



# The African Border Day: Relevance and Prospects

– John Elikem Tsotorvor –

## Summary

*In 2010, the African Union (AU) instituted the annual African Border Day to be commemorated on June 7 by Member States as part of the implementation process of the African Union Border Programme (AUBP). The African Border Day aims to raise awareness about eliminating conflicts along international boundaries, fostering peaceful, safe, and harmonious border communities for socio-economic integration and cultural development. Additionally, the African Border Day seeks to emphasise the significant roles of the AUBP and the African Union Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation (the Niamey Convention) as critical frameworks for integrated border governance and cross-border cooperation. Despite its potential to foster peace, security, and integration across the continent, little is known about the African Border Day among member states. The African Border Day suffers from lack of adequate information and understanding leading to its obscurity. Furthermore, there is notable absence of advocacy within relevant AU structures and organs for the proper commemoration of the African Border Day. To address these issues, this policy paper, emphasises the urgent need for increased education, information dissemination, and advocacy at continental, regional, and national levels to highlight the significance of the African Border Day.*

## Introduction

African international boundaries remain sources of conflicts and disputes. The arbitrary boundaries inherited from colonial powers contribute to border areas being zones of tension, disputes, and conflicts. For instance, the border regions between Somalia and Ethiopia, Kenya and South Sudan, and Tanzania and Malawi experience disputes and conflicts. Along the Kenya-South Sudan boundary, over two-thirds of the 200km boundary line remains in dispute.<sup>1</sup> The border area of Korou/Koalou, which lies between Benin and Burkina Faso, is also being disputed resulting in the area being declared a neutral zone pending settlement.<sup>2</sup> Along Ghana's boundaries, there are specific cases of unresolved disputes, particularly over farmlands such as that between residents of Achem Kpoeta and Hanyigbatodzi along the Ghana-Togo boundary.

Furthermore, African border regions lack basic infrastructure, representing neglect, underdevelopment, and impoverishment. In instances where basic facilities exist, they are dilapidated and require rehabilitation.<sup>3</sup> Often, these borderland areas are characterised by minimum or no state presence, and, therefore, are conducive havens for armed groups and criminal activities<sup>4</sup>. Disputes, conflicts, and exploitation by armed or criminal groups in areas along Africa's international boundaries have been attributed to the poorly-defined nature of these boundaries. As of 2014, approximately two-thirds of the 83500km stretch of Africa's international land boundaries had been properly demarcated<sup>5</sup>. The implementation of the 'Principle of the respect of borders existing upon achievement of national independence' contained in the Charter of the Organisation of African Union (OAU), Resolution

AHG/Res.16(1) under Border Disputes Among African States<sup>6</sup> remains a challenge. The Resolution was adopted by the First Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government held in Cairo in July 1964. However, decades down the line, there are questions about why Africa continuously experiences boundary-related conflicts and disputes. The vision for an integrated Africa, free from border-related disputes and conflicts, remains elusive, raising concerns about the feasibility of regional integration. Proponents of African integration emphasise the importance of peaceful, open, and prosperous borders as a fundamental pathway to unite the continent. However, persistent challenges and unresolved issues hinder the realization of this vision. It further poses challenges to the implementation of such initiatives as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) which emphasises free movement of Africans to ensure regional integration and trade.

To tackle conflicts and disputes along international boundaries, African Heads of State agreed to demarcate and delimit all inter-state boundaries by 2017. This led to the establishment of the AUBP in 2007 to assist in international boundary demarcation and delimitation. The initiative serves as a conflict prevention mechanism to address present and future border disputes.<sup>7</sup>

