

Building Borders to Facilitate Free Movement? One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) and the West African Paradox

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Abstract

This article critically examines One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) in West Africa, focusing on Togo as a key case study. While OSBPs are designed to facilitate the free movement of people and goods across borders, they simultaneously introduce enhanced control, surveillance, and spatial segmentation, revealing a paradox at the heart of regional integration efforts. Drawing on geographical analysis, trade facilitation literature, and Science and Technology Studies, the paper unpacks the political, institutional, and technological dynamics shaping OSBP implementation and everyday practices. It highlights how OSBPs serve as techno-political assemblages that embody both the promise of seamless mobility and the realities of discipline, producing new hierarchies and exclusions within regional circulation. The study underscores free movement as a contested and negotiated process, refracted through complex actor interactions and spatial arrangements, thus calling for deeper investigation into the material and social politics of mobility infrastructures in West Africa.

Keyword: One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), regional integration, free movement, border governance, mobility, trade facilitation, spatial practices, Togo, West Africa.

Introduction

This article explores the paradox at the heart of the One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) implemented in Togo and West Africa more broadly: they are infrastructures meant to facilitate the free movement of people and goods, yet they rely on heightened mechanisms of control and surveillance. Their implementation thus raises a fundamental question: how can a border control instrument promote free movement? On the surface, free movement appears incompatible with the proliferation of control mechanisms such as OSBPs. These infrastructures are promoted on the assumption – widely shared in trade and border management circles – that increased inter-agency coordination, and the use of digital tools enable smoother mobility for pre-vetted or low-risk travellers and shipments, while eliminating unnecessary checks. These assumptions not only obscure the power dynamics and hierarchies embedded in control infrastructures, but they also sustain a dominant narrative that OSBPs are key to accelerating the effective implementation of free movement within ECOWAS and WAEMU. In this view, OSBPs are seen as the long-awaited remedy to the inefficiency of previous mobility initiatives—a technical fix to decades of stalled regional integration. The following scene illustrates the enduring nature and political weight of this belief.

On 11 November 2022, a ministerial convoy from Togo and Ghana visited the Noépé/Akanu OSBP, a 17-hectare fenced compound at the border between the two countries. The facility, financed by the European Union for approximately, includes modern customs and inspection equipment. It symbolizes both a shift in border governance and a new spatial imagination of circulation. Similar high-level visits to OSBPs at the borders with Burkina Faso and Benin attest to the political salience of these infrastructures. The OSBPs are part of broader regional integration agendas promoted by ECOWAS and WAEMU, in coordination with international donors (EU, World Bank, JICA, GIZ) and private operators. They aim to rationalize border crossing through harmonized procedures, co-location of services, and integrated administrative spaces. These sites are more than infrastructure – they are nodal points of transnational governance and tools for reconfiguring border spaces.

While a growing body of research has analyzed OSBPs in East Africa, especially in Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda (Nugent & Soi, 2020), there is a notable gap in the literature on West Africa. Existing documentation originates primarily from operational stakeholders – regional institutions, development agencies, and consulting firms – offering technical assessments rather than critical analysis (Banque africaine de développement, 2015 ; AUDA-NEPAD & JICA, 2022). This article seeks to fill this gap by adopting a geographical perspective, attentive to how borders are spatially transformed and how everyday practices are restructured within these new infrastructures. Indeed, the functional rationalization of space within OSBPs – through designated roles and behaviors specific to certain zones (such as common control areas, exclusive control areas, and integrated administrative spaces) – reflects a disciplinary approach that can be interpreted through a Foucauldian lens (Blanchette, 2006 ; Walters, 2006 ; Didiot, 2015). These mechanisms are designed to regulate the behavior of agents and rely on new rationalities such as a “culture of sharing” (Doyle, 2010 ; Kieck, 2010 ; Polner, 2011). This model of collaborative governance also involves specific funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to streamline cross-border flows has become standard practice.

The article also draws from the literature on trade facilitation and regional mobility, which examines the actors, political and spatial configurations, and practices involved, as well as the tools implemented to operationalize integration. In particular, it refers to the ECOWAS 1979 Protocol on Free Movement, which guarantees the right to travel, reside, and settle within the community space (Zanker *et al.*, 2020 ; Arhin-Sam *et al.*, 2022 ; Dauchy, 2022 ; Gendrot, 2022 ; Bisong *et al.*, 2022). Finally, this research engages with Science and Technology Studies (STS) to examine how OSBPs, as techno-political assemblages, enact new regimes of mobility, embodying both promises of integration and techniques of discipline (Cowen, 2014 ; Klimburg-Witjes et Trauttmansdorff, 2023 ; Fill, 2025). In this light, OSBPs can be read through the notion of “friction” (Tsing, 2005), as sites where global norms, national administrations, and local practices meet, clash, and co-produce new spatial and political configurations.

Togo provides a revealing case for analyzing how OSBPs are deployed, how they are implemented, and the modalities and practices that unfold within them. Since 2013, the country has aspired to transform itself into a logistical hub in the sub-region of West Africa for trade

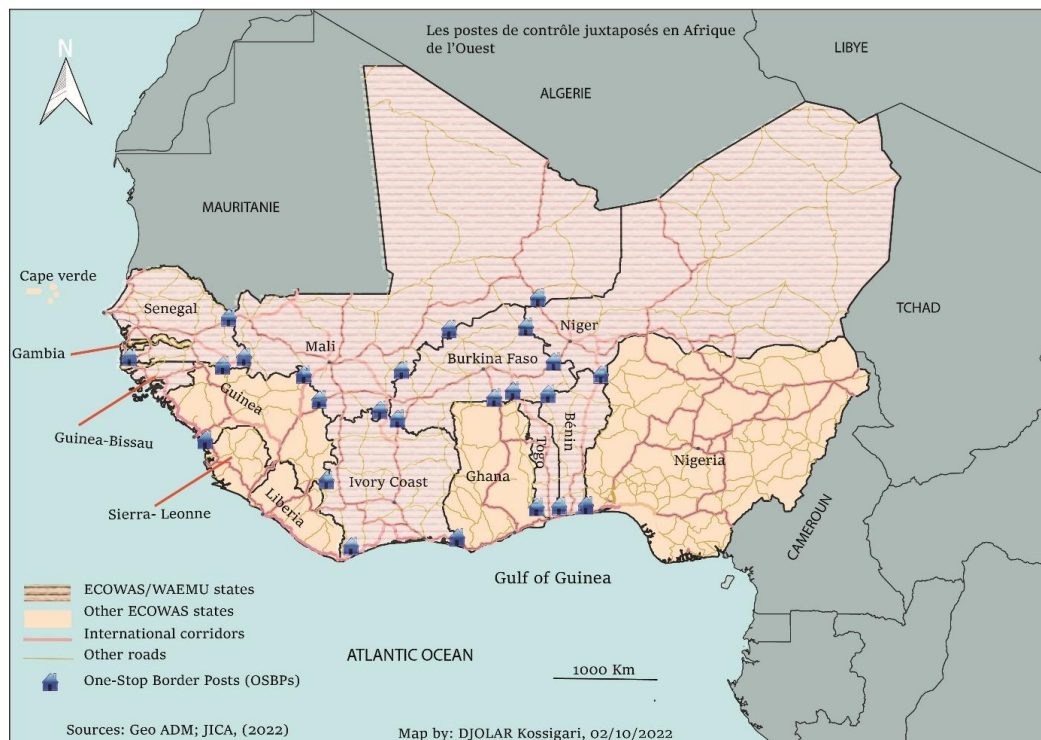
and commerce. It is the only ECOWAS member operating OSBPs at all three of its main land borders, hosting half of the six fully operational OSBPs in the WAEMU/ECOWAS region.

