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## STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE NIGERIA CUSTOMS SERVICE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COMMODITY SMUGGLING IN MBO, AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

**Okoro Sunday Asangausung**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria  
okoroasangausung@aksu.edu.ng

**Ebere James Okorie**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
University of Uyo, Nigeria  
ebereokorie@uniuyo.edu.ng

**Kingdom Sunday Mboho**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria  
kingdommboho@aksu.edu.ng

**Julian Wealth Igbudu**

Directorate of Public Order and Information  
Management  
University, of Uyo, Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Commodity smuggling is a serious problem in the coastal areas of Akwa Ibom State. The study examined the strategies adopted and challenges faced by the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) in the fight against commodity smuggling in Mbo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. With Ronald V. Clark's Situational Crime Prevention Theory serving as the theoretical foundation, the study used a descriptive survey design. Sixty (60) Customs Officers participated in the study. Focus Group Discussion and Key Informant Interview were methods of data collection. Thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the qualitative data. The findings revealed that commodity smuggling had been a common practice in the study area. In response, the Nigeria Customs Service implemented various strategies, including strengthening community relations, leveraging technology, gathering intelligence, deploying personnel for surveillance, enhancing border controls, enforcing anti-corruption measures, fostering collaboration, and implementing legal and regulatory frameworks. Additional efforts included personnel training, imposing fines, making arrests, seizing smuggled goods, and prosecuting offenders. However, these measures proved ineffective due to border porosity, bribery, corruption, inadequate funding and welfare, weak intelligence networks, sabotage, manpower shortages, evolving smuggling techniques, and a lack of community cooperation and trust. The study suggested, among other things, stepping up border patrols and checkpoints and enhancing physical security through the use of surveillance technologies like satellite tracking and drones to monitor smuggling activities.*

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**Keywords:** Nigeria Customs Service, Strategies, Challenges, Fighting, Commodity Smuggling

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### Introduction

One of the global transborder crimes is the smuggling of commodities. Criminal acts that cross national borders or boundaries are referred to as transborder crimes. These have posed significant challenges to law enforcement agencies. Many countries in Africa, including Nigeria, have experienced commodity smuggling (Asangausung, 2024). The Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) is saddled with the responsibility of fighting smuggling and other transborder crimes through detection, prevention, and control (Mboho & Tahirih, 2014; Okorie *et al.*, 2021/2024). The effective and efficient execution of these roles involves strategies that range from inter-security agency collaboration, intelligence sharing, patrol, arrest and detention to prosecution of offenders among others (Mboho & Udo, 2019). Smuggling is defined as the illegal transportation of objects (import and export) secretly contrary to the law and especially without paying customs duties imposed by law (United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022).

Depending on the contraband involved, arms, weapons, drugs, petroleum products, foreign parboiled rice, vegetable oil, foreign poultry products, used clothes and ammunitions have been smuggled into and out of Nigeria. Elsewhere, Buehn & Farzanegan (2012) and Mozayani (2019) observed the high rate of commodity smuggling in Pakistan, Iran, and the Philippines. In Africa, the rate of smuggling is very high especially in Cameroon, Kenya, Mali, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria; and smugglers have often

escaped apprehension (Ojo, 2015; Gallien & Weigand, 2021; Ogunaiké, 2021). However, Foster (2018) identified countries with the lowest rate of smuggling and other crime-related offences to include Switzerland, Finland, Singapore, Ireland, Costa Rica, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, Iceland, Hong Kong, Norway, Portugal, Austria, Estonia, Qatar, Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, Bahrain, Canada, Japan, Nepal, and Sweden. This suggests the employment of effective strategies against commodity smuggling.

In Nigeria, Asangausung (2024), Oritse (2022), Moronfolu (2022), Bilesanmi (2021), Ikoh (2021), Nditi & Idhiambo (2020), Abegunde & Fabiyi (2019), and Golup (2012) admitted that most commodities smuggled into the country passed through the high sea. As a coastal country, Nigeria has a maritime border with Cameroon, Benin Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, and Ghana (Asangausung (2024). To combat smuggling, the Federal Government of Nigeria enacted the Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA, 2004) along with other laws and policies that criminalise the possession of smuggled goods. Under this legislation, anyone found with such goods is considered guilty, unless they can prove lawful importation or payment of the required duties. Exceptions apply to individuals who are not sellers and had no reason to suspect the goods were smuggled. The law covers items whose importation is prohibited or those brought in without paying the necessary duties. A conviction under this provision results in a mandatory one-year prison sentence without the option of a fine.

The International Trade and Administration (2023) listed commodities prohibited or restricted from imports and exports in Nigeria to include but not limited to foreign parboiled rice, used clothing (okrika), frozen poultry products (for example chicken, turkey, and gizzard), edibles, and illicit substances. To put the smuggling of commodities in check, extant laws and policies against smuggling have been formulated. According to Mboho & Asangausung (2024), security agents have been deployed to mount surveillance and monitor the borders, hinterlands, and waterways. Several arrests, detention, prosecution, and conviction of suspected smugglers have been achieved; and commodities that are believed to have been smuggled were seized and confiscated on various occasions. Despite these efforts, contraband commodities are still found in the local markets, thereby becoming an issue of public concern.

Commodity smuggling is a threat to the economy and national security of many nations. Ojo & Okonula (2014) affirmed this and further argued that smuggling activities destroy health due to the importation of fake and expired drugs and dangerous substances, hinder local industries, drain the economy, increase insecurity, and impede the provision of social services by the government. It also expands the black market and increases convergence between organised crime, terrorist groups, and other threat networks. The increase in smuggling in Nigeria is not without severe consequences. The negative implications of smuggling include revenue loss for the government, money laundering, exposure of local industries to unfair competition with their foreign counterparts, insecurity, loss of security agents, corruption, and general health challenges (Oladiyi, 2023; Mboho & Tahirih, 2014).

Successive governments in Nigeria had created institutions of social control including the Nigeria Customs Service and other security agencies like the Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency, Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Navy, Department of State Services, Nigeria Army, and Nigeria Air Force among others to fight this menace (Asangausung *et al.*, 2023a; Willie *et al.*, 2023). Also, laws and policy formulations against smuggling are periodically being reviewed. For instance, all land borders were closed in 2018 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Security agents were deployed to mount surveillance on land and waterways. They raided houses where smuggled commodities were stored, arrested and detained suspected smugglers seized and confiscated smuggled items; smugglers were prosecuted and convicted to serve as deterrence (Ismail & Rabi, 2022). The extent to which security prevention, apprehension, and control have curbed smuggling to a tolerable limit remains a debatable issue.

Crime prevention, detection and control remain the constitutional responsibilities of law enforcement agencies (Brown & Okorie, 2015; Asangausung, 2021; Okorie, 2023). Every country in the world has restrictions for both the import and export of commodities; and the role of the Nigeria Customs Service in the fight against illegal trade cannot be overemphasised (Asangausung, 2024). Reports have shown that commodity smuggling is more prevalent in Asia and Africa (Buehn & Farzanegan, 2012; Ojo,

2015; Mozayani, 2019; Gallien & Weigand, 2021). Ikoh (2021) opined that other than the land borders, the Nigeria maritime borders have severally been used for arms smuggling. Ojo (2015) observed that Nigeria is a destination for smugglers because of its large populace and the citizens' demand for foreign goods (Lautensach, 2020). The large population provides a very active market for smuggled products. To satisfy the market, smugglers are becoming effectively organised. Commodities that are meant for import or export are supposed to be examined by government authorities before such commodities can be approved. However, it is observed that in the recent past, smugglers have developed new techniques for smuggling illegal goods into and out of the country with little or no apprehension (Maiwada, 2022).