As part of measures towards the implementation of the AUBP, the African Border Day was instituted to create awareness of the elimination of all sources of conflicts along African international boundaries to make border communities peaceful, safe, and harmonious for socio-economic integration and cultural development. Commemoration of the African Border Day along Africa's international boundaries provides the opportunity for border communities to engage in joint programmes and activities for mutual benefit. Additionally, cooperation among border communities through the commemoration of the African Border Day, diffuses tensions, conflicts, and disputes that may hitherto exist. Commemoration of the day further sensitises national governments on the critical challenges along the international

boundaries while proffering relevant interventions to address them. Under the auspices of the African Border Day, joint projects are undertaken across boundaries, thereby addressing the problems of underdevelopment. Notwithstanding, there is minimum commitment to the commemoration of the African Border Day stemming from inadequate information about the day among member states. This paper discusses the significance of the African Border Day and advocates for pragmatic steps to ensure the Day is meaningfully commemorated, aiming to fully realise its benefits.

### **Commemoration of African Border Day**

Since the institution of the African Border Day on 25 May 2010, the Day has been commemorated at the continental level at the African Union Commission and national levels by a few member states. Each year, the Day is celebrated under a specific theme, drawing out key messages on the need to work towards the elimination of all sources of conflicts along international boundaries, strengthen peaceful relations among countries, and ensure borders become bridges and not barriers. Themes adopted for the commemoration of the Day include the following:

*2011: Uniting and Integrating Africa Through Peaceful, Open, and Prosperous Borders.*

*2013: The Spirit of Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance.*

*2014: Promoting Borders as Bridges.*

*2017: The Role of the Youth in Conflict Prevention and Cross-Border Cooperation.*

*2018: Winning the Fight Against Corruption: A Sustainable Path to Africa's Transformation.*

*2021: Arts, Culture, and Heritage: Levers of Building the Africa we want.*

At the continental level, the AUC has organised annual events at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa to popularise the importance of the AUBP towards peace, regional and continental integration.

The commemoration of the ABD at the AU level has achieved the following:

- Handover of border archives to facilitate the implementation of the resolution AHG/Res.16(1) on Border Disputes between African States adopted in Cairo in July 1964 by Heads of State and Government of OAU. The border archives represent historical documents on the African inter-state boundaries, including treaties, reports, and maps. These serve as the basis for the demarcation and delimitation of African inter-state boundaries.
- The official launch of AUBP guidebooks developed with support from the Government of Germany. The guidebooks chronicle lessons learnt and good practices on delimitation and demarcation gathered from years of practical experiences, creation and operation of boundary commissions, promotion of cross-border cooperation, and settlement of border-related disputes traversing the period from OAU to AU.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the guidebooks contain practical guides and reference materials covering all aspects of border management.
- Launch of the adopted African Union Convention on Cross-border Cooperation, also known as the Niamey Convention. The Convention, adopted by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in June 2014, is a framework for collaboration across borders which ensures integration in Africa and enhances prospects for peaceful resolution of border disputes between member states. The Convention encourages joint activities between neighbouring countries and facilitates the development of borderlands to ease movement of persons and goods.<sup>9</sup>
- Launch of the documentary *African Borders; from Barriers to Bridges* to underscore the need to make borders areas of prosperity, peace, and development.

At the national level, certain member states have commemorated the African Border Day through activities, including the following:

*Cameroon, Yaoundé, 2017:* A series of activities were organised to mark the day under the theme: The Border, an Integrated Area of Development.<sup>10</sup> The main events included a capacity building workshop for stakeholders in the management of Cameroon's borders and a roundtable discussion on various aspects of border management.

*DRC-Rwanda (Goma-Rubavu) Border 2018:* The African Border Day was commemorated under the theme Fighting Corruption Through Cross-border Cooperation. The day highlighted the role of borderlands in enhancing free movement of people and goods. The day also highlighted the importance of border communities in facilitating cross-border cooperation and good neighbourliness.<sup>11</sup>

*Benin, 2020:* Twenty-five women from both sides of the Benin/Nigeria border were trained by border security agencies in the production of reusable nose masks. The training enhanced cross-border cooperation and built trust between the security agencies and communities.<sup>12</sup>

