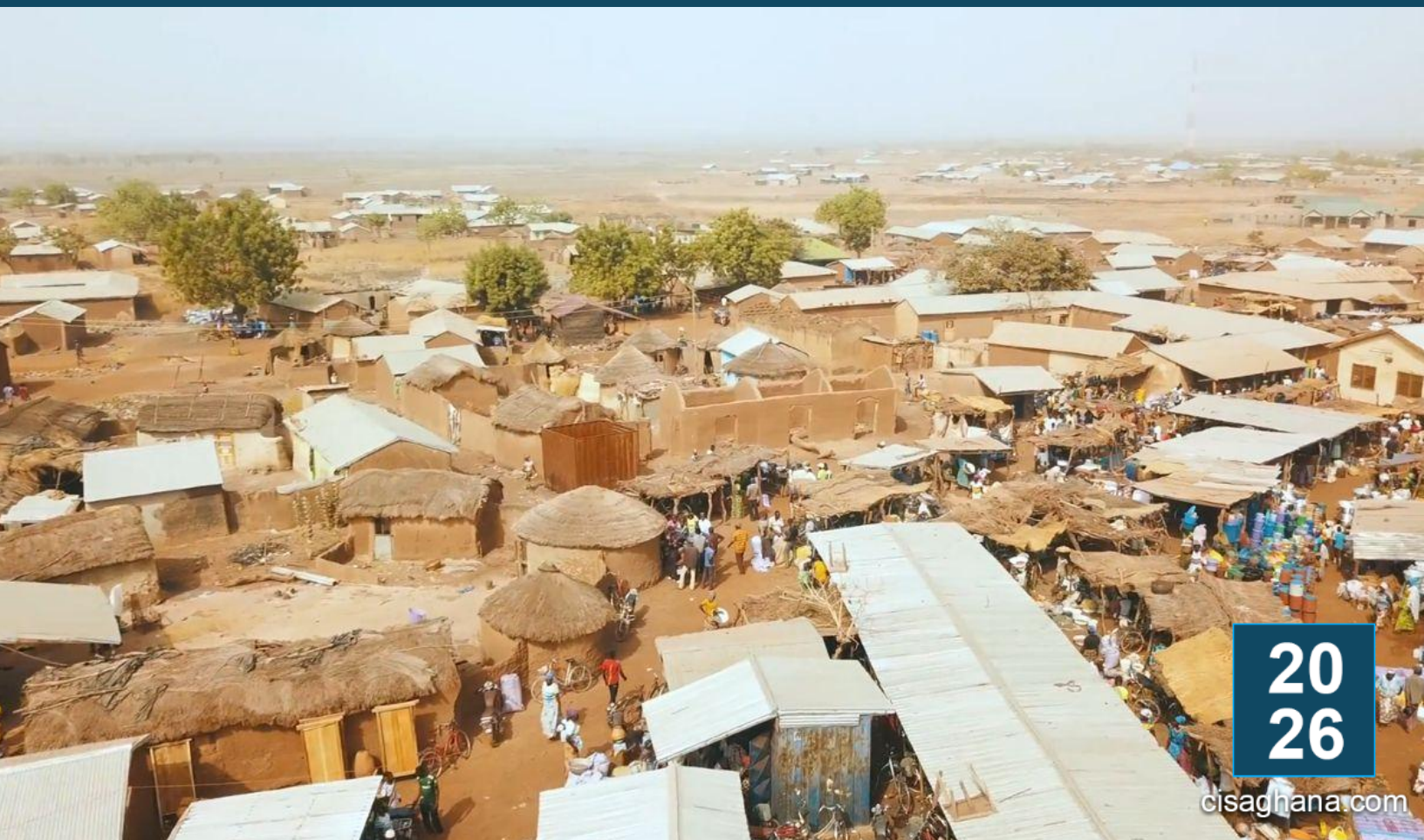
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The Sahel ‘Yoghurt Man’: A Crystallisation of How Migration Is Reshaping Ghana’s Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural Architecture



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Introduction

Over the past two years, a significant development has been observed in Ghana's itinerant yoghurt retail business. The once predominantly Ghanaian-run, bicycle-based yoghurt vending business has gradually been taken over or dominated by non-Ghanaians. These new itinerant sellers are typically dark-skinned, non-English-speaking immigrants who often do not understand any Ghanaian language. When spoken to, they usually respond in what sounds like Hausa or broken French when engaged by Ghanaians who stop them for a purchase. Upon further inquiry, some identify themselves as Nigeriens, Malians, or Chadians.