The article is structured as follows. The first section situates OSBPs within scholarly work on mobility, border control, and integration in West Africa, and outlines the methodological approach. The second section reconstructs the historical and institutional genealogy of OSBPs. The third section analyzes the frictions and negotiations shaping their implementation and everyday functioning. Finally, the article reflects on how OSBPs reshape the very idea of free movement, revealing both the aspirations and contradictions of regional integration.

I. One Stop Border Posts in West Africa: Debates and Methods

The development of One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) in the West African context serves multiple objectives and follows diverse ideological and political logics ((see Map 1).

Map 1: OSBP Projects in the West African Region



Understanding the complexity of the OSBP requires clarifying how this physical infrastructure has been addressed in the literature on border control, regionalization, and free movement. Bridging these three fields of analysis allows us to consider OSBPs as a concatenation of fragmented analyses of which they are a synthesis. It is equally essential to revisit the methodology used to study this geographical element. While OSBPs are legal, political, and ideological constructs, they are also spatially situated and alter both landscapes and spatial practices. Therefore, a micro-geography of OSBPs is necessary for two reasons. First, to clarify the methods used to grasp their content. Second, to trace the historical and institutional

trajectories of these infrastructures, whose roots lie in the diffusion of integration and border governance models in West Africa.

1. Border Control, Regional Cooperation and Free Movement: The Stakes of One Stop Border Posts

The debate over the ability of contemporary African states to control borders inherited from the colonial era has been central in political science (Foucher, 1991 ; Bayart, 1999 ; Badie, 2014), history (Lawrance, 2002 ; Nugent, 2003 ; Gayibor, 2011), geography (Walther, 2010 ; Bennafla, 2014). and anthropology (Chevrillon-Guibert, 2016). For a long time, studies on African borders have focused on the impact of porous borders on territorial organization, citizenship, and the difficulties in forming nation-states (Nugent, 2003 ; Foucher, 2014). African borders are often perceived as porous, poorly controlled, and border regions suffer from marginalization and low levels of socio-economic integration (Bennafla, 1999 ; Zinsou-Klassou, 2010 ; Conseil de l'Entente, 2020). The literature has largely centered around whether this lack of control and surveillance constitutes a barrier or an opportunity for national and regional economic and political integration, and what consequences it has on free movement processes.

Two main currents emerge. On the one hand, researchers are exploring the experiences of local and transnational actors involved in mobility and their interactions with administrations and power structures. These studies focus on cross-border exchanges driven by local actors and the importance of trade networks, whose practices challenge state authority and increase both the physical (due to limited control resources) and social (via corruption) porosity of borders (Bewiadzi Akakpo, 2022). The concept of the "national periphery" (Igue, 1989) highlights this porosity as a factor of integration and solidarity among local populations living on both sides of borders. These regions, functioning as *de facto* free economic zones beyond state control, become shared spaces (Igue, 2006) structured around trade and commercial networks (Walther, 2015). Weak border control has thus become an economic opportunity for these actors, fostering social and economic exchanges in border regions. The economic impact of these unregulated mobilities on national economies has also been emphasized (Faleye, 2016). Some view such informal exchanges as promoting social peace in contexts where states fail to distribute wealth equitably.

Certain authors see these dynamics as opportunities to consolidate integration, as they facilitate *de facto* informal free movement (Arhin-Sam et al., 2022; Bisong et al., 2022), led by local actors who circumvent or negotiate controls. The lack of control capacities in regional integration and free movement policies has led to the emergence of concepts such as "bottom-up regional integration" (Portes, 1999) and "informal cross-border trade" (Pliez, 2002 ; A. C. & Pliez, 2016), underlining the intensity of exchanges outside formal control frameworks. For these authors, such dynamics merely require institutional support. Accordingly, "top-down" regional integration initiated by institutions such as ECOWAS (which implemented free movement in 1979) and UEMOA (established in 1994), should complement these bottom-up processes.

On the other hand, another current argues that, while these forms of integration may support economies and social redistribution, they are unsustainable and hinder national economic development in a context of insecurity and integration into global markets (Walther, 2012). Revenue losses, unfair competition, and links between these networks and armed groups are seen as harmful to state stability and regional integration (OECD, 2018). For these scholars, integration requires strengthened state control. Reasserting control over borders has thus become a national and international political priority (Walther, 2009). Whereas regional integration in the European Union is facilitated by relaxed border controls (Mareï et Richard, 2018), in West Africa it is pursued through a rhetoric of border modernization via advanced technologies, such as smart borders and OSBPs. These co-produced and co-managed infrastructures aim to streamline globalization while ensuring effective control over regional and international flows (Amilhat-Szary, 2015).

Studies on the material transformations of land borders in West Africa show that migration control issues are central to these dynamics. The reinforcement of border controls in connection with migration policies – especially through ECOWAS – EU cooperation – illustrates this clearly (Andersson, 2015 ; Boyer et Chappart, 2018 ; Andersen et Sandberg, 2022). This cooperation has led to measures such as the criminalization of irregular migration, the legal (re)politicization of migration (Perrin, 2020), and the adoption of biometric registration systems (Dauchy, 2020, 2023). While such technologies aim to improve border surveillance amid insecurity (Walther, 2022), they have been criticized for fostering technological dependency, a surveillance continuum, and unequal mobility, evoking a “colonial continuum” (Dauchy, 2022).