The Nigeria Customs and Excise Management Act (CEMA) (LFN, 2004) seems to be constantly flouted by smugglers. As Idoniboye-Ob (2022) observed, commodity smuggling is becoming more alarming in Nigeria and the process is more organised to a point that smugglers are capable of escaping apprehension. Most of the smuggled commodities are foreign parboiled rice, petroleum products, dangerous drugs, used clothes, consumables, weapons, and arms, among others (Idoniboye-Ob, 2022). In the light of this, Ojo (2015) opined that an effective security response is required in the fight against the smuggling menace in Nigeria.

One could imagine the reasons behind the high rate of smuggling in Nigeria. Scholars suggested several reasons. For instance, Ismail and Rabi (2022) and Asangausung et al. (2024) blamed the high rate of smuggling on corruption and weak enforcement of laws; commodity smuggling is largely tolerated by residents and security agents (Nduti *et al.*, 2019); and the high rate of unemployment and under-employment (Musai & Mehrara, 2014). Also, The Conversation Editorial (2012) attributed it to the restrictive trade policy, high import duty, import bans on many products, and cheaper prices of goods in the neighbouring countries. These reasons are without empirical backing, but based on speculation and newspaper reports. This study seeks to draw button-up inputs by getting information from security personnel and border community members on the causes of smuggling.

Most of the smuggled commodities are sold in Nigerian markets, and grocery stores, and are sometimes used in homes and government quarters (Anagor-Ewuzie, 2019). This observation has left many curious about how smugglers manage to move contraband items into the country despite the heavy presence of the joint security personnel comprising of officers of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Navy (NN), Nigeria Army (NA), Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and Nigeria Quarantine Service (NQS) among others within the land borders and coastal regions (Okorie *et al.*, 2021).

The high rate of commodity smuggling in Nigeria is not without reason. Mark and Iwebi (2019) have suggested that the high rate of commodity smuggling in Nigeria is associated with the neighbouring countries. Golup (2012) opined that countries like Togo, Cameroon, Benin Republic, and other neighbouring countries consider commodity smuggling as a major source of income and employment opportunities. Adeola & Oluyemi (2012), Golup (2012), and Ojo & Okonula (2014) observed that the colonial pattern of exploitation and trade, official corruption, unequal distribution of resources, and weak legal and institutional frameworks and inability or incapacity of the law enforcement agencies are factors responsible for smuggling. Bilesanmi (2021) blamed the porous borders and numerous informal routes, corruption, shortage of security personnel and equipment, unemployment, lack of government presence in the coastal communities, and societal emphasis on wealth rather than the means to create wealth as the main factors for persistence of smuggling in Nigeria. Mukhtar (2021), Asangausung et al. (2023b), and Alao et al. (2019) blamed it on residents of the border communities and security operatives for aiding and abetting smuggling in exchange for financial rewards. Bilesanmi (2021), and Nzechi (2022) blamed the government for not providing basic social amenities to residents of the coastal communities.

Previous scholars like Hoffman and Melly (2015), Adeniji (2018), Aluede (2019), Abegunde and Fabiyi (2019), Nduti et al. (2019), Nyambishi (2020), Idhiambo (2020), Aliu et al. (2021), and Hassan-Wuyo (2021) conducted researches on smuggling, particularly on the causes and effects of smuggling on national security and economic development. Others like Olomu et al. (2019), Nduti & Idhiambo (2020), Mukhtar (2021) and Maiwada (2022) conducted research on the efficacy of border enforcement against smuggling in different parts of Nigeria. Risely (2014) researched maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.

Brown & Okorie (2015) conducted a study on crime control in coastal settlements in Nigeria. However, none of these studies focused on strategies and challenges of the Nigeria Customs Service in the fight against commodity smuggling in Mbo Local Government Area, which is one of the hotspots for commodity smuggling and other related crimes in Nigeria. This is the gap in the literature that this study filled. Against this backdrop, this study examined the strategies employed by the Nigeria Customs Service and the challenges faced by them in the fight against commodity smuggling in Mbo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State.

### **Literature Review**

Buehn & Farzanegan (2022) defined smuggling as an activity that people use to earn income from carrying goods across state borders in violation of the extant laws of a state. It involves the conveyance of goods by stealth to evade customs duties. This illegal trade succeeds in countries where there are high customs duties. All other definitions of smuggling agree with the tag of illegality which successfully labeled smuggling as a crime but the extent to which smuggling thrives in countries where customs duties are high is debatable. For instance, Gallien & Weigan (2022) defined smuggling as the purposeful movement of goods or people across a border that contravenes the existing legal frameworks. In this definition, people are included, which suggests the recognition of Article 3(a) of the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol by the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC).

Other definitions offered by Mozayani (2018) defined smuggling commodities as that section of commercial exchanges between countries carried out with the aim of evading trade arrangements and standards, hidden from the authorities of foreign trade (example, the Customs), and not recorded in any formal commercial source. It also refers to the movement of commodities across a customs frontier in a clandestine manner. The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry [FICCI] (2016) defined commodity smuggling as those items that are illegal (prohibited) or legal upon which customs or excise duties have not been paid.

Asangausung (2024) defined commodity smuggling as a clandestine economic activity that involves the illegal movement of goods across borders to evade customs duties and trade regulations. It thrives in regions with high tariffs and strict trade policies, as individuals seek to maximise profits by bypassing official channels. While universally regarded as illegal, the extent of its prevalence varies based on economic conditions and enforcement effectiveness. Smuggling not only undermines government revenue but also distorts market competition and fosters underground economies. Additionally, the inclusion of human smuggling within some definitions highlights its broader implications for security and human rights, aligning with international legal frameworks.

Maiwada (2022) evaluated the effects of the Nigeria Customs Service's community relations initiatives in Ogun Command, the border town of Idiroko. The population of the study consisted of Idiroko people, from whom 100 respondents were recruited using a stratified procedure. The study used the survey method. Data were collected from Nigeria Customs Service Ogun Command and the people living in Idiroko through questionnaires and interviews. The results demonstrated that routine meetings, courtesy visits, public sensitisation, donations, community development services, and relationships with local leaders were the main community relations tactics used. However, the study did not explore the broader enforcement strategies used to combat commodity smuggling, particularly in Mbo. Given the unique geographical and socio-economic conditions of Mbo, a detailed examination of the specific anti-smuggling measures employed by the Nigeria Customs Service in this region is necessary. This study addresses that gap by analysing the strategies beyond community relations, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how smuggling is tackled in Mbo.