In Accra, Kumasi, and other commercial centres, migrants from the Sahel engage in a range of economic activities, including selling mobile-phone accessories, fabrics, herbal products, and scrap materials, as well as itinerant personal-grooming services such as manicures and pedicures. The yoghurt trade is a rather more recent phenomenon.

Their growing presence is occurring against a broader transformation in migration across West Africa. Conflict, political instability, food insecurity, environmental pressures and declining livelihood opportunities have intensified population movements across the Sahel. At the same time, Ghana's relative political stability, economic opportunities and established commercial networks make it an attractive destination. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has long identified the interaction between climate change, livelihood insecurity, conflict and migration as an important feature of mobility in the Sahel (IOM, 2011).

The implications for Ghana extend beyond the visible presence of foreign nationals. They include questions of documentation, border management, labour-market competition, trafficking, organised crime, regional integration and social cohesion. These issues must be considered against West Africa's long history of cross-border mobility and the economic contribution of immigrants to Ghana.

This article does not seek to stereotype or demonise migrants from the Sahel. Rather, it examines the security, economic and socio-cultural implications of increased migration to Ghana while distinguishing between regular and irregular migrants, economic migrants and refugees, trafficking victims and traffickers, and lawful commercial activity and activities restricted by Ghanaian law.

Migration Pressures in the Sahel

Migration from the Sahel is closely associated with deteriorating security and socio-economic conditions. Mali and Niger have experienced prolonged insecurity involving armed groups, communal violence and political instability, while Chad faces political,

humanitarian and displacement pressures. Across the Central Sahel, conflict interacts with poverty, food insecurity and environmental stress, resulting in substantial population displacement.

The humanitarian consequences are considerable. UNHCR identifies the Sahel as one of Africa's major displacement crises, while IOM documents the links between conflict, displacement and livelihood insecurity. Environmental pressures are particularly important because agriculture and livestock remain central to many livelihoods. Changes in rainfall, drought, flooding and natural-resource degradation undermine livelihoods and intensify competition over scarce resources (IOM, 2011). Migration consequently reflects overlapping security, economic, environmental and family considerations, with these factors often reinforcing one another.

Ghana forms part of this wider migration system. Its northern frontier connects it to the Sahel through Burkina Faso, while established trading, family and social networks facilitate movement towards cities such as Tamale, Kumasi and Accra. Migration from the Sahel should therefore be understood as part of longstanding regional mobility rather than an isolated or entirely new phenomenon.

Ghana and the West African Free-Movement Regime

Migration across West Africa predates modern national borders, with trade, pastoralism, seasonal labour and family relationships connecting communities. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formalised much of this mobility through its 1979 Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, which established a framework for enabling citizens of member states to enter, reside and establish themselves in other member states (ECOWAS, 1979).

The regional framework changed in 2025 when Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formally withdrew from ECOWAS, effective 29 January that year. Nevertheless, ECOWAS announced transitional arrangements allowing citizens of the three countries to continue enjoying visa-free movement, residence and establishment under existing community protocols until further notice. Their national passports and identity cards bearing the ECOWAS logo would also remain recognised (ECOWAS, 2025). Consequently, nationals of Mali and Niger cannot automatically be treated as ordinary non-regional migrants. Chad, however, is not an ECOWAS member, and Chadian nationals are subject to Ghana's applicable immigration framework.

Importantly, freedom of movement does not guarantee unrestricted access to all economic activities. Section 32 of the Ghana Investment Promotion Authority Act, 2026 (Act 1173) reserves activities including petty trading, hawking and selling goods in markets or stalls for Ghanaian citizens and wholly Ghanaian-owned enterprises (GIPA,

2026). The right to enter or reside in Ghana is therefore distinct from the right to undertake every form of economic activity.