This trend reveals a notable paradox in regional integration dynamics in West Africa. Camille Gendrot (2022) argues that viewing this process as a contradiction is overly simplistic. Border modernization in Africa is not contradictory in itself. Mobility management cooperation within regional blocs is not only about promoting free movement; it also serves broader economic, political, and cultural interests, depending on ruling powers. She also shows that regional integration in West Africa reflects neoliberal dynamics aiming to facilitate trade by opening markets and creating free trade areas.

Focusing on OSBPs allows us to grasp how multiple stakes intersect within a single control infrastructure. It highlights how the modernization and strengthening of border surveillance in West Africa go beyond national and regional concerns – like boosting state revenues, promoting regional integration through free movement, or combating corruption. OSBPs also intersect, if not primarily, with issues related to the logistics turn in Africa (Cowen, 2014 ; Steck, 2016 ; Chauvin *et al.*, 2017), reinforced migration control agendas (Boyer et Chappart, 2018 ; Boyer et Mounkaila, 2018 ; Bachirou, 2021), and rising security concerns (Boyer, 2019). It is at the intersection of these fragmented dimensions that OSBPs must be understood. This article contributes to reconnecting fragmented and siloed literatures. This interdisciplinary synthesis is essential to understanding both the physical and technical transformations of borders (infrastructure, technologies, etc.) and the rationalization of border control practices and procedures. Reforms intended to streamline global flows and their effects on the practices of

border officials—such as customs officers, who have become emblematic figures of modern control and state authority (Chalfin, 2008, 2010 ; Cantens *et al.*, 2015) – as well as changes in ports and airports, new governance modes, and the increasing role of private actors (Hönke et Cuesta-Fernandez, 2017, 2018) are reshaping how border control is exercised, perceived, and signified.

Despite growing interest in land border transformations, studies explicitly focusing on OSBPs as indicators of border control modernization in West Africa remain absent. Yet integrating OSBPs into border analyses would also allow a rethinking of African border studies, emphasizing how modernization processes reshape the nature and functions of borders. These posts, embedded in global logistics corridors, become terrestrial extensions of infrastructures designed to streamline global circulation. They also illustrate the contradictions between free movement and control imperatives in a context of insecurity. Studying OSBPs also offers insights into the technologization of borders in West Africa. As such, OSBPs enable the analysis of contradictory trends and foster the intersection of literatures on free movement, borders, Africa's logistics turn, and security and technological governance.

II. OSBPs as Socio-Technical Infrastructures

The concept of socio-technical infrastructure refers to the association of heterogeneous elements that support the mobility of people and goods (Xiang et Lindquist, 2014). It emerges from studies in a context of data proliferation, the expansion of technological use, and the proliferation of regulatory and legal frameworks aimed at monitoring and controlling mobility (Easterling, 2016). OSBPs bring together what has been called “paper infrastructures,” that is, the array of written documents required for the circulation of people and goods, intended to “control, rationalize, and formalize” movement (Błaszkiwicz, 2018, p. 136). In this sense, OSBPs become tools of social regulation.

They are also, first and foremost, legal infrastructures (Fill, 2025) with a special and exceptional status within state territories—extraterritoriality—which is combined with the massive use of information and communication technologies. The functioning of this infrastructure is enabled by interactions between a diversity of public and private actors, whose power relations shape the materiality of these infrastructures. This assemblage of heterogeneous, material, technical, and human elements designed to facilitate, control, and rationalize the movement of people and goods makes OSBPs a socio-technical infrastructure.

1. The History of an Imported Control Mechanism

One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) are presented by state actors, regional authorities, international development agencies, and private actors involved in logistics as modern tools to facilitate trade and travel, aiming to reduce transportation costs, shorten crossing times, and improve security. Historically, their origins can be traced back to the first experiences of joint border control in the 1950s between France and Belgium (Kieck, 2010), before Europe opted for the complete dismantling of internal border checks within the Schengen Area. Inspired by this European

model, OSBPs in West Africa follow a teleological logic of development promoted by international donors and the European Union, who consider such facilities to be key levers for regional integration (Boyer et Chappart, 2018 ; Boyer et Mounkaila, 2018 ; Bachirou, 2021; Dauchy, 2022; Dauchy, 2023)

The words of a WAEMU representative interviewed in Ouagadougou illustrate this imported nature. When asked about the origin of OSBP projects, he explained:

“Maybe the idea was to follow the EU’s path. Apparently, a hundred years ago, to join the European Union, one had to go through this process. Today, they are in what they call the Schengen Area. We didn’t model ourselves on the current Schengen system, but on the old one! The old model, where some believe that if Europe passed through this stage to get where it is now, why shouldn’t Africa follow the same path?” (Head of Road Transport Division, Ouagadougou, January 22, 2022)

OSBPs, largely supported by international and regional organizations such as the European Union, the WTO, and ECOWAS, embody a model of imported public action based on international norms for mobility management and border control.

Although the goals and missions of OSBPs are clearly defined, their trajectories vary. OSBPs follow distinct paths depending on their funding model, operating structure, and institutional affiliation. These factors influence their outcomes, effectiveness, and the interactions between actors involved in their management. In West Africa, OSBPs fall under the purview of two regional organizations: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). This dual affiliation is reflected in the design and operation of OSBPs in Togo.

For instance, the OSBP at Cinkassé, located on the border between Togo and Burkina Faso along the Lomé–Ouagadougou corridor, was the first of its kind in West Africa and has been operational since 2011 (Photo 1). It is funded and managed through a public-private partnership with the private operator Scanning System. The contract includes the provision of scanners, parking areas, and electronic management systems.

Photo 1: Entrance to the Cinkassé OSBP



Source : DJOLAR Kossigari, Cinkassé, December 20, 2020

While the OSBP at Sanvée-Condji (Photo 2), located on the border between Togo and Benin, and the OSBP at Noépé/Akanu (Photo 3), on the border between Togo and Ghana, are funded by regional actors (ECOWAS, WAEMU, and the European Union), they feature a distinct architectural design.

Photo: The eastern administrative block of the Sanvée-Condji OSBP



Source: DJOLAR Kossigari, Sanvée-Condji, October 13, 2020
Photo 3: The northern administrative block of the Noépé/Akanu OSBP



Source: DJOLAR Kossigari, Noépé, November 11, 2022

The popularity of the One Stop Border Post (OSBP) is illustrated by the rapid growth of projects in Africa since 2009 (see Map 1). International donors such as the WTO, PIDA, the European Union, JICA, and the World Bank have strongly supported these initiatives.

2- Disciplining Practices and Space: Spatial and Legal Organization of OSBPs

Legally, OSBPs benefit from a status of extraterritoriality governed by Regulation 15 of 2009 from the UEMOA Commission, which defines their legal framework, particularly regarding their location, zoning, and operating modalities.