Varavayi & Shirkish (2014) conducted a study to determine ways in which the Iranian government was employed to prevent fuel smuggling at the Ghasreshirin border. In the study, a survey design was employed. The questionnaire and applied research component were considered. The population of the study consisted of customs officials, judicial authorities, and personnel in the border city. The sample size in this study was 100. The findings demonstrated that fuel smuggling was not curtailed by the fundamental administrative mechanisms the Iranian government established at the border. However, the study focused

on Iran's border management strategies without considering the specific context of Nigeria, particularly Mbo. Additionally, it did not explore a broader range of enforcement measures beyond administrative mechanisms. This study fills the gap by investigating the diverse strategies employed by the Nigeria Customs Service to curb commodity smuggling in Mbo, providing insights into the effectiveness of these measures in a different geopolitical and economic environment.

Nduti & Odhiambo (2020) studied the measures implemented to prevent food commodities from Uganda being smuggled into Busia Town, Kenya, over international borders. The research design used in the study was a descriptive survey. Eight strata were identified through the use of a stratified sampling technique: those of transporters, residents, traders, trade agents, hawkers, revenue collectors, opinion leaders, and government officials. Using census, purposive, and snowballing sampling techniques, sample sizes of 193 respondents were chosen from these strata. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interviews, observation, questionnaires, and secondary data obtained through document analysis were the methods used to acquire the data. Appropriate descriptive statistics were used to examine the quantitative data, while theme and content analysis were used to assess the qualitative data. The findings showed that the following tactics were efficient in stopping the smuggling of commodities: severe penalties, arrests, detentions, incarceration, seizure, and destruction of the goods. However, their study was geographically limited to Busia Town and did not explore the broader institutional and operational strategies of customs agencies in a different national context. This study addresses the gap by investigating the specific strategies employed by the Nigeria Customs Service to curb commodity smuggling in Mbo, providing insights into the effectiveness of enforcement, surveillance, and community engagement in a Nigerian coastal border setting.

Horobets et al. (2020) investigated ways to reduce the number of products smuggled into Ukraine. The study made use of the system-structural approach, formal logical method, and critical analytical techniques. The results showed that technological devices were useful in combating commodities smuggling. However, their study did not explore the broader enforcement strategies, institutional frameworks, and community-based interventions used by customs agencies. This study fills the gap by examining the specific strategies employed by the Nigeria Customs Service in Mbo, considering both technological and non-technological approaches within a coastal border context.

Odago (2019) carried out research to ascertain how well customs tactics work to prevent products from being smuggled into Kenya. A descriptive research design was employed in the study. The customs employees at Nairobi's customs region and Namanga One Stop Border Post were the study's target study sites. The study determined a sample size of 214 responses, representing 87.2 percent of the 460 staff members targeted, using a stratified random selection technique. The selection of respondents was done by simple random sampling. A questionnaire was used in the study to gather primary data. There were closed-ended questions on the questionnaire. Qualitative data were collected in the study. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the qualitative data through the Statistical Packages for Social Scientists (SPSS Version 23). The results demonstrated how customs tactics, such as one-stop border checkpoints, physical border patrol, and customs cooperation with other agencies, impacted the management of commodities smuggling at Kenya's borders. However, the study did not explore how these strategies apply in maritime-border regions or address the unique challenges faced by the Nigeria Customs Service in Mbo. This study fills the gap by investigating the specific strategies employed in a coastal setting, considering local security dynamics and enforcement constraints.

Afaha & Ani (2020) investigated the function of security personnel in the management of border security in Nigeria. It questioned Nigeria's current border conditions as well as the plethora of steps taken to address the problems caused by transborder crimes. The study showed that Nigeria faces numerous security concerns in its transborder connections, and the porous and widely dispersed borders contribute to a multitude of national security issues. Afaha & Ani (2020) focused on broader transborder security concerns but have not provided a detailed, localised analysis of how customs officers navigate issues such as corruption, inadequate funding, evolving smuggling techniques, and community resistance. This study fills that gap by offering a focused examination of the operational difficulties encountered by customs personnel in Mbo, shedding light on factors that directly hinder enforcement efforts.

Sosuh (2011) conducted a study on the dynamics of border security using Tema Harbour, Kotoka International Airport, and the Aflao border in Ghana. Data were generated from primary and secondary sources. The questionnaire was the instrument of data collection. The results, among other things, demonstrated that the institutional issues mostly revolve around the absence of contemporary border infrastructure and facilities, the development of the agents' capability who are directly involved in border security, and those who assist in the apprehension and handling of suspects. Insufficient public awareness of border matters exacerbates the issue further. The study did not address the specific challenges faced by the Nigeria Customs Service in combating commodity smuggling in Mbo. The institutional and logistical issues identified in Ghana may not fully capture the complexities of smuggling operations in Nigeria, where factors such as border porosity, corruption, funding constraints, and community dynamics play a crucial role. This study fills the gap by providing a localised analysis of the unique challenges customs officers encounter in Mbo, offering insights that are essential for improving enforcement strategies.

### **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). This theory focuses on reducing opportunities for crime by manipulating the immediate environment rather than addressing broader social or psychological factors. The theory assumes that crime is a rational choice, where offenders weigh the risks and rewards before engaging in illegal activities. It posits that crime can be deterred by increasing the perceived effort and risk of committing an offense, reducing potential rewards, and removing provocations that encourage criminal behaviour. The theory emphasises practical interventions such as surveillance, target hardening, and environmental design to prevent criminal activities.

In the context of this study, SCPT is relevant in understanding and addressing the challenges of the Nigeria Customs Service in combating commodity smuggling in Mbo. Smugglers exploit weaknesses in border security, corruption, and limited enforcement resources, making smuggling an attractive criminal enterprise. By applying SCPT, effective strategies such as increased border surveillance, improved technology, strict enforcement of penalties, and better community engagement can be implemented to reduce smuggling opportunities. Strengthening customs operations through intelligence-driven approaches and inter-agency collaboration aligns with the theory's focus on reducing criminal opportunities rather than solely relying on punitive measures.

The Situational Crime Prevention Theory (SCPT) of Ronald V. Clarke, offers a useful framework for lowering the likelihood of crime, although it has been criticised for a number of reasons. Its exclusive emphasis on situational and contextual elements while neglecting the more profound social, economic, and psychological reasons of crime is one of its main criticisms. Critics contend that preventing crime should address underlying issues like poverty, unemployment, and social injustices as well as opportunity, as these factors frequently lead people to engage in illicit activities like smuggling.

### **Methods and Materials**

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, which was deemed appropriate for eliciting relevant responses to answer the research questions. The study was conducted in Mbo Local Government Area, a coastal community in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Mbo LGA, one of the 31 local government areas in the state, has a total landmass of 365 square kilometers and a projected population of 130,400 as at 2022 (City Population, 2022). The area is bounded by Urue-Offong/Oruko LGA to the north, the Atlantic Ocean and Cameroon to the south, Udung Uko LGA to the east, and Esit Eket and Ibeno LGAs to the west. The people of Mbo, primarily speak the Oro and Efik languages, with slight dialectical variations. The local economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, with major crops including cocoa, plantains, yams, cassava, and palm products, while fishing remains a dominant occupation due to the area's numerous water bodies. Natural resources such as crude oil, lumber, salt, clay, sand, and gravel also contribute to economic activities. Additionally, marketplaces serve as key trading hubs where residents engage in commerce involving agricultural products, household goods, and other essentials.

