalating into broader conflicts and has strengthened social cohesion in border areas. However, challenges such as inadequate training, logistical constraints, and corruption continue to limit their full potential (Keen, 2005).

## Security Mechanisms and Their Impact on Cross-Border Trade

Security and trade in the MRU are closely intertwined. Stable borders create an enabling environment for commerce, while insecurity disrupts trade flows and discourages investment. The introduction of coordinated security mechanisms has made cross-border trade more predictable and relatively safer (Oracle News Daily, 2025). Traders operating along borders particularly between Liberia and Sierra Leone now experience fewer disruptions from armed groups and banditry (Bangura, 2017). This has encouraged both formal and informal trade activities, contributing to local livelihoods and regional integration.

Moreover, joint patrols and surveillance efforts have helped reduce certain forms of illicit trade, although enforcement remains inconsistent. Smuggling of goods, arms, and narcotics continues to undermine formal economic systems and reduce government revenue. The role of security mechanisms became even more pronounced during the West African Ebola epidemic, when cross-border cooperation was essential for managing public health risks. While border closures and movement restrictions were necessary, they also disrupted trade, highlighting the delicate balance between security and economic activity (Barrie, 2024). Overall, while progress has been made, infrastructural deficits, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and corruption still hinder the full realization of trade benefits in the region.

## Effectiveness, Limitations, and the Way Forward

The MRU's security mechanisms have demonstrated moderate effectiveness in promoting regional stability and facilitating cross-border trade. They have contributed to reducing conflict spillovers, strengthening trust among member states, and improving relations between communities and security actors (World Bank, 2021). However, several structural challenges persist. Porous borders remain difficult to control, institutional weaknesses limit enforcement capacity, and inconsistent international support affects sustainability.

Additionally, corruption and limited technological integration continue to undermine progress. Going forward, a more integrated and adaptive approach is required. This should include the use of modern surveillance technologies, improved training for security personnel, and stronger collaboration between governments and local communities (ECOWAS Commission, 2018). Enhancing infrastructure and simplifying trade procedures will also be critical in maximizing the economic benefits of improved security. Ultimately, the MRU experience underscores an important lesson: effective regional security is not just about military coordination but also about building trust, strengthening institutions, and addressing the socio-economic realities of border communities.

## Persistent Challenges to the Effectiveness of the Mano River

Despite its longevity and strategic relevance, the Mano River Union continues to operate within a landscape shaped by deep structural and human challenges that constrain its effectiveness. One of the most persistent


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obstacles is border porosity, a condition rooted not only in weak state surveillance but also in the historical and social reality of borderland communities. For many residents along MRU borders, national boundaries are recent political constructs imposed upon older patterns of kinship, trade, and mobility (Bangura, 2017). While this permeability facilitates social cohesion and informal commerce, it simultaneously creates entry points for transnational criminal networks engaged in arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and the movement of mercenaries. The absence of adequate infrastructure and trained personnel at border posts further weakens the ability of states to manage these flows effectively (Bangura, 2017).

Closely linked to porous borders is the growth of human trafficking and illicit trade, which thrive in environments where poverty, weak governance, and limited livelihood opportunities intersect. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, often coerced or deceived into exploitative cross-border movement. Illicit economies, including the smuggling of minerals, fuel, and agricultural goods, undermine formal trade systems and deprive governments of revenue needed for development (Adebajo, 2002). These shadow economies also erode public trust in regional institutions, as citizens struggle to distinguish between survival-driven informality and organized criminality.

Another critical challenge is institutional capacity constraints within the MRU itself and its member states. While protocols and mechanisms, such as joint border patrols and confidence-building units, exist on paper, their implementation is uneven. Limited financial resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and political instability weaken coordination and continuity. In many cases, security cooperation is crisis-driven rather than preventative, reacting to outbreaks of violence or instability rather than addressing early warning signals (Albrecht & Drew, 2011). MRU has also been affected by inconsistent international support. External partners have played a vital role in post-conflict reconstruction, peacekeeping, and capacity-building. However, this support has often been episodic and shaped by shifting global priorities. When donor attention wanes, programs risk stagnation, leaving regional initiatives without the sustained resources needed for long-term impact. This dependency undermines local ownership and limits the institutional maturation of the MRU (Barrie, 2024).