Under this status, OSBPs are exempt from national legal frameworks and jurisdictions concerning the regulation and organization of public space and security. However, the extraterritoriality status of OSBPs does not imply the non-application of national laws. National laws on immigration, health, and taxes still apply within specific areas defined by the UEMOA text. Security, management, and organizational rules within and around the OSBP are set by the UEMOA Commission. According to this regulation, law enforcement agents from the neighboring country to the OSBP's host country are allowed to carry arms within the OSBP premises. This legal framework has since been adopted by ECOWAS in its program to extend the OSBP initiative across ECOWAS since 2008. The border thus becomes a space where multiple legal regimes intertwine in an effort to rationalize behaviors, surveillance, and control of mobility. In a context of mobility control, this overlap and accumulation of legal frameworks at national, regional, and international levels create complexity in interpretation, requiring specific arbitration by the agents.

The novelty brought by OSBPs is not limited to the legal transformation alone. It is also embodied in the modern architecture of the buildings (see previous photos), the internal organization of which is also governed by Regulation 15 of the UEMOA. These posts are meant to embody both architectural and behavioral changes, hence the construction of new architectural structures. The old control posts, consisting of huts and corrugated iron buildings, are demolished. This architectural evolution illustrates a desire for modernity but also a break from border governance models centered on the state. The demolition of the old buildings constructed by the states for their border administrations and their replacement with new modern structures symbolizes this projection into a new world where the new infrastructure is intended to influence the organization and functioning of administrative agencies in favor of free movement.

Photo 4: Demolition and reconstruction operations at the Sanvée-Condji/Hilla-Condji OSBP at the Togo/Benin border



Source: DJOLAR Kossigari, Sanvée-Condji, February 20, 2022

Demolition of the old buildings of the Togolese police and reconstruction of new premises. On

the right, in the foreground, the main building of the Togolese police remains, with its demolition deferred until the full operationalization of the post. In front, a new wall gradually rises. The construction materials obscure trucks using the operational areas of the OSBP, which are demarcated by the fence.

This dynamic recalls the biblical principle "a sound mind in a sound body." These new buildings are meant to accommodate new ways of working (collaboration, shared services, etc.), new rationalities in terms of control (competitiveness, efficiency), and new objectives to achieve, such as free movement.

From an internal organizational perspective, the OSBP space is divided into three zones: the administrative zone, the common control zone, and the internal operations zone. The OSBP is first and foremost a large area, spanning dozens of hectares, subdivided into different zones with varying identifications and assignments based on specific control activities. According to Regulation 15,

"The control services of the neighboring states operate in the common control zones (CCZ) of the OSBP. The layout of the CCZ is designed to facilitate a sequential order of control. Each neighboring state has an exclusive control space (ECS) in which its services carry out border controls. The exclusive control space of a state within the CCZ and the premises housing its border control services are marked with inscriptions and official badges. The control of the gauge, weight, and axle load of heavy goods transport vehicles, and potentially their contents via scanning and the eco is carried out in the internal operations zone of the OSBP. The border surveillance sector, i.e., the area delimited around the OSBP, whose responsibility lies with the host state according to the OSBP model, ensures that people, vehicles, and goods crossing the border cannot bypass the border control carried out at the OSBP."

This spatial division within the OSBP, defined according to the objectives and specific tasks designed to organize the actions and behavior of control agents to facilitate traffic flow, recalls the discipline of the body or anatomo-politics discussed by Marie Didiot, drawing on the works of Foucault. This technique of managing bodies "involves managing the distribution of individuals in space, controlling their activities, and shaping their behavior to produce 'useful' bodies, docile and submissive" (Didiot, 2015, p. 70). The zoning of the OSBP aims to create new gestures, reflexes, and attitudes within state administrations in line with regional and global standards of control, while eliminating the state and national reflexes of control and abuse.

OSBPs can also be considered as a form of tool, designed to channel individual and collective behaviors. While individual behaviors are framed by the internal zoning of the OSBP, the border surveillance sector corresponds to a broader objective, as it seeks to channel travelers towards the OSBP through the deployment of law enforcement forces with the aim of monitoring the geographical areas surrounding the OSBP.

3- Operational Challenges in Coordination Between Actors

In the management of One Stop Border Posts (OSBP), two management models are proposed by Regulation 15 of UEMOA: concessions and management committees. The operational conditions and the setup of the OSBP vary depending on the mode of operation.

In the first case, a concession is a contract agreed between UEMOA/ECOWAS and a private company, which is responsible for operating the OSBP site in exchange for a fee jointly agreed

upon by both contracting parties. This model corresponds to the Cinkassé control post, operated by the company Scanning System, according to an agreed-upon specifications document. The concession, signed in 2009, follows the BOT (Build, Operate, and Transfer) model for a period of 20 years. The operator is responsible for the construction, operation, and subsequent transfer of the OSBP. The specifications document requires Scanning System to assist the administrations by providing office supplies, IT equipment (computers, printers, phones, etc.), and all costs related to the operation of the site, such as electricity, water, and property ownership of the site. It is important to note that some services located within the OSBPs use their own equipment due to the sensitivity and security of the data. Togolese and Burkinabé customs, for instance, use IT equipment and communication lines provided by national operators, separate from the services provided by the manager.

The issue of the loss of sovereignty over docks, in reference to the monopoly on port management and control by multinational shipping companies emancipating from constraints, is already raised in Europe (Maquet, 2015) and in many African countries (Debrie, 2003 ; Dagnogo *et al.*, 2012). The OSBP symbolizes the extension of this phenomenon to land borders, which were previously spared. The growing involvement of private actors in the sovereign domain of security and territory control in West Africa now aligns with the business of borders and control described by several authors in the context of migration governance (Rosière et Jones, 2012 ; Gammeltoft-Hansen et Sorensen, 2013 ; Rodier, 2014). While the establishment of OSBPs is not explicitly aimed at limiting migratory movements or preventing migrants from crossing the border, as seen at European and American borders, the lobbying efforts by private operators to convince national governments and regional bodies raise a troubling similarity. The head of the UEMOA land transport division subtly mentioned the strong lobbying by Scanning System to win this contract, blending opaque political strategy with intense lobbying:

"On what basis did the economic operator obtain this contract? Was it through an open, international tender, or was it simply decided to entrust the project directly to him, saying, 'Sir, you're on it, go ahead, do this work'? It seems to be a negotiated contract, without competition. Perhaps there were no terms of reference (TOR) or a precise specifications document. You understand what I mean. Anyway, these elements sometimes touch on political issues. It's a high-level debate we can't get into here. As for economic operators, you don't know how much lobbying they can do to secure a deal. Sometimes, they take unexpected paths, and even high authorities may condone these practices. It complicates things a lot because opposing them can lead to lawsuits. That's why I prefer not to get too involved in these kinds of discussions" (Ouagadougou, ECOWAS Representative in Lomé, October 11, 2020).