The study targeted personnel of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) stationed in Mbo LGA, with a total of 169 customs officers deployed to the area, comprising both senior and junior staff. A combination of purposive and stratified random sampling techniques was employed to determine the sample. The purposive sampling method was used to select key informants, particularly senior officers, based on their knowledge and experience in customs operations. Stratified random sampling ensured balanced representation across different ranks and gender categories, thereby enhancing the study's credibility. A sample size of 60 Customs Officers was determined through data redundancy or saturation.

The Deputy Comptroller of the Nigeria Customs Service, Akwa Ibom State Command, granted official permission for the study and instructed his subordinates to cooperate with the researcher. Data collection Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII), were both conducted in English. Each interview session lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting to ensure confidentiality and to minimise distractions. The formation of the FGDs was based on rank and experience, ensuring a mix of perspectives. Participants were grouped into four FGDs, each consisting of 12 individuals, totalling 48 participants. In addition, 12 key informant interviews were conducted with selected NCS personnel to gain deeper insights into specific aspects of customs operations and challenges faced in combating smuggling.

All interview and discussion sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of participants while field notes were taken concurrently to capture key observations. The recorded data were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' responses. The transcribed data were then subjected to thematic analysis, which involved coding and categorising responses into emerging themes relevant to the research objectives. Thematic coding was carried out manually and key patterns, relationships, and recurring issues were identified. The analysis process followed an iterative approach, where initial codes were refined through multiple readings of the data. Themes such as enforcement strategies, challenges in combating smuggling, community engagement, and policy effectiveness were developed. Findings from the thematic analysis were synthesised to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues explored in the study. Data collection took place between May and July 2024.

## Results and Discussion of Findings

**Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their socio-demographic characteristics (N=60)**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	40	66.67
Female	20	33.33
<b>Age</b>		
18-23 years	7	11.67
24-29 years	13	21.67
30-35 years	10	16.67
36-41 years	8	13.33
42-47 years	12	20
48+	10	16.67
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	48	80
Not married	12	20
<b>Educational Qualification</b>		
SSC	9	15
OND/NCE	10	16.67
HND	13	21.67
First Degree	20	33.33
MSc Degree	6	10
PhD Degree	2	3.33

<b>Job Cadre</b>		
Senior Staff	40	66.67
Junior Staff	20	33.33
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	40	66.67
Islam	15	25
African Traditional Religion	3	5
Others	2	3.33

Source: Field data (2024)

Table 2 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of Custom officers who participated in the study. The socio-demographic distribution of respondents provides insights into the workforce composition of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) in Mbo Local Government Area and its implications for combating commodity smuggling. The predominance of male officers (66.67%) suggests that enforcement roles may be male-dominated, potentially influencing operational strategies and field engagement. The age distribution indicates a fairly balanced mix of youthful and experienced officers, with the majority falling within the productive working age range of 24-47 years, suggesting a blend of energy and experience necessary for enforcement duties. A significant majority of respondents (80%) are married, which may contribute to a sense of stability and responsibility in their professional roles.

The educational qualifications reveal a well-educated workforce, with a substantial percentage holding at least a first-degree qualification (33.33%) and a notable presence of postgraduate degree holders (13.33%). This level of education is crucial for strategic decision-making, intelligence gathering, and the application of modern enforcement techniques. The dominance of senior staff (66.67%) suggests that the NCS in Mbo is staffed with experienced personnel, which could enhance operational efficiency. However, the lower representation of junior staff (33.33%) may imply a shortage of lower-ranking officers responsible for field operations, possibly affecting manpower availability in border surveillance. Religious affiliation indicates that Christianity (66.67%) is the dominant faith, followed by Islam (25%) and other beliefs. While religion may not directly impact enforcement, it reflects the socio-cultural background of personnel, which could influence their perspectives on duty execution and ethical considerations.

### Strategies Employed by the Nigeria Custom Service to Curb Commodity Smuggling

The findings revealed that community relations play a crucial role in curbing smuggling in Mbo, as locals often have valuable intelligence. However, distrust between residents and law enforcement agents/officers, fuelled by economic dependence on smuggling, hampers collaboration. Inter-security agency cooperation enhances enforcement efforts, with joint operations leading to successful contraband seizures. The adoption of surveillance technologies has improved monitoring and intelligence gathering, though its effectiveness depends on upgrades and skilled personnel. Intelligence gathering remains a key strategy, enabling officers to identify smuggling networks and anticipate evolving tactics, but its success hinges on reliable sources and inter-agency coordination. Anti-corruption measures are vital to maintaining the integrity of enforcement, with strict regulations and transparency necessary to prevent internal misconduct. Lastly, the arrest and prosecution of smugglers, along with the confiscation of illegal goods, serve as deterrent. The verbatim accounts of the participants' opinions were as follows:

### Community Relations

In terms of community relations, a 40-year-old Customs officer said: *"In coastal areas like Mbo, community interactions are essential to the battle against commodities smuggling. A trusting relationship between the locals and law enforcement can be fostered by having good community relations. Since residents may have important knowledge about criminal operations occurring in their area, this trust is crucial for obtaining intelligence and tips regarding smuggling activities. Unfortunately, locals are not often eager to provide intelligence on smugglers. We will not give up on getting their assistance..."*. The response from the 40-year-old Customs officer highlights the significance of community relations in combating commodity smuggling in Mbo. Given the coastal nature of the area, collaboration between law



enforcement and local residents is crucial for gathering intelligence and effectively addressing smuggling activities. The officer's statement underscores the role of trust in securing community cooperation, as locals often possess valuable information about illicit activities but may be reluctant to share it due to fear, allegiance to smugglers, or economic dependence on smuggling networks. The reluctance of residents to provide intelligence suggests a gap in trust between the Nigeria Customs Service and the local population. This poses a challenge to enforcement efforts, as intelligence-driven operations rely on community participation.

Another participant, a 34-year-old Customs officer added: *"Good community relations can assist in informing and increasing the consciousness of locals of the detrimental effects of commodity smuggling on both their neighbourhood and the larger society. Law enforcement organizations can obtain community assistance in reporting suspicious activity, stopping smuggling attempts, and assisting with investigations by cultivating a feeling of shared responsibility for countering criminal activities. However, smuggling activities continue to increase despite the community interactions with the locals and stakeholders. In Mbo, we don't have that cordial relationship with residents and community leaders. This is because they see security agents as threats to their smuggling business which is part of their economic life..."*. The officer's response underscores the potential benefits of strong community relations in curbing smuggling, particularly by raising awareness and encouraging public participation in crime prevention. However, the persistence of smuggling despite these efforts highlight a disconnect between law enforcement and local communities. The perception of security agents as threats rather than allies suggests that economic dependence on smuggling fuels resistance to anti-smuggling initiatives.

### **Inter-Security Agency Collaboration**

When asked about the role of inter-security agency collaboration to curb commodity smuggling, a 28-year-old Customs Officer said: *"Without inter-security agency collaboration, there can never be an effective seizure of contraband commodities. We have achieved a lot because of the collaborative efforts of the Joint Task Force, the Nigeria Police, Nigerian Navy, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, Nigeria Immigration Service, Nigeria Drugs Law Enforcement Agency and many others..."*. The response highlights the importance of inter-agency collaboration in combating commodity smuggling. Cooperation among various security agencies enhances intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and enforcement efficiency, leading to more successful seizures of contraband goods. However, while joint efforts have yielded positive outcomes, the complexity of smuggling networks suggests that sustained collaboration, resource sharing, and capacity-building remain crucial.