Migration and Ghana's Informal Economy

Foreign nationals are increasingly visible in low-capital informal activities accessible through personal and community networks. The bicycle-based yoghurt trade provides an illustrative example. Similar patterns appear in petty commerce involving mobile-phone accessories, fabrics and scrap materials, as well as itinerant personal-grooming services. These developments raise questions about labour-market competition, particularly where foreign participation may involve activities legally reserved for citizens.

Evidence nevertheless suggests that immigration has both positive and negative economic effects. OECD/ILO research found that immigrants were generally well integrated into Ghana's labour market, although some displacement effects affected native-born workers, particularly women. Immigrants contributed approximately 1.5 per cent of Ghana's GDP and accounted for around 1.6 per cent of employment. They also made a positive per-capita contribution to the government's fiscal balance (OECD/ILO, 2018). Immigration should therefore be assessed according to sector, occupation, location, migrant skills and applicable regulations rather than characterised as wholly beneficial or harmful.

Economic Competition and Regulation

Competition becomes particularly sensitive when migrants and economically vulnerable Ghanaians operate in the same low-capital sectors. Increased competition may reduce local workers' access to customers and earnings, while migrants depend on these activities for livelihoods. Tensions can arise when regulations exist but are inconsistently enforced.

Sections 27 and 40 of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre Act establish restrictions on foreign participation in specified activities and identify relevant contraventions as offences, including permitting foreigners to occupy market stalls or stores in prohibited circumstances (Government of Ghana, 2013). The central issue is therefore whether economic activities comply with Ghanaian law.

However, migrants also contribute through purchasing goods, renting accommodation, using transport and telecommunications, and participating in supply chains. Some migrant-owned businesses employ Ghanaians or provide goods and services to local consumers. Sound policy consequently requires evidence that measures both competition and economic contribution.

Documentation and Migration Management

Ghana's migrant population includes people exercising regional mobility rights, foreign workers, visitors, refugees, asylum seekers, residence-permit holders, irregular migrants and trafficking victims. These categories have different rights and responsibilities and should not be treated interchangeably.

In June 2026, the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) warned of abuses of the ECOWAS free-movement regime, citing irregular migration, child trafficking, cyber fraud, organised street begging and other criminal activities during discussions with the West African Monetary Institute (GIS, 2026). Such concerns underline the importance of reliable identification and migration data. Effective systems help authorities distinguish legitimate mobility from irregular migration and identify trafficking or criminal networks. Similarly, IOM's *Migration in Ghana: A Country Profile 2019* emphasises migration data as a foundation for evidence-based policymaking and effective governance (IOM, 2020). Biometric identification and interoperable databases could strengthen border management while helping protect migrants' rights.

Security Implications

Insecurity across the Sahel has intensified concerns about migration and national security. Ghana's northern areas experience intermittent chieftaincy, ethnic and land disputes, while proximity to Burkina Faso places them near areas affected by violent extremism, organised crime and cross-border trafficking.

Although migration does not inherently constitute a security threat, cross-border movement can intersect with trafficking, smuggling, document fraud, illicit financial flows and criminal networks. GIS's June 2026 warning highlighted concerns about irregular migration, child trafficking, cyber fraud and organised street begging (GIS, 2026).

In dealing with the situation, the Ghana Immigration Service, in August 2026, in partnership with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), trained its personnel towards the operationalisation of the Strengthening and Harmonising Integrated Border Management Frameworks and Technical (SHIFT) Project, a strategic collaborative effort aimed at modernising the country's border security infrastructure and transitioning the institution into an intelligence-led one. SHIFT prioritises professional data analysis, suspicious behaviour detection, and enhanced inter-agency collaboration (GIS, 2026).

Street Begging and Human Trafficking

Street begging illustrates the intersection of migration, public order, trafficking and child protection. In August 2026, GIS conducted intelligence-led operations in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions targeting suspected trafficking and organised-begging networks. According to the Information Services Department, 1,055 West African nationals were apprehended, comprising 248 women, 145 men and 662 children. Authorities said the operations targeted suspected syndicates accused of trafficking, controlling and exploiting vulnerable foreign nationals, particularly women and children, through forced begging (Information Services Department, 2026).