Regarding the OSBPs at Sanvée-Condji/Hilla-Condji and Noépé/Akanu, operations within the OSBP are the responsibility of a management committee set up by UEMOA and ECOWAS. According to the UEMOA transport manager, the management committee is a temporary, lightweight structure composed of a permanent administrator, an administrative and financial assistant, and an interpreter. This committee is responsible for the daily management, such as site maintenance and meeting certain personnel needs at the facility. Moreover the committee, which could evolve into a board of directors, is expected to give way to the installation of a manager tasked with operating the site. At Noépé/Akanu, establishing a management committee has faced challenges due to the issue of paying the committee members by ECOWAS, which

claims to lack sufficient resources. The OSBP is temporarily managed jointly by the two administrations, with a rotating presidency every six months. Electricity costs are shared between the two countries, but water supply remains problematic. Power outages and lack of water make working conditions difficult, according to the Togolese police officers met on November 11, 2022. In Sanvée, the management conditions are not much better. The temporary administration set up is led by a former customs colonel from the Republic of Benin, assisted by the heads of customs from Togo and Benin. Coordination between services for border control was being set up in January 2023, but the provision of furniture, funded by the UEMOA commission, was still ongoing.

The multiplicity of actors within the OSBPs, with differing administrative cultures and operational logics, makes coordination by official management structures challenging. For example, at the Cinkassé control post, there are customs services, police, phytosanitary services, veterinary services, gendarmerie, the Chamber of Commerce for Burkina Faso, the Burkinabé Shippers' Council, Cotecna BF (the company responsible for placing and removing the seals), and health services. Scanning System organizes quarterly coordination meetings to gather the concerns of various actors. However, this coordination framework does not seem to satisfy all personnel. During my visit in December 2021, the Togolese immigration commissioner felt marginalized in the discussions and resented the proximity of the OSBP's operations manager to the Burkinabé services. This distrust among actors contributes to the development of self-assertion, in which the primacy of national regulations is emphasized over the conduct of activities within the OSBP.

III- The Challenges of Implementing One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs)

The concept of the OSBP, as defined by its creators, faces recurring implementation challenges. The attachment of states to their sovereignty, the use of state sovereignty for illicit extractions by officials assigned to control at OSBPs, as well as the intensity of parallel flows avoiding the control posts, explain why OSBPs struggle to achieve the desired results. Additionally, there are material difficulties faced by the technological systems put in place.

1. The Impossible Overcoming of National Control Logics

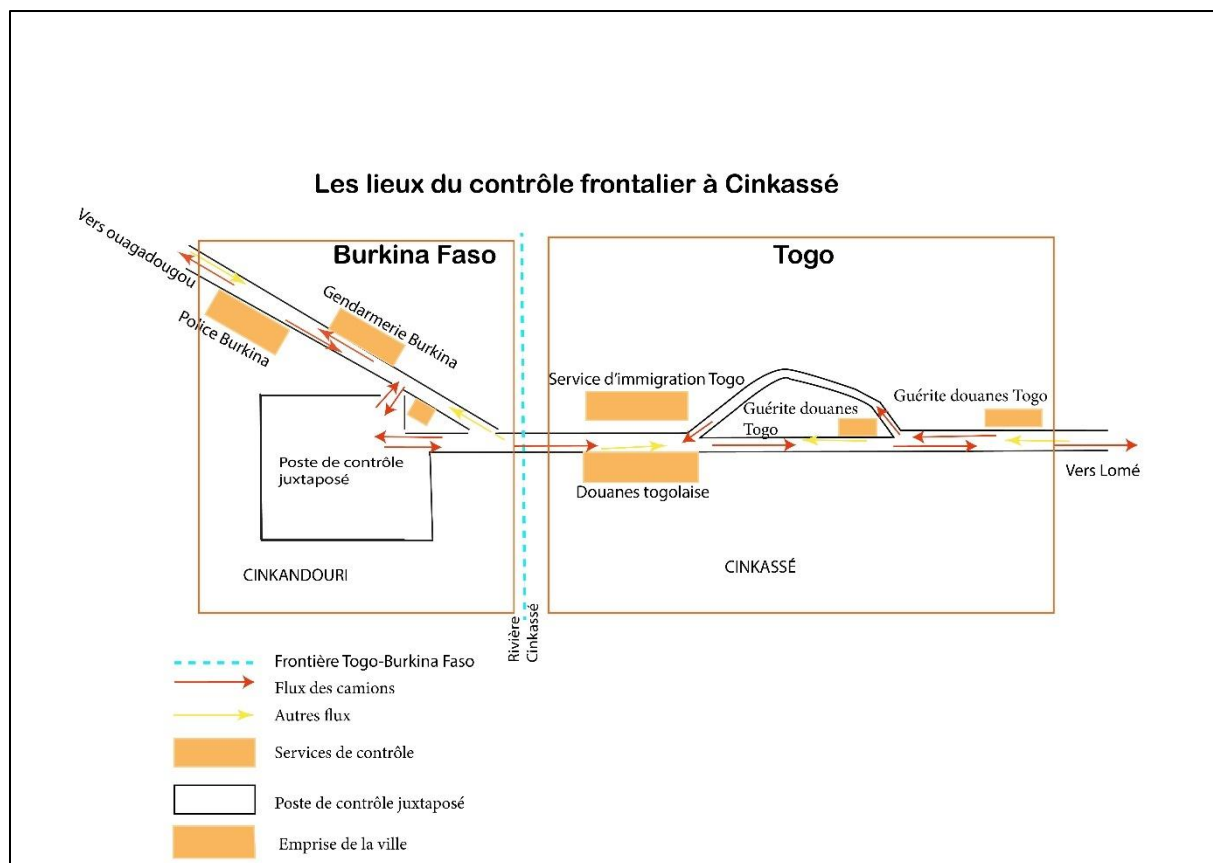
The aim of control posts is to promote the smooth movement of people and goods across space. They embody the desire to overcome state borders and national regulations. This creates a tension between state protectionism and the free movement of people and goods. OSBPs need to establish cooperation between private operators and state actors, but within administrations, the issue of sovereignty is central. The sharing of equipment, as seen at the Sanvée/Condji border where the weighbridge belongs to Benin, raises concerns. Togolese customs see this as a violation of their sovereignty since the data is managed by Beninese servers. Furthermore, a former Beninese colonel leads the management committee, which is poorly received by Togolese authorities, who feel that this threatens their sovereignty. The customs inspector at Sanvée-Condji emphasizes that his mission is to assert this sovereignty against Beninese influence.