### **Surveillance Technologies**

Regarding the use of surveillance technology to prevent smuggling, a 43-year-old Customs Officer responded as follows: *"Our capacity to identify and stop smuggling has greatly increased with the use of surveillance technologies. It has made it possible for us to gather evidence for prosecutions and monitor high-risk regions more successfully. These technologies have significantly reduced the number of smuggling instances, which improve national security and makes our job easier to handle..."*. The use of surveillance technologies has enhanced the ability of the Nigeria Customs Service to detect and prevent smuggling activities in Mbo. Advanced monitoring tools improve intelligence gathering, facilitate real-time tracking of smuggling routes, and provide crucial evidence for prosecutions. This has contributed to a reduction in smuggling incidents and strengthened national security. However, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on continuous upgrades, proper maintenance, and skilled personnel to operate them.

### **Intelligence Gathering**

A 48-year-old Customs officer responded to a question on the use of intelligence collection as a tactic to stop commodities smuggling by saying that: *"Our attempts to stop smuggling have relied heavily on intelligence application. It enables us to obtain intelligence on possible smuggling activity, recognise important figures in piracy networks, and keep up with changing strategies. This proactive strategy has worked well to curb the importation of illegal items and to sabotage criminal activities. By utilising*

intelligence, we can more efficiently target our efforts and significantly reduce smuggling...". Intelligence gathering plays a crucial role in the Nigeria Customs Service's efforts to curb commodity smuggling in Mbo. By leveraging intelligence, officers can identify smuggling networks, anticipate evolving tactics, and take proactive measures to prevent the illegal movement of goods. This approach enhances operational efficiency, allowing law enforcement to focus resources on high-risk areas and disrupt criminal activities effectively. However, the success of intelligence-driven operations depends on reliable sources, timely information sharing, and inter-agency collaboration.

### **Anti-Corruption Measures**

A 40-year-old Customs officer responded to a question on anti-corruption initiatives as a tactic to stop the smuggling of commodities by saying: *"Strong anti-corruption measures must be put in place if we are to reduce smuggling. We have rigorous regulations in place to prevent and uncover any instance of corruption since misconduct within the customs department has the potential to undermine all of our other initiatives. This entails extensive hiring procedures, strong internal controls, and frequent training on moral behaviour. We also promote an accountable and transparent culture inside the department. Our nation's interests can be efficiently safeguarded and smuggling effectively countered by upholding high standards of integrity..."*. Anti-corruption measures are essential in the fight against commodity smuggling, as internal misconduct within the Nigeria Customs Service can undermine enforcement efforts. Strengthening hiring processes, implementing strict internal controls, and promoting ethical conduct through continuous training help minimise corrupt practices. Transparency and accountability within the agency enhance operational integrity, ensuring that smuggling networks do not exploit weaknesses in the system. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on consistent enforcement, institutional commitment, and public confidence in the agency.

### **Arrest and Detention of Smugglers, Seizure and Confiscation of Smuggled Goods and Prosecution of Offenders**

When asked about how the arrest and detention of smugglers, seizure and confiscation of smuggled goods and prosecution of offenders have curbed smuggling in Mbo, a 50-year-old Customs Officer said: *"A key element of our plan to stop smuggling in Mbo is the arrest and detention of smugglers, the seizure and confiscation of smuggled products, and the prosecution of criminals. When we capture people engaged in smuggling, we not only stop their illicit activity but also make it clear that breaching the law has serious consequences. Criminals lose their illegal gains when smuggled products are seized and confiscated. Furthermore, we discourage others from committing the same crimes by prosecuting criminals to the fullest extent of the law. These steps support the preservation of public health and safety, and our economy..."*. The arrest and detention of smugglers, along with the seizure and confiscation of smuggled goods, serve as critical deterrents in combating smuggling in Mbo. By apprehending offenders and ensuring their prosecution, the Nigeria Customs Service reinforces the consequences of illegal trade, discouraging others from engaging in similar activities. Confiscating smuggled goods prevents illicit economic gains, weakening smuggling networks. These enforcement actions contribute to safeguarding national security, public health, and economic stability. However, their effectiveness depends on consistent legal proceedings, reduced corruption, and strong institutional backing to prevent smugglers from exploiting legal loopholes.

### **Challenges Faced by the Nigeria Customs Service in the Fight against Commodity Smuggling in Mbo**

The fight against smuggling in Mbo faces significant challenges, primarily due to the porosity of borders, as smugglers exploit numerous undocumented routes that remain undiscovered by security personnel. This issue is further exacerbated by a shortage of security personnel, some of whom engage in corruption by escorting smugglers instead of apprehending them. Bribery and corruption weaken enforcement efforts, as compromised officers allow contraband goods to pass freely, creating a culture of impunity that emboldens smuggling networks. Limited funding and poor welfare conditions also hinder anti-smuggling operations.

Insufficient financial resources restrict patrols, surveillance, and maintenance of operational equipment, while inadequate officer welfare contributes to dissatisfaction and increases the likelihood of collusion with smugglers. Moreover, smugglers continually develop new techniques to evade law enforcement, such as using hidden routes along the Atlantic Ocean, storing contraband in residential areas, and even utilising government vehicles like ambulances to transport illicit goods. Another major challenge is the lack of community cooperation and trust. Many residents and local leaders, rather than assisting security agencies, are complicit in smuggling due to economic dependence on the trade. Their reluctance to share intelligence information severely weakens enforcement efforts, allowing smuggling networks to operate with minimal resistance. Observations from the Customs Officers include the following:

### **Porosity of Borders**

In response to a question concerning border porosity, a 25-year-old customs officer stated: *The porousness of the borders is a serious challenge. This is because smugglers have created so many illegal routes even within the communities in Mbo. Many of these routes are yet to be discovered by the security personnel...*. The porosity of borders in Mbo presents a significant challenge to the Nigeria Customs Service, as smugglers exploit numerous undocumented routes to evade detection. The existence of these illegal pathways undermines enforcement efforts, making it difficult for security agencies to control the inflow of contraband goods. Without adequate surveillance and intelligence gathering, smugglers continue to operate freely, weakening trade regulations and economic policies.

Another participant, a 32-year-old Customs officer added: *"I think the porosity of border is attributed to a limited number of security personnel to man it. These limited personnel instead of doing their job, often got involved in smuggling. For instance, instead of pursuing smugglers, they escort them to safer destinations without being caught..."*. The porosity of borders in Mbo is exacerbated by an insufficient number of security personnel, making it difficult to effectively monitor and control smuggling activities. The challenge is further compounded by instances of corruption among some security officials who, rather than enforcing the law, facilitate smuggling operations for personal gain. This weakens border enforcement, undermines anti-smuggling efforts, and encourages the continuous influx of contraband goods.

### **Bribery and Corruption**

A 35-year-old customs officer responded as follows when questioned about corruption and bribery as a challenge: *"I will quickly agree with you. No doubt, security personnel in Mbo have compromised the rules of engagement. Some of these security personnel have demanded for bribe and allowed smuggled commodities to move to desired destinations..."*. Bribery and corruption among security personnel in Mbo significantly undermine the Nigeria Customs Service's efforts to combat smuggling. When officers accept bribes in exchange for allowing contraband goods to pass through, enforcement measures lose their effectiveness, and smuggling networks continue to thrive. This compromises the integrity of law enforcement, weakens border security, and fosters an environment where illegal trade becomes normalised.