The number of children involved highlights the need to distinguish vulnerable victims from immigration offenders. Government figures released that month indicated that GIS had removed 2,281 migrant beggars and 774 other illegal immigrants involved in transnational organised crime by the end of 2025. Between January and July 2026, a further 960 migrant beggars and 186 other foreign nationals involved in unlawful activities had reportedly been removed (Information Services Department, 2026). Effective responses must investigate recruitment, transportation, coercion, control of proceeds and cross-border trafficking networks while providing appropriate protection and support to victims.

Socio-Cultural Implications

Migration contributes to Ghana's cultural diversity through languages, religious practices, food, clothing, commercial traditions and social networks. It forms part of the longer history of population mobility that has shaped Ghanaian cities. Nevertheless, larger migrant communities may face integration challenges arising from language differences and limited familiarity with local institutions.

Some migrants speak French, Hausa, Zarma, Arabic or other languages but have limited proficiency in English or Ghanaian languages. In the bicycle-based yoghurt trade, many foreign sellers struggle to communicate effectively with local customers, despite familiarity with the Ghanaian cedi. Migrant networks provide essential social and economic support but may also reinforce separation from host communities. Integration therefore requires migrants to understand Ghanaian laws and institutions, alongside efforts by authorities and host communities to promote accurate information, inclusion and mutual understanding.

The Need for Better Data

Limited access to detailed, current migration and labour-market data weakens Ghana's migration debate. Observations that migrants are increasingly visible in particular occupations cannot establish the scale or causes of these changes. For example, the

apparent concentration of migrants among bicycle-based yoghurt sellers does not reveal previous Ghanaian participation, the number of migrants involved, their legal status or the reasons for changing participation.

Ghana needs reliable information on migrants' nationality, age, sex, occupation, immigration status, location and duration of residence, subject to appropriate privacy and data-protection safeguards. Such information would help distinguish labour-market complementarity from direct competition, labour shortages and unlawful economic activity. Both IOM and OECD/ILO identify stronger migration and labour-market information systems as important to evidence-based policy (IOM, 2020; OECD/ILO, 2018).

Conclusion

Migration from Niger, Mali, Chad and elsewhere in the Sahel reflects wider political, economic, environmental and security pressures. Ghana's relative stability, economic opportunities and established trading networks make it an important destination. Its effects are mixed: immigrants contribute to economic activity, with OECD/ILO estimating their contribution at approximately 1.5 per cent of GDP, while immigration may also create displacement in particular labour-market segments and pose challenges involving trafficking, organised crime and border management (OECD/ILO, 2018).

The central question is not whether migration is inherently beneficial or harmful, but whether Ghana possesses the information, institutions and enforcement capacity to manage it effectively. This requires reliable migration data, consistent enforcement of economic regulations, effective border management and regional cooperation. It also requires distinguishing legitimate migrants, criminal actors and trafficking victims, since nationality must never substitute for evidence. Ghana's long-term objective should be to preserve the benefits of regional mobility while protecting economic interests, social cohesion and national security through evidence-based policy and respect for the rights and responsibilities of citizens and migrants.

Recommendations

Ghana's migration policy should balance regional mobility, economic opportunity and national security. Firstly, authorities must distinguish legitimate mobility from irregular migration, particularly given the transitional arrangements preserving visa-free movement, residence and establishment for citizens of Mali and Niger (ECOWAS, 2025).

Additionally, economic regulations should be enforced consistently. Activities reserved for Ghanaian citizens, including specified forms of petty trading and hawking, should be regulated in accordance with the law, while permitted foreign participation should satisfy applicable registration, employment, business and taxation requirements.

For those immigrants who are already in the country illegally, the Government of Ghana can liaise with their embassies or high commissions to invite them for screening, sensitisation, and regularisation of their stay within the ambit of Ghana's immigration laws. This way, they will not feel targeted by the Government of Ghana since their missions would lead the campaign.

Furthermore,~~Also~~ biometric identification, intelligence sharing and cooperation among immigration, police, customs and other agencies should strengthen border management without indiscriminately targeting migrants. Anti-trafficking operations must focus on exploitative networks while incorporating child protection and victim support.

Finally, cooperation with neighbouring states and regional institutions is essential because migration routes and criminal networks cross national borders.

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