In recent years, health security threats, most notably the Ebola outbreak, have further exposed the vulnerabilities of cross-border governance. Public health crises revealed how security is deeply intertwined with human mobility, trust, and information-sharing. Border closures disrupted livelihoods, separated families, and heightened fear, demonstrating that regional security frameworks must move beyond traditional military concerns to address human security in its broadest sense (Barrie, 2024).

Additionally, the informality and vulnerability of women traders remain a largely under-addressed challenge. Women dominate small-scale cross-border trade in the MRU region, yet they often operate without legal protection, facing harassment, exploitation, and exclusion from formal economic systems. Their marginalization not only undermines gender equity but also weakens the overall resilience of cross-border trade networks.

Finally, youth unemployment and governance deficits continue to pose long-term risks. A growing population of underemployed young people, combined


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with weak political inclusion, creates fertile ground for criminal recruitment and social unrest (Barrie, 2024). Without meaningful economic opportunities and a sense of belonging within state and regional institutions, youth frustration threatens to reverse hard-won gains in peace and stability.

**Recommendations for Strengthening the Mano River Union's Resilience**

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and human-centred strategy that blends institutional reform with grassroots engagement. First, border management must be reimagined not solely as a security exercise but as a shared social responsibility. Strengthening joint border patrols, improving infrastructure, and deploying digital monitoring systems should be complemented by community-based policing and local intelligence networks that draw on the lived knowledge of border residents.

Second, combating human trafficking and illicit trade demands coordinated regional legal frameworks and stronger enforcement mechanisms, alongside poverty-reduction strategies. Expanding livelihood opportunities, particularly for youth and women, can reduce dependence on informal and illicit economies. Formalizing small-scale trade through simplified customs procedures and trader identification schemes would protect vulnerable groups while boosting state revenue.

Third, the MRU must invest in institutional capacity-building, ensuring that its security and trade mechanisms are adequately funded, professionally staffed, and politically supported. Regular joint training exercises, standardized operating procedures, and information-sharing platforms can enhance trust and effectiveness among member states.

Fourth, regional security must fully incorporate human security considerations, including public health preparedness. The lessons of Ebola highlight the need for cross-border disease surveillance, coordinated emergency responses, and public communication strategies that prioritize dignity and trust rather than fear and coercion.

Finally, while international partnerships remain valuable, the MRU should prioritize regional ownership and sustainability. Predictable funding from member states, stronger political commitment, and policies grounded in local realities are essential. Empowering youth through regional employment schemes and civic engagement initiatives would further anchor peace and integration in everyday life.

**Conclusion**

The Mano River Union (MRU) stands as one of Africa's most enduring sub-regional institutions dedicated to peace, security, and trade integration. Over more than five decades, it has contributed meaningfully to the rebuilding of war-torn states, the restoration of vital trade routes, the rebuilding of cross-border trust, and the gradual improvement of joint border management. These achievements are neither symbolic nor abstract; they are reflected in reopened markets, safer communities, and renewed social ties across once-hostile frontiers.

At the same time, the MRU's experience reveals both the possibilities and the limits of regional cooperation in fragile contexts. Its security mechanisms have been moderately effective in reducing armed conflict, improving stability, and facilitating cross-border trade, particularly through joint


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security committees, confidence-building measures, and early warning systems. However, persistent challenges—porous borders, illicit trade, weak institutions, and human insecurity—continue to undermine progress. These realities underscore that regional integration is not a linear or purely technical process; rather, it is deeply human, shaped by history, collective memory, inequality, and resilience.

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