Similarly, another participant, a 23-year-old Customs Officer added: *"Yes, this is true because in most cases, security personnel that aid and abet smuggling find it difficult to play an active role in the fight against smuggling. Such security personnel closed their eyes for smugglers to do their businesses..."*. Bribery and corruption weaken the effectiveness of anti-smuggling efforts in Mbo, as compromised security personnel are unable or unwilling to enforce the law. When officers accept bribes or facilitate smuggling, they not only enable illegal trade but also create a culture of impunity, where offenders operate without fear of consequences. This erodes public trust in law enforcement, emboldens smuggling networks, and undermines economic and security policies.

### **Limited Funding and Poor Welfare**

The following is what a 45-year-old customs officer responded when questioned about finance as a challenge: *"The fight against commodity smuggling has been hindered by lack of resources that could have assisted in patrolling the communities in Mbo. There are also limited funds to invest in the surveillance process. The vehicles we have here are in bad condition without adequate maintenance..."*. Limited

funding and poor welfare conditions significantly hinder the effectiveness of the Nigeria Customs Service in combating commodity smuggling in Mbo. The lack of financial resources restricts the ability to patrol smuggling-prone areas effectively, invest in advanced surveillance technologies, and maintain operational equipment. Poorly maintained vehicles and inadequate logistical support reduce mobility and response time, allowing smugglers to exploit security gaps. Additionally, insufficient welfare provisions for officers can lead to low morale and susceptibility to corruption.

In the same vein, another participant, a 38-year-old Customs Officer said: *“We are not treated well and this could be the reason some of our colleagues are not satisfied with their salaries, thereby developing a subculture...”*. Limited funding and poor welfare conditions negatively impact the motivation and integrity of customs officers in Mbo. Inadequate salaries and poor treatment contribute to dissatisfaction among personnel, potentially leading to the development of a subculture that tolerates or even facilitates smuggling. When officers feel undervalued or financially strained, they may be more susceptible to corruption, thereby weakening enforcement efforts.

### **Shortage of Personnel**

Regarding the manpower difficulty, a 39-year-old Customs Officer responded as follows: *“We don’t have enough security personnel. The few we have here are not willing to work sincerely. We need more personnel with professional experience. These smugglers are very stubborn and violent especially, when we try to resist them...”*. The shortage of personnel significantly hampers the effectiveness of the Nigeria Customs Service in combating commodity smuggling in Mbo. With inadequate manpower, security operations are stretched thin, making it difficult to monitor and control smuggling activities effectively. Additionally, the lack of experienced and dedicated personnel further weakens enforcement efforts, especially when faced with violent and determined smugglers.

Another participant, a 29-year-old Customs Officer said: *“Well, for me, when you have security personnel that are not willing to work, it is more or less like having none. We need capable hands who are eager to collaborate with other security personnel to achieve the desired goal...”*. The shortage of committed and capable personnel further weakens the effectiveness of the Nigeria Customs Service in curbing smuggling in Mbo. Even when officers are present, a lack of willingness to perform their duties undermines enforcement efforts. This challenge not only limits the capacity for coordinated operations but also reduces the overall efficiency of anti-smuggling measures.

### **New Smuggling Techniques**

A 55-year-old Customs Officer responded to a question concerning the new smuggling methods used by smugglers by saying: *“Smugglers have come up with new ways of doing business and this has become more complex for security agents. They smuggled these goods through the different outlets along the Atlantic Ocean in Mbo especially, when the operation is over. Most of these goods are stored in people’s houses within the community. In most cases, government vehicles especially, ambulances are being used to convey smuggled commodities...”*. Smugglers in Mbo have adopted increasingly sophisticated techniques, making it more challenging for security agencies to curb illegal trade. The exploitation of multiple routes along the Atlantic Ocean, concealment of contraband in residential areas, and the use of government vehicles, including ambulances, demonstrate the adaptability of smuggling networks. These evolving strategies weaken enforcement efforts and highlight the need for continuous intelligence gathering, improved surveillance, and stronger community cooperation to counter smuggling effectively.

Another respondent, a 42-year-old Customs Officer added: *“New smuggling techniques constitute a problem to the security officials. When the security is tight you will not find smugglers with commodities. Most of them will agree with their customers and hide them somewhere. In some cases, the customer will stay in a hideout and monitor the terrain. Once the security eases up mostly in the afternoon or night, smugglers will take advantage immediately...”*. The evolving smuggling techniques in Mbo pose a significant challenge to enforcement efforts. Smugglers adapt by using strategic hideouts and closely monitoring security patterns to exploit weak moments, particularly during the afternoon or night. This

demonstrates their ability to evade detection and underscores the need for round-the-clock surveillance, intelligence-driven operations, and proactive security measures.

### **Lack of Community Cooperation and Trust**

In response to a question concerning trust and community cooperation, a 32-year-old Customs Officer stated: *"I would say that there is not much cooperation from the community leaders who are supposed to be stakeholders." They have frequently aided and abetted smuggling activities and blamed it on lack of employment...*". The lack of community cooperation and trust significantly weakens anti-smuggling efforts in Mbo. Community leaders, who should serve as key stakeholders in combating smuggling, are instead perceived as complicit, often justifying these illegal activities due to economic hardships. This lack of collaboration limits intelligence gathering and enforcement efficiency, allowing smugglers to operate with local support.

Another participant, a 40-year-old Customs Officer added: *"The community people are not cooperating at all. Most of these illegal goods passed through their backyards. They are not likely to provide intelligence information to us..."*. The lack of community cooperation and trust presents a major obstacle to combating smuggling in Mbo. Residents, rather than aiding law enforcement, appear indifferent or even supportive of smuggling activities, as these often pass through their neighborhoods. Their reluctance to provide intelligence weakens security operations and allows smuggling networks to thrive.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Strategies Employed by the Nigerian Customs Service to Curb Commodity Smuggling**

The findings of this study highlight the various strategies employed by the Nigeria Customs Service to curb commodity smuggling in Mbo, demonstrating both successes and challenges in enforcement efforts. One of the key approaches is community relations, which, while essential in fostering trust and intelligence-sharing, remains a difficult strategy due to resistance from locals. The economic dependence of some residents on smuggling has made them hesitant to cooperate with law enforcement, seeing security agents as threats rather than allies. Another significant strategy involves inter-security agency collaboration, which has contributed to effective operations by facilitating intelligence sharing and coordinated enforcement. The synergy between the Customs Service and other security agencies has resulted in successful seizures of contraband goods, showing that joint efforts yield better outcomes in combating smuggling. However, the study also suggests that sustained collaboration is necessary, as smuggling networks continue to evolve, requiring continuous adaptation and strategic partnerships among enforcement agencies.