This desire for sovereignty complicates the harmonization of bureaucratic practices in the spirit of OSBPs. At other border control posts along the Togolese border, coordination between national bureaucracies is just as difficult. In Cinkassé, electronic seals, which are mandatory for goods in transit, are managed by separate services on each side of the border. Service hours vary from one country to another, even in shared premises. At the Sanvée-Condji/Hillacondji post, Togolese customs are permanently present, while Beninese customs are not. This issue is also present in Cinkassé, where Burkinabe customs do not maintain a permanent presence. Coordination has only been successful with the Ghanaian services at Noépé/Akanu. This discordance in administrative functioning raises questions: “If we are together to work to ensure fluidity, wait, does one of us have to maintain a permanent presence while the other does not?” asks a police commissioner at the Cinkassé OSBP (Cinkassé, December 10, 2021). “Actually, we grouped the two customs services, but each works independently, without coordination,” says another police officer met on the same day at Cinkassé (Cinkassé, December 10, 2021).

Differences in the organization of services are also problematic. After the delivery of the Cinkassé OSBP in 2011, the two customs services expressed opposition to the relocation of some services. Togolese customs refused to move their brigade into the OSBP area. Similarly, the Burkinabe customs refused to leave Bittou, making the procedures redundant. It wasn’t until 2019 that both customs offices were relocated to the OSBP premises. At the Noépé/Akanu post, the Ghanaian government hesitated to transfer competencies from Aflao due to the investments already made and the rural nature of Noépé/Akanu. These bureaucratic habits and attachments hinder the proper functioning of the OSBPs. In December 2022, some operations were still impossible at Noépé/Akanu, forcing trucks to return to Aflao for weighing, leading to strikes by Ghanaian transit operators.

When services agree to relocate their offices to the OSBP, they often maintain some services at the former posts, arguing that the new premises do not meet their specific needs. This is the case for immigration and security services at Cinkassé, where each service has a post both within and outside the OSBP, resulting in double controls for travelers (see diagram 1). Both services cite security issues related to the OSBP’s location. Togolese police point out that the post is not located on the national road, allowing some travelers to evade control, while Burkinabe police believe it is too close to the city, complicating the surveillance of entries and exits.

Diagram 1: The Spatial Organization of Control Services at the Cinkassé Border Post



Source: Field Notebook, Cinkassé, February 24, 2022. Created by: DJOLAR Kossigari, September 24, 2024.

In reality, while security arguments may be acceptable, the duplication of posts implies multiplying control operations and, consequently, potentially fostering arrangements and negotiations between travelers and law enforcement agents. All foreign travelers exiting Togo must make an informal payment ranging from 500 FCFA to 1000 FCFA at the police outpost, even though passage through the One Stop Border Post (OSBP) is free. On the Burkinabe side, travelers are also required to pay 1000 FCFA at the gendarmerie and 2000 FCFA to the police upon leaving the city. As a Burkinabe police captain stated, "This is where everything happens" (Burkinabe police officer, Cinkassé, December 24, 2021).

2- Operational Limits of Technological Control at OSBPs

One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) have become key sites for surveillance and mobility management technologies, integrating these systems as essential components of their functioning. The datafication of mobility, whether in Africa or Europe, responds to security (Bigo, 2002 ; Andreas, 2003), economic, and geopolitical logics (Bigo, 2011) that frame border management. The introduction of ISPS codes after the September 11, 2001 attacks marked the widespread deployment of border control technologies, particularly the use of infrared scanners and biometric data recording. In West Africa, these technologies were initially limited to port areas (Sylvanus, 2022) and airports (Chalfin, 2010) due to their integration into global circulation networks.

However, their generalization to land borders has intensified, driven by growing concerns about

migration control and the need to reduce shipping delays and costs within the global supply chain. The rise of biometric databases fits into this trend, supported by European programs focused on managing migration flows, such as MIDAS and IWAPS (Dauchy, 2023). Simultaneously, the movement of goods is regulated through customs software like SYDONIA World, single-window systems, and initiatives for interconnecting customs systems (SIGMAT). Thus, OSBPs embody these transformations, becoming testing grounds and hubs for technological devices aimed at controlling mobility. At various Togolese border posts, infrared scanners for goods, SIGMAT, MIDAS, and IWAPS systems are installed to make controls more efficient.

This technological deployment should not obscure the operational challenges that these systems face. Consider the interconnection of customs systems. In practice, interconnection allows all customs offices concerned with a shipment to be informed about its movement through time and space, facilitating remote tracking. When a document for a transit shipment (T1) is issued at a departure office (usually at ports or loading locations), the electronic information is transmitted both to the destination office and all intermediate offices, allowing for real-time tracking of the shipment and enabling control at each stage. Since T1 contains all relevant information about the transporter, the goods (nature, value, volume), the means of transport, travel time, and the route, customs administrations can anticipate procedures and flag potential issues. This computerized management of transit saves time by eliminating manual registrations, office by office, and puts all customs services on the same level of information. By doing so, the system fosters a kind of transparency, alerting other services to fraudulent behaviors or procedural bypasses. The number of customs offices crossed is indicated and known in advance, so any procedure skipping is flagged in the system. The dematerialization of procedures and formalities through interconnection also serves as a tool to combat the diversion of transit goods, protecting the local market from unfair competition.

Customs system interconnection, while facilitating the exchange of information between customs services, faces various challenges, with the availability of connections sometimes being uncertain.

"The connection problem is very, very serious here. Initially, it works intermittently, but sometimes, the Burkinabe colleagues have no connection at all. They told us to plan for Plan B: when the connection fails, can we revert to manual procedures, and once the connection is restored, update the system? Anyway, regarding interconnection, it doesn't work..." (Head of Customs Office, Cinkassé, January 2019).

Thus, there are instances where trucks traveling under T1 end their journey without the T1 being cleared in the system (Box 1).

Box 1: Interconnection Failure

On March 16, 2022, during a visit to Dapaong, I met Inspector Rock from the customs office, who arranged to meet me at Cinkassé at the navigation office responsible for tracking trucks under T1. The inspector called the agent in charge of the IT service, a young man, who invited me into his office so I could observe the process more closely. After several clicks, the screen froze, and the mouse cursor spun for several minutes. The connection was still not restored, and the agent, clearly accustomed to these interruptions, assured me that this type of problem occurred regularly.