*Ghana-Cote d'Ivoire (Elubo – Noé) Border 2022:* In advancing the tenets of the AUBP and in the spirit of cross-border cooperation, the National Boundary Commission of Cote d'Ivoire (CNFCI) and the Ghana Boundary Commission (GhBC) jointly commemorated the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the African Border Day in the border communities of Elubo, Cocoa Town, and Nougoua in Ghana as well as Noé and Nougoua in Cote d'Ivoire. The theme for the commemoration was Challenges of Cross-Border Cooperation and Management of Shared Resources. The joint activities included free and voluntary health screening, construction and commissioning of community water systems, tree planting along the boundary, and a community sensitisation programme on the need to protect water bodies along the boundary. Prior to the commemoration, the Minister for Lands and Natural Resources issued a statement in the Parliament of Ghana to observe the day, highlighting the strategic and socio-political significance of African boundaries as fundamental elements of statehood and the importance of cross-border cooperation in ensuring

proper boundary management and peaceful co-existence among neighbours.

The national commemoration of the African Border Day has enhanced cross-border cooperation and deepened friendship, camaraderie, and good neighbourliness among border communities. Engaging in activities such as community sports helps diffuse tensions and strengthen friendships. In June 2023, Guinea and Sierra Leone came together under the auspices of the International Organisation for Migration to commemorate the day through a series of activities, including cross-border sports.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, apart from using the African Border Day to sensitise border communities on the need for peace, the day is further used to educate border communities on thematic issues such as the preservation of the environment. During the commemoration by Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire in 2022, border communities were sensitised on the need to protect the water bodies along the boundary. Additionally, the commemoration has led to development projects along the international boundaries, including water systems in Nougoua (Cote d'Ivoire) and Cocoa Town and Ghana Nougoua (Ghana).

Despite the benefits to gain from commemorating the African Border Day, the AU Commission's observance is mainly centred at the AU Headquarters, resulting in limited impact along the international boundaries across the continent.

At the level of the RECs, the African Border Day appears to go by without any commemoration. At the national level, fewer than one-third of member states have marked the day with specific activities. In certain cases, however, selected communities along inter-state boundaries where the African Border Day is commemorated are sensitised on the importance of borders in promoting peace, security, and stability on the continent. Despite the efforts, challenges along inter-state boundaries persist, including areas bordering Somalia–Ethiopia, Kenya–South Sudan, and Tanzania–Malawi.<sup>14</sup> In North and West Africa, over 50% of victims from violent activities within the

first half of 2021 are reported to be within 100km of a boundary line.<sup>15</sup> In 2020, the Mali-Burkina-Faso-Niger border area remained highly violent. The same applies to border areas of N'Guigmi in Niger and Mubi in Nigeria and Matona in Cameroon. Between 2007 and 2019, West Africa experienced forty-two percent of violence within approximately 100km of borderland.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, free movement of goods and persons, as established by the Heads of State and Government of member states of the OAU, faces setbacks. Nationals of AU member states face challenges at approved border-crossing points when moving from one African country to the other, a situation that does not make the vision of turning borders into bridges a reality. Residents of border communities are harassed and extorted by border officials while crossing to neighbouring African countries.<sup>17</sup> Transborder trade in goods has been challenging, giving rise to the use of unapproved routes along international boundaries. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is reported to have achieved more integration than the other economic blocs in Africa but lags in free movement of goods and persons. There is, therefore, the need for a more concerted effort in ensuring the aims of the African Border Day are achieved. This calls for more member states to commemorate the day, using the occasion as a platform to sensitise border communities on the need to avoid disputes and conflicts. A lot more work needs to be done to educate member states on the importance of the day and ensure it is commemorated along the international boundaries.

## Prospects

The African Border Day presents a significant opportunity for advancing effective border governance throughout Africa. The African Union Border Governance Strategy emphasises enhancing the capacities of key stakeholders involved in border governance. These stakeholders include local authorities, traditional rulers, and border security agencies. The African Border Day can serve

as a strategic platform to build the capacities of these stakeholders in new policies, protocols, and frameworks pertaining to border management. This includes a focus on crucial frameworks such as the Niamey Convention and protocols relating to the free movement of people and goods across the African continent.