The use of surveillance technologies has been another effective tool in detecting and preventing smuggling activities. Advanced monitoring systems have enhanced intelligence gathering, real-time tracking, and prosecution of offenders, reducing smuggling incidents. However, the sustainability of this approach depends on regular technological upgrades, adequate training of personnel, and the allocation of sufficient resources to maintain these systems. The effectiveness of surveillance must also be complemented by field intelligence and ground-level enforcement. Intelligence gathering has proven to be a proactive strategy in identifying smuggling networks and their evolving tactics. By leveraging intelligence-based operations, customs officers have been able to disrupt smuggling activities more efficiently. However, this method relies heavily on access to credible sources and strong collaboration between agencies to ensure the timely flow of information. The study suggests that enhancing intelligence frameworks through informant networks and advanced data analysis could further improve enforcement measures.

Anti-corruption measures have been implemented to strengthen integrity within the Customs Service, as corruption has been identified as a major factor enabling smuggling. Strong internal controls, transparent operational policies, and continuous ethical training have been put in place to deter officers from engaging in misconduct. Despite these efforts, corruption remains a challenge, with some officials still complicit in smuggling activities. The study indicates that reinforcing accountability mechanisms and ensuring strict legal consequences for corrupt practices could help in mitigating this issue. The arrest and

detention of smugglers, as well as the seizure and confiscation of smuggled goods, have served as deterrent measures. By prosecuting offenders and preventing them from profiting from illicit trade, law enforcement has been able to disrupt smuggling networks and signal the consequences of illegal trade. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on the efficiency of the legal system in ensuring swift and consistent prosecutions. The study implies that addressing legal bottlenecks, strengthening judicial processes, and reducing corruption in legal proceedings would further reinforce the impact of these enforcement strategies.

The findings of this study align with existing literature on smuggling enforcement strategies while also providing a unique perspective on the specific challenges and successes encountered in Mbo. The role of community relations in customs enforcement, as highlighted by Maiwada (2022), is evident in Mbo, where trust-building efforts, public sensitization, and collaboration with local leaders have been pursued to curb smuggling. However, similar to the challenges observed in other regions, resistance from local communities remains a significant obstacle, as some residents perceive security agents as adversaries rather than allies due to their economic dependence on smuggling. This reinforces the argument that while community engagement is essential, it must be accompanied by broader enforcement mechanisms to achieve tangible results.

The importance of inter-agency collaboration in strengthening customs enforcement efforts, as emphasized in the work of Odago (2019), is also reflected in the findings of this study. Joint operations between the Nigeria Customs Service and other security agencies have facilitated intelligence sharing, coordinated patrols, and successful seizures of smuggled goods. However, just as seen in Kenya, where inter-agency cooperation contributed to border management, the study suggests that such efforts in Mbo must be continuously reinforced to adapt to the evolving tactics of smuggling networks. Effective collaboration, particularly in a coastal setting, requires sustained commitment, resource allocation, and trust among enforcement agencies to maintain operational efficiency.

The findings further demonstrate the effectiveness of surveillance technologies in combating smuggling, consistent with the observations of Horobets et al. (2020), who highlighted the role of technological advancements in border control. The use of real-time monitoring systems in Mbo has enhanced intelligence gathering, improved detection, and facilitated the tracking of smuggling operations. However, just as seen in Ukraine, the study underscores that technological solutions alone are insufficient without continuous investment in training, maintenance, and complementary field intelligence. A holistic approach that integrates technological surveillance with human intelligence and proactive enforcement is necessary for sustainable results.

The role of intelligence gathering in identifying and dismantling smuggling networks, as seen in the study by Nduti and Odhiambo (2020), is evident in the findings. Intelligence-led operations have proven instrumental in preempting smuggling activities and disrupting supply chains. However, as observed in Busia Town, where intelligence effectiveness depended on diverse data sources and robust informant networks, the study suggests that Mbo could benefit from expanding its intelligence frameworks to include more structured data analysis and enhanced collaboration with informants. Strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms across agencies would improve the overall effectiveness of enforcement measures.

Corruption remains a persistent challenge in smuggling enforcement, mirroring findings from previous studies. As noted by Varavayi and Shirkes (2014), administrative mechanisms alone were insufficient in curbing smuggling at the Ghasreshirin border, partly due to systemic corruption. Similarly, in Mbo, despite the implementation of internal controls and anti-corruption policies, some officials remain complicit in smuggling operations. The study reinforces the argument that strict accountability measures, legal consequences for misconduct, and transparent operational frameworks are crucial in addressing this issue. Enhancing ethical training and ensuring the integrity of customs personnel are necessary steps toward minimizing corruption-induced vulnerabilities in enforcement strategies.

The effectiveness of punitive measures such as arrests, detentions, and the seizure of smuggled goods, as observed by Nduti and Odhiambo (2020), is also reflected in the findings. These strategies have served as deterrents, disrupting illicit trade and signaling the legal repercussions of smuggling. However, just as in Busia Town, where the efficiency of these measures depended on the effectiveness of the judicial

system, the study highlights that the enforcement of legal consequences in Mbo is sometimes undermined by delays and inconsistencies in prosecution. Addressing judicial inefficiencies and ensuring timely legal proceedings would further reinforce the impact of these enforcement mechanisms.

Overall, the study supports existing research while extending the discussion to the specific geopolitical and economic realities of Mbo. It underscores the necessity of a multi-faceted approach that integrates community engagement, technological advancements, inter-agency collaboration, intelligence-driven operations, anti-corruption initiatives, and legal enforcement. By contextualising these findings within the broader literature, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in combating smuggling in a coastal border environment.

### **Challenges of the Nigerian Custom Service in the Fight against Commodity Smuggling**

The results showed that Nigeria Customs Service have faced several challenges in the fight against commodity smuggling in Mbo. These challenges include but not limited to the porosity of borders, bribery and corruption, new smuggling techniques, limited funding and welfare, shortage of personnel, and lack of community cooperation and trust. The porosity of borders remains a critical issue, as smugglers exploit numerous undocumented routes, making it difficult for security agencies to enforce trade regulations. Limited security personnel further exacerbate the problem, as officers are unable to effectively monitor all illegal entry points. This challenge is compounded by corruption, where some officials facilitate smuggling instead of enforcing the law, weakening border security and enforcement efforts. Bribery and corruption are major impediments to the effectiveness of anti-smuggling operations in Mbo. The study revealed that some security personnel accept bribes, allowing smuggled goods to pass through unchecked. This not only undermines enforcement strategies but also fosters a culture of impunity, where smugglers continue their activities without fear of consequences. Such practices weaken public trust in law enforcement and contribute to the normalisation of illegal trade, making it difficult for genuine enforcement measures to gain traction.

Limited funding and poor welfare conditions also play a crucial role in hindering the effectiveness of anti-smuggling efforts. Insufficient financial resources prevent the acquisition of essential surveillance equipment and the maintenance of operational vehicles, reducing mobility and response time. Furthermore, poor welfare conditions contribute to low morale among officers, increasing their susceptibility to corruption. When personnel feel undervalued and financially constrained, they may be more likely to engage in unethical practices, further weakening enforcement mechanisms. The shortage of personnel is another major challenge that limits the ability of the Nigeria Customs Service to combat smuggling effectively. The study found that not only is there a lack of personnel, but some officers are also unwilling to work diligently. This shortage makes it difficult to conduct coordinated operations, leaving security agencies stretched thin in the fight against well-organised smuggling networks. The need for experienced and committed officers is essential in ensuring that enforcement efforts are both effective and sustainable.