Source: Field Investigation, Dapaong, March 16, 2022.

These technical issues are compounded by challenges related to human resources. In January 2024, at the Sanvée-Condji border, the immigration commissioner stated, "For now, we are trying to use the computer equipment provided, but since the young ones don't master it well, for the moment, we're still using paper." This interview perfectly illustrates the implementation difficulties these systems face. The limitations of border control posts are also evident in the management of cross-border flows. The avoidance practices of OSBPs are a stark reality for any observer of border control in West Africa.

3- Persistence of Parallel Flows to OSBPs

While One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) are supposed to limit illicit and irregular border crossings, thereby strengthening state control over the movement of people and goods, it is acknowledged that this effort is limited by the intensity of human flows and exchanges of goods and services. The ethnolinguistic kinship and religious ties between populations on both sides of the borders, combined with the benefits they derive from the discontinuities (political, monetary, fiscal, economic) distinguishing state territories, are the main drivers of dynamics that create genuine socio-economic development hubs within the sub-region (Igue, 1995 ; Goeh-Akue, 2009 ; Zinsou-Klassou, 2010). In this context of transnational solidarity, the question of the Togolese state's ability, as well as its neighbors', to control their border areas becomes critical.

Far from eliminating flows passing through parallel crossing points, OSBPs instead serve as instruments of segregation in the management of these flows. The flows passing through the control post are thus split into two when approaching the structure. International travelers by bus or on foot, as well as cargo trucks, use the OSBP passage.

These so-called official border crossings (Djolar et Guézéré, 2022)) are contested by parallel tracks near the OSBP area. Whether at Noépé/Akanu, Sanvée-Condji, Hilla-Condji, or Cinkassé, parallel routes to the OSBPs are open and experience high traffic volumes. When questioned about the persistence of these flows, the police explained the existence of these parallel routes as necessary to facilitate social interactions between the populations on both sides of the border. This way, local flows are managed on these routes by specific police detachments. Well-monitored, these parallel routes, while effectively supporting local mobility, are also hotspots for trafficking and extortion practices of all kinds. Out of sight, control agents collect sums ranging from 500 FCFA to 1000 FCFA for all travelers, particularly from Togolese authorities.

These parallel crossing points are also sites of large-scale fuel trafficking. Control agents and oil smugglers from Benin engage in profitable compromises, allowing the former to extract substantial resources and the latter to continue their operations despite the formal ban on this trade by the Togolese state.

IV- Constrained Circulations, Co-Produced Circulations: OSBPs as Mobility Stratification Devices

One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), which are meant to streamline cross-border movements, have become revealing sites of inequalities among transport actors. Although introduced as tools of

modernization and facilitation, OSBPs do not benefit all users equally: large-scale transporters, small-scale transporters, and state actors all engage with these infrastructures differently, with varying uses and constraints. OSBPs are the product of multiple, sometimes conflicting, interests. Rather than providing universal freedom of movement, OSBPs promote co-produced mobility, where individuals, travelers, and users must supplement their right to free movement with personal resources.

1- OSBPs as Sites of Inequality Between Large and Small Transporters, and Resource Capture Strategies for the State

For small transporters, OSBPs are spaces of slowdown. Unfamiliar with administrative norms and lacking the necessary resources, they suffer the bureaucratic and financial burdens imposed by these facilities. The fees, extended waiting times due to complex procedures, and the reliance on intermediaries make crossing more difficult. Testimonies and field observations show that for these actors, passing through an OSBP can take several days, which negatively impacts their profitability and economic stability. Breakdowns on the road, an inability to pay fees upon arrival, and family financial pressures further increase their precarity. The OSBP thus becomes a bottleneck, deepening their vulnerability. One truck driver, who had been waiting for three days, described the situation as follows:

"Trips like Lomé to Ouagadougou used to be simple, but now, at the OSBP, things are ten times harder. For example, if you leave Lomé at 6 a.m., you might pass Kara by 8 p.m. The next day, you could arrive in Cinkassé before noon. But at the OSBP, you'll spend three days. The OSBP was supposed to make things easier, but it made life harder for us, the weak." (Truck driver, Cinkassé, April 18, 2019)

The distribution of costs provides insight into how OSBP-related fees burden small operators:

"Look, if you take a 40-foot container of rice, it costs 1,300,000 FCFA. You get an advance of 800,000 FCFA, which is 60% of the value. Diesel costs 500,000 FCFA, the boss takes 200,000, and gives you 100,000 for road expenses. You also have to leave something for the family—25,000 FCFA. If you're unlucky and the truck breaks down on the way, you'll run out of money at the border. You'll have to call the merchant to ask for another advance." (Togolese truck driver, Ouagarinter, December 3, 2021)

For large transporters, OSBPs are not obstacles. As the operations manager of Kanis Logistics put it: *"There's no real hassle there, you just pay what you have to pay."* (Ouagadougou, November 22, 2022). With robust logistics, strong financial capital, and established relations with administrative actors, large companies cross OSBPs smoothly. Procedures are anticipated, documents are pre-prepared, and fees paid swiftly. System interconnectivity and automation work in their favor, allowing quick passage where others are delayed. Delays are rare, and the OSBP is just a routine stop within a modern transport logic:

"When you arrive, our guys hand you your documents, you park in Bittou. After about three hours, you get your documents and continue your trip." (Driver, Ouagadougou, November 22, 2022)

The head of the Scanning System service emphasized that processing time depends on the actor's administrative capacity:

"When talking about border crossing time, many factors matter. If a vehicle has all its documents in order from Lomé, everything ready, then it takes just one day. If the goods are sensitive, it can even leave the same day. But if any document is missing or the driver can't pay the customs fee, it drags—customs has to tag it, and that takes time." (Cinkassé, February 25, 2022)

These financial and administrative efficiency criteria favor large transporters.

For state actors, OSBPs offer a means of control and revenue generation. States see them as tools to assert sovereignty, improve tax collection, enhance border security, and modernize infrastructure. Through data collection, digital payments, and centralized procedures, customs, tax, and security administrations boost both efficiency and revenue. The public-private partnerships involved also validate increased private sector participation.