As indicated earlier, border areas often face neglect, making the commemoration of the African Border Day a valuable occasion for these communities. The African Border Day provides an avenue for communities across borders to collaboratively identify and endorse mutually beneficial projects. Additionally, the commemoration offers the chance to actively engage national governments, development partners and other stakeholders, seeking their support for the execution of such projects.

### **A Look into the Future**

Noting the importance of the African Border Day to the integration, peace, and security of the continent, a range of measures needs to be taken at the continental, REC, and national levels to achieve the goals of the day.

Firstly, at the continental level, the AU should intensify advocacy efforts through its relevant organs and structures to inform, educate, and encourage member states to commemorate the day. Additionally, the AU should actively engage the RECs on the importance of the African Border Day and the need to commemorate it at their levels.

Secondly, Member States should prioritise the commemoration of the African Border Day to facilitate continental integration and consolidate peace and security along international boundaries.

Moreover, the commemoration of the day can be strategically leveraged to advance the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) which emphasises free movement of Africans to ensure regional integration and trade.

In alignment with this perspective, it is imperative for African governments to allocate resources dedicated to supporting the commemoration of the day. Additionally, there is the need for a diverse range of activities in the border areas, engaging border security agencies, local and traditional authorities, and border residents to mark the day.

The joint commemoration of the African Border Day is significant within the context of the African Union Convention on Cross-border Cooperation for building peaceful, safe, and harmonious border area. This collaborative approach strengthens friendship and neighbourliness across borders. In this regard, organising activities such as sports, games and cultural events that bring together both sides of the boundary strengthens these bonds. For instance, along the Guinea/Sierra Leone border, the joint commemoration of the 2023 African Border Day involved residents from Heremankono and Koindoukura participating in cross-border sports activities and a capacity-building programme for border agents.<sup>18</sup> This not only strengthened friendship and comradeship among the residents but also enhanced the capacities of frontline border officials with relevant knowledge on trade facilitation, customs processes, and cross-border mechanisms.

Expanding on the importance of cross-border cooperation, it is essential to identify and implement joint projects that benefit both sides of the border. A notable example is the joint commemoration of the African Border Day by Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, where the two countries laid the first block for the construction of a Community Social Centre at Noé. This centre aims to provide social services for travellers and residents on both sides of the border.

At the regional level, it is imperative for Regional Economic Communities to take a lead role in the commemoration of the African Border Day by collaborating with states within their jurisdiction. Furthermore, the AUBP should play a key role in coordinating and facilitating commemoration at the



national levels. This ensures that activities align with the broader framework of establishing the day.

Indeed, celebrating the African Border Day necessitates initiative, dedication, and planning from institutions mandated to lead and coordinate activities marking the day. Hence, member states should establish, strengthen, and resource boundary commissions to lead and facilitate the commemoration of the African Border Day.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The African Border Day provides a platform for fostering cross-border engagement, mitigating conflicts along international boundaries, and unlocking opportunities for the development of border communities. The commemoration of the African Border Day promotes the gradual transformation of borders to bridges. This transformative process not only signifies progress but also contributes to the broader objectives of African integration, acting as a catalyst for building trust, friendship, and cordiality among border communities. To harness and maximise the potential the African Border Day, it is crucial to emphasise stakeholder collaboration in commemorating the day across Africa to achieve the aims of the day. The following recommendations are thereby proposed:

- The AU should leverage its high-level sessions, including the meeting of Heads of State and Government, as platforms to advocate and encourage member states to commemorate the day.
- The AU should assist member states to set up national boundary structures in their respective countries to advocate and facilitate the commemoration of the African Border Day.
- The AU should encourage member states to ratify the African Union Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation and deposit their ratification instruments with the AU. This way, member states would become aware of the African

Border Day and the need to commemorate it in their respective countries.