The adaptability of smugglers presents an evolving challenge, as they continuously develop new techniques to evade detection. The study revealed that smuggling operations often involve the use of unconventional methods, such as transporting contraband through the Atlantic Ocean, storing goods in residential areas, and even utilising government vehicles. These tactics demonstrate the sophistication of smuggling networks and highlight the need for security agencies to adopt intelligence-driven strategies and advanced surveillance techniques to counteract these threats. A lack of community cooperation and trust further weakens anti-smuggling efforts. Many community members, including local leaders, are perceived to support smuggling due to economic dependence on the illicit trade. Their reluctance to provide intelligence information to law enforcement officials significantly hampers efforts to curb smuggling. Without active community involvement, enforcement agencies face an uphill battle, as smugglers receive protection and logistical support from within the local population.

The findings of this study reinforce the broader literature on border security and smuggling enforcement while also providing a localized perspective on the specific challenges faced by the Nigeria Customs Service in Mbo. Previous studies, such as Afaha and Ani (2020), have highlighted Nigeria's porous borders as a significant national security issue, a concern that is evident in Mbo. Smugglers exploit

undocumented routes, making enforcement difficult, especially with the limited number of security personnel available. The study found that officers struggle to monitor all illegal entry points, allowing smugglers to operate with relative ease. This aligns with existing research that points to border porosity as a major enabler of transborder crimes and highlights the necessity of enhanced surveillance and manpower allocation.

Corruption further exacerbates the challenges of smuggling enforcement in Mbo, consistent with the findings of previous studies. The study revealed that some security personnel accept bribes, which weakens enforcement efforts and fosters a culture of impunity. This observation echoes the institutional challenges identified by Sosuh (2011), who found that border security efforts are often undermined by internal inefficiencies, including the lack of adequate training and the failure of enforcement agents to resist corruption. The persistence of bribery and unethical practices in Mbo not only facilitates the movement of contraband but also erodes public trust in law enforcement agencies, making community cooperation even more difficult to secure.

The study also found that limited funding and poor welfare conditions significantly hinder anti-smuggling efforts, further validating the findings of earlier research on border security challenges. Similar to the logistical shortcomings highlighted by Sosuh (2011), the lack of financial resources in Mbo prevents the acquisition of essential surveillance equipment and restricts operational mobility. Additionally, poor welfare conditions contribute to low morale among officers, making them more susceptible to corrupt practices. When personnel feel undervalued, they may prioritize personal financial gains over their duty to enforce the law, further weakening enforcement mechanisms.

The adaptability of smugglers presents an evolving challenge, as they continuously develop new techniques to evade detection. The study revealed that smuggling networks in Mbo employ sophisticated methods such as transporting contraband via the Atlantic Ocean, hiding goods in residential areas, and even using government vehicles to move illicit commodities. This aligns with broader research on the dynamic nature of smuggling operations, which demonstrates that enforcement efforts must continuously evolve to counter emerging threats. Intelligence-driven strategies and advanced surveillance techniques are essential in addressing these sophisticated smuggling tactics, as static enforcement measures quickly become ineffective.

A critical issue that further weakens anti-smuggling operations in Mbo is the lack of community cooperation and trust. The study found that many community members, including local leaders, provide tacit support to smugglers due to economic dependence on illicit trade. This finding is consistent with Afaha and Ani (2020), who noted that broader transborder security concerns are often influenced by socio-economic factors that shape local attitudes towards enforcement agencies. Without community involvement, enforcement agencies face considerable resistance, as smugglers receive protection and logistical support from within the local population. Addressing these challenges requires not only stricter enforcement but also strategic engagement with community stakeholders to shift local perceptions and encourage cooperation.

Overall, the findings align with existing literature while providing a focused analysis of the specific difficulties faced by customs officers in Mbo. The study highlights the need for a multi-pronged approach that includes improved funding, enhanced surveillance, intelligence-driven operations, anti-corruption measures, and stronger community engagement. By contextualizing these findings within the broader academic discourse, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in combating smuggling in Nigeria's coastal border regions.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the challenges of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), and its strategies, in the fight against commodity smuggling in Mbo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The results showed that the Nigeria Customs Service has deployed different strategies to bring smugglers to book. These strategies include community relations, surveillance technologies, anti-corruption measures, inter-security agency collaboration, arrest and detention of suspected smugglers, seizure and confiscation of smuggled commodities, prosecution of smuggling offenders among others, to



serve as specific and general deterrents. The results also revealed the challenges encountered by the Nigeria Customs Service in the fight against smuggling in Mbo, including the porosity of borders, bribery, and corruption, limited funding, manpower shortage, bribery and corruption, poor inter-security agency collaboration, new smuggling techniques, inadequate legal frameworks, inadequate training and capacity building for Customs officers, sabotage, inadequate border infrastructure and facilities, and lack of community cooperation and trust. Smuggling leads to significant revenue losses for the government. Smuggling of arms and ammunition fuels insecurity and criminality. Contraband goods and hard drugs pose health risks to citizens. Smuggling perpetuates corruption among officials and undermines the rule of law.

This study contributes to knowledge by providing an in-depth examination of the challenges faced by the Nigeria Customs Service in combating commodity smuggling in Mbo, a coastal region with significant smuggling activities. By analysing community relations, inter-security agency collaboration, surveillance technologies, intelligence gathering, anti-corruption measures, and enforcement strategies, the study highlights both the strengths and limitations of current anti-smuggling efforts. The findings revealed that while technological advancements and inter-agency cooperation have improved enforcement, persistent issues such as border porosity, corruption among security agents, insufficient personnel, and lack of community cooperation continue to undermine the effectiveness of smuggling control. The study expands existing literature by emphasising the socio-economic dimensions of smuggling, particularly how community allegiance and economic dependence on smuggling networks create resistance to law enforcement efforts. Additionally, the study provides practical insights into the evolving tactics of smugglers and the institutional weaknesses within the Customs Service that hinder effective enforcement.

Future research should explore the role of socio-economic incentives in community engagement and how alternative livelihood programmes could reduce local dependency on smuggling. Investigating the impact of public awareness campaigns on changing perceptions of smuggling and promoting lawful trade would also be beneficial. Additionally, further studies could assess the effectiveness of advanced surveillance technologies in coastal anti-smuggling operations and examine policy frameworks that enhance inter-agency cooperation and intelligence sharing.

## Recommendations

- i. The Nigeria Customs Service should strengthen trust and collaboration with local communities through sustained engagement programmes, economic incentives, and public sensitisation on the negative impacts of smuggling. Strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms within security agencies is also critical, requiring more stringent oversight, ethical training, and accountability measures to prevent officers from aiding smugglers. Strict anti-corruption procedures should also be put in place within the Customs Service to make sure that personnel are not involved in smuggling; this would improve the integrity and efficiency of enforcement actions.
- ii. NCS should step up border patrols and checkpoints. Investing in surveillance technology like satellite tracking and drones to monitor smuggling activities, increasing personnel, and improving welfare conditions would enhance operational efficiency, while legal reforms and stricter prosecution of offenders would deter smuggling activities more effectively. By addressing these structural and operational weaknesses, the fight against commodity smuggling in Mbo can become more effective and sustainable.

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