

Travel, Trade and Cross-Border Mobility: the Role of Regional Alliances

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International borders and their adjacent territories have functioned traditionally as tourist attractions and important destinations, while also mediating tourism flows as physical and psychological barriers. According to the political geography literature, international boundaries have several functions: to mark the physical limits of sovereignty; to mediate the flows of certain goods and services; to filter undesirable elements out and keep desired elements in; to provide a line of military defense; and to monitor flows of people.

Owing to these functions, borders have long been perceived by travelers as somewhat burdensome; immigration formalities are commonly seen as intimidating and inconvenient, and crossing some boundaries, even friendly ones, can be daunting and time consuming. In national administrative terms, borders have long dictated the extent of sovereign control, and historically few cross-boundary partnerships have developed except in instances of limited trade in goods, because problems were generally more localized in nature. However, during the past century, political isolationism, which was the norm in many parts of the world for centuries, has diminished. In its place, there has been rapid globalization and integration. Manifestations of this exist in many parts of the world as sections of countries, entire countries, large multinational regions, and continents begin to cooperate and collaborate in social, economic, political and ecological ways to achieve goals which are to the mutual benefit of all parties.

Cross-border and multinational alliances have gone from near non-existence 70 years ago to become the norm in the 21st century, with important implications for tourism, particularly in the realms of resource conservation, transportation, flow of people and products, infrastructure development and marketing. This paper will briefly examine the implications of supranational alliances for tourism generally and highlight the case of the Economic Association of West African States (ECOWAS) and its potential role in mitigating travel flows across state boundaries. Research findings will be presented on cross-border tourists' and traders' perceptions of West African borders as barriers and facilitators of travel, as well as the role of ECOWAS in regional cross-border travel.