For Togolese and Burkinabe public administrations, OSBPs offer a better work environment for border agents:

“This provides proper working conditions for control services. We know how things used to be—working under huts or in dilapidated offices. OSBPs allow for data collection on transport volumes and traded goods. And since the post is a major infrastructure, it guarantees safety for all staff. But the main goal is to reduce border crossing times by simplifying and harmonizing formalities between neighboring states.” (Head of Transport Section, WAEMU, Ouagadougou, November 22, 2021)

When asked about the benefits of OSBPs for cross-border mobility, the manager of the private company overseeing the Cinkassé OSBP was clear: *“The result is positive in every way: in terms of revenue and flow.”* (Cinkassé, February 25, 2022). He also revealed that his company had won the bid to operate six WAEMU OSBPs, including Cinkassé, with two currently operational. OSBPs thus represent a new, profitable business model for transport facilitation (Andersson, 2014).

Rather than equalizing mobility conditions, OSBPs increase disparities among actor categories. They are logistical and economic inequality hubs that reflect transporters' unequal capacities to benefit from border mechanisms. Though meant to embody modernity, OSBPs mainly expose a stratification of mobility based on resources, status, and power. They are markers of socio-economic inequalities in transport: *“In the name of regulating movement”* (Lombard et Steck, 2004, p. 12), OSBPs reinforce existing inequalities between actors.

The motivations of various stakeholders participating in the construction of One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), in the name of free movement, reflect their interpretations of this process. Let us consider the perspectives of actors from regional institutions (WAEMU/ECOWAS), funding and cooperation organizations such as the European Union (EU), the World Bank (WB), and state actors. While all these stakeholders claim to promote the free movement of people and goods through their investments, their understanding of this concept diverges significantly. This is particularly evident in the fact that these posts do not imply a negation of control, but rather a reinforcement of control mechanisms. The promoters and advocates of these infrastructures are explicit about their intended goals. The head of the infrastructure department of WAEMU explains the meaning of free movement and the role that OSBPs can play in this regard:

“As we often say, people have never really understood what free movement means. When it is discussed, many assume that it simply means entering Ghana, doing whatever one pleases, and leaving again. But in reality, it is a protocol that defines both rights and obligations! You have the right to free movement; you can enter Ghana as you wish, but under certain conditions. This is what many people have misunderstood: this right comes with prerequisites. You need to be traceable somewhere, and when an immigration officer is asked, they should be able to justify your border crossing and confirm that you entered legally.” (ECOWAS Representative in Togo, Lomé, November 8, 2020)

For this regional official, free movement means controlled free movement. It is the ability to trace the movement of people and goods, and the OSBP is intended to serve that purpose – improving the tracking of flows, enhancing working conditions for public agents involved in border management, and fostering stronger inter-agency cooperation. This comes in addition to reducing border crossing times. At no point does it entail the elimination of controls to promote free movement. From the EU's perspective, promoting free movement in West Africa aligns with its broader strategies for migration control and border externalization. The EU primarily funds OSBPs as part of its migration diplomacy (Seeberg, 2022), similar to its actions in Jordan. Through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the EU helps implement biometric registration systems at these OSBPs. Supporting OSBP construction is also part of the EU's strategy to export the values it champions, as summarized by the EU representative in Togo:

“If there is one area where the EU has succeeded, it is in promoting free movement. So, we export these values to ECOWAS.” (EU Cooperation Officer in Togo, Lomé, March 22, 2022)

This value export goes beyond promoting free movement; it includes demands tied to migration control. It is also driven by the promotion of European businesses in West Africa “to facilitate better trade,” according to the same representative. Furthermore, the EU uses its support as a geopolitical lever to counterbalance the influence of Chinese competitors and emerging economies in trade and development aid.

For the Togolese government, the construction of OSBPs fulfills both political and economic objectives. Economically, these infrastructures contribute to modernizing migration policy and the country's broader modernization efforts to increase its economic attractiveness. Politically, this interest is even more pronounced given Togo's major economic challenges between the 1980s and 2008, particularly after the suspension of cooperation with technical and financial partners in 1993. With deteriorating border facilities, these new posts allow police and customs authorities to better perform their duties. These new facilities include Internet access, facilitating connection to the Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS). Although “connectivity issues sometimes persist,” the Togolese public authorities' involvement in these projects is primarily motivated by control-related concerns, whether for security or economic purposes. Customs revenue is one of the state's main income sources, so modernizing equipment to control the flow of goods aims to maximize customs duties and border taxes. Thus, for the Togolese state, free movement means modernizing border posts to better tax flows while providing more comfortable working conditions for its agents.

The World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO), for their part, pursue different objectives. By emphasizing the importance of OSBPs, they contribute to the broader diffusion of free trade values, which OSBPs embody. These infrastructures also symbolize the triumph of the corridor approach (Cissokho, 2019). This approach elevates the role of private actors, as seen in the case of the Cinkassé post. OSBPs become the material embodiment of free-trade ideology and its principles of governance.

Free movement thus echoes a multitude of interests. It manifests in various forms and material configurations. Depending on status, interests, and objectives, it reflects often contrasting realities. Yet it exists—at least as a horizon or aspiration mobilizing diverse stakeholders. Free

movement should be conceived as a horizon, a shared objective pursued by various actors—a negotiated reality that takes on multiple forms depending on perceptions and individual circumstances, and of which OSBPs are a synthesis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has shown how One Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) in West Africa – far from being merely technical tools for trade facilitation – embody both the aspirations and contradictions of regional integration. By placing the OSBP at the center of the analysis, the study highlights how diverse actors – governments, regional institutions, international donors, and private operators – converge around a shared promise of free movement, while simultaneously enacting new regimes of surveillance, differentiation, and control. The Togolese case, with its ambition to become a regional logistical hub, illustrates how these infrastructures serve as both instruments and symbols of transnational governance, reshaping the geography and politics of circulation.

These infrastructures are not neutral. Their implementation reveals underlying tensions between competing visions of mobility, between facilitation and filtering, inclusion and exclusion. As infrastructures of control, OSBPs also contribute to the production of new hierarchies between large and small transporters, rich and poor users, redefining access and mobility according to institutional, spatial, and technological rationalities. The spatialization of control – through delineated zones, digital systems, and institutional co-location – reinforces a logic of segmentation that contrasts with the normative ideal of undifferentiated, rights-based free movement.

By adopting a geographical approach attentive to spatial practices and actor configurations, this article has proposed a framework for critically engaging with the everyday functioning of integration infrastructures. It argues that free movement should not be treated as a fixed institutional reality, but as a negotiated and contested horizon – mobilized by multiple actors with diverging interests, reinterpreted through everyday interactions, and reconfigured through frictions on the ground.

Ultimately, this study calls for further investigation into the politics of mobility infrastructures in West Africa and beyond. Understanding OSBPs as spaces of encounter, tension, and negotiation helps illuminate the deeper dynamics shaping contemporary border governance and invites a broader reflection on the conditions under which regional integration becomes materially and socially meaningful.

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