- Member states should demonstrate strong commitment towards commemorating the African Border Day by allocating resources and tasking relevant institutions to spearhead the commemorative activities.
- Recognising the financial requirements for a successful commemoration, the AU, member states and relevant institutions should collaborate with development partners, international governmental organisations, and corporate institutions to secure funding support to mark the day.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kenya–South Sudan Land Boundary Brief accessed at <https://sovereignlimits.com/boundaries/kenya-south-sudan-land> on 14 December 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Benin–Burkina Faso Land Boundary Brief accessed at <https://sovereignlimits.com/boundaries/benin-burkina-faso-land> on 14 December 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Draft African Union Border Governance Strategy, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Field Report, Ghana Boundary Commission, June 2022.

<sup>5</sup> From Barriers to Bridges. Uniting and Integrating Africa through borders which function as bridges for peace, security and development. African Union Border Programme (AUBP), GIZ (2014).

<sup>6</sup> African Union Border Governance Strategy (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Press Release: African Union Celebrates Border Day accessed at <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/african-union-celebrates-border-day> on 29 July 2023

<sup>9</sup> African Union Convention on Cross Border Cooperation (Niamey Convention document), 2014 accessed at <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-union-convention-cross-border-cooperation-niamey-convention> on 5 August 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Cameroon Celebrates African Border Day 2017, accessed at <https://timesnews2.info/cameroon-celebrates-african-border-day> on 6 August 2023.

<sup>11</sup> AUBP Newsletter 2018 accessed at <https://www.peaceau.org/uploads/aubp-newsletter-final.pdf> on 5 August 2023.

<sup>12</sup> AUBP Newsletter – No.1, Vol 1, Dec 2020 accessed at [https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/AUBP\\_Newsletter\\_Dec2020\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/AUBP_Newsletter_Dec2020_ENG.pdf) on 6 August 2023.

<sup>13</sup> International Organisation for Migration (2023), African Border

Day Celebrated with cross-border sports and Training to promote Peace, Regional Integration. Accessed at <https://rodakar.iom.int/news/african-border-day-celebrated-cross-border-sports-and-training-promote-peace-regional-integration> on 27 August 2023.

<sup>14</sup> The Conversation Africa (2023). Ilemi Triangle Spat: how resources fuel East Africa's Border Conflicts accessed at <https://theconversation.com/ilemi-triangle-spat-how-resources-fuel-east-africas-border-conflicts-199656> on 10 August 2023.

<sup>15</sup> OECD (2022). Borders and Conflicts in North and West Africa

<sup>16</sup> Annual Report, Ghana Boundary Commission 2021

<sup>17</sup> Ghana Boundary Commission's engagements with border communities, including sensitisation of residents along the Ghana-Togo boundary in Akanu (2022), community sensitisation in Zolo, Togo (2023) along the Ghana-Togo boundary, community sensitisation in New Town, Western Region (2023) along the Ghana-Cote d'Ivoire boundary.

<sup>18</sup> International Organisation for Migration (2023), African Border Day Celebrated with cross-border sports and Training to promote Peace, Regional Integration. Accessed at <https://rodakar.iom.int/news/african-border-day-celebrated-cross-border-sports-and-training-promote-peace-regional-integration> on 27 August 2023.

## About the Ghana Boundary Commission

The Ghana Boundary Commission (GhBC) is a state agency mandated to determine, demarcate and delimit Ghana's international land and maritime boundaries in accordance with accepted principles of international law. Accordingly, the Commission is responsible for the settlement of boundary disputes between Ghana and neighbouring countries. The mandate of the Commission, therefore, has a wider implication for safeguarding the territorial sovereignty of Ghana at all times. To this end, the GhBC collaborates with both local, regional and international actors in implementing the mandate.

## About the Author

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The opinions expressed in this policy brief are exclusively those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ghana Boundary Commission.

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