



## Research Article

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## Implementation of Ecowas Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Person (2018-2022) In Nigeria: An Appraisal

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**Abstract:** In recent years, combating trafficking in persons (TIP) has emerged as a top priority for the member States of the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS). Strategies have been developed to eliminate barriers to free movement within the sub-region and reduce the incidence of TIP. Due to the prevalence of TIP in the West African sub-region, ECOWAS Heads of State convened in Dakar, Senegal in December 2001 to address the issue comprehensively. This commitment resulted in the adoption of the ECOWAS Initial Plan of Action (POA) against TIP. The POA serves as a blueprint for member states, guiding the development of robust anti-trafficking laws, policies, and measures within their respective countries. Nigeria accepted the plan in 2003 and has since signed various international and regional instruments opposing TIP, slavery, and forced labor. Over the years, Nigeria has established political and legal frameworks to facilitate the effective implementation of the POA. Despite the creation of agencies such as the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP), tasked with coordinating and overseeing POA implementation alongside other security agencies, the threat of TIP persists. This paper, therefore, aims to assess the implementation of the ECOWAS POA against TIP, specifically focusing on Women and Children for the period 2018-2022 in Nigeria. The goal is to identify existing gaps and propose measures for more effective implementation. Utilizing both qualitative research methods and desk research, the paper reveals persistent issues and challenges that hinder the successful execution of the POA, negatively impacting human capital and national growth in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper provides recommendations to address these identified gaps.

**Keywords:** Implementation of Ecowas, Ecowas Plan, Action Against Trafficking, Nigeria, An Appraisal.

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## INTRODUCTION

Trafficking in Persons, or human trafficking, represents a global challenge, constituting both a grave violation of human rights and a heinous crime against humanity. According to UNODC (n.d.), human trafficking involves the trade of individuals for forced labor, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation. Illicit transnational trafficking extends to degrading activities such as organ harvesting, recruitment of child soldiers, and suicide bombings (Bassiouni et al., 2010). Most countries worldwide are implicated as either a source, transit, or destination for trafficking victims. While trafficking in human beings is not a new phenomenon, its prevalence, particularly in the West African sub-region, has necessitated concerted global efforts to combat it. The United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, adopted in Italy in 2003, marked a significant global initiative against this crime.

Trafficking in Persons (TIP) stands out as one of the most lucrative organized crimes globally, transcending cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries (Babatunde, 2014). This phenomenon has not only claimed countless lives but has also depleted nations of crucial human capital essential for national

development. In 2016, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated the global number of trafficking victims at 40.3 million, a figure that surged to about 107 million by 2020 (Statistica, 2020). Notably, 52.5 percent were trafficked for sexual exploitation, 30.2 percent for forced labour, and 11.9 million for forced marriage, with one in four victims being children. The escalating numbers of TIP cases are attributed to globalization and the evolving dynamics of the 21st century (ILO, 2020; Chidiebere, 2017). Reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the ILO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) emphasize that TIP thrives in countries lacking robust laws against the practice and the protection of the fundamental rights. Surprisingly, even developed nations like the United States, the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, and Japan grapple with this menace despite having various TIP and human rights laws.

The United States primarily serves as a transit destination for trafficked individuals, with an estimated 14,500 to 17,500 (mostly women and children) smuggled into the country annually (USDS, 2019). Asia, particularly South Asia, is a global hub for TIP, with

300,000 to 450,000 people trafficked within the region each year (UNDP, 2017). India, with over 14 million known victims, holds the highest rate of human trafficking globally (United States Department of State, 2019). Africa also grapples with TIP, affecting approximately 53 African countries, with many victims ending up in Europe. Rapid urbanization, population growth, and resource inequalities contribute to the gradual increase in migration, smuggling, and TIP in African countries. The Global Slavery Index (2016) estimates over 106,000 TIP victims in South Africa, while Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo account for 875,500 and 762,900 victims, respectively.

In response to this crisis, ECOWAS launched its first action plan against trafficking in human beings (2002-2003) within the West African sub-region in 2001. Despite subsequent reviews covering 2008-2011 and 2018-2022, trafficking in persons in the sub-region persists (UNODC, 2017). This study evaluates the domestication and implementation of the 2018-2022 Plan in Nigeria from 2018 to 2020. The paper contextualizes the concepts of "ECOWAS Plan of Action" and "Trafficking in Persons" and examines the issues and challenges affecting the ECOWAS POA (2018-2022) implementation in Nigeria.

### Conceptual Clarifications

#### Understanding Trafficking in Persons

Various scholars and analysts offer diverse definitions of trafficking in persons, reflecting individual perspectives shaped by studies, backgrounds, and experiences. Maurice and Chukwuma (2012) characterized it as a modern form of slavery involving recruitment, sales, transportation, transfer, harbouring, and receipt of human beings. The means employed include cajoling, abduction, deception, and debt bondage, all for financial exploitation. Bello and Olutola (2020) define human trafficking as the deception, recruitment, transportation, and transfer of persons for exploitation. Chuang (2006:137) adds a globalized economic dimension, describing trafficking as a consequence of a labour migration gone awry, especially with tightening their border controls in destination countries.

The US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 categorizes trafficking into sex trafficking and labour trafficking, with sex trafficking involving induced commercial sex acts by force, fraud, or coercion. The universally accepted definition, according to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000, adopted in 2003), encompasses:

*The recruitment, transportation, harbouring, transfer, or receipt of a person or group of persons using threat or use of force or other forms of coercion of abduction, deception, fraud, of position, or vulnerability, of the abuse*

*of power or of the giving or receiving of financial payment or benefits to achieve the consent or will of a person having control over another person for exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or organ harvesting.*

The three essential elements in trafficking, as clarified by Olateru-Olagbegi and Ikpeme (2014), are action (recruitment), means (threats), and purpose (exploitation). Consent becomes irrelevant when any of the means listed in the definition have been used. This study considers trafficking in persons as a criminal endeavor designed to deceive unsuspecting individuals, subjecting them to a deplorable denial of decent human existence.

#### ECOWAS Plan of Action

The ECOWAS Plan of Action comprises legal and institutional guidelines designed to address trafficking in persons (TIP) in West African countries (Sadikh, 2017). It seeks to strengthen national legislation in response to the United Nations (UN) Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish TIP, especially of Women and Children. Due to the prevalence of TIP in West Africa, international and sub-regional initiatives, particularly the ECOWAS Plan of Action, have been implemented (Ruby and Benjamin, 2010). The Plan, a regional response to TIP, emerged from collaborative efforts among West African countries. The increasing incidences of TIP and inadequate national responses prompted ECOWAS Heads of State to convene in Dakar, Senegal, in December 2001, leading to the adoption of the ECOWAS Initial Plan of Action against TIP (2002-2003).

Akosile (2017) emphasizes that the Plan provides legal, policy, and institutional frameworks for Member States to enact robust laws, policies, and measures against TIP. Ruby and Benjamin (2010) assert that the ECOWAS Plan of Action serves as a policy manual to influence national laws against TIP in the Member States. The Plan mandates countries to ratify and fully implement critical international and regional instruments, strengthening national laws while safeguarding trafficked persons.

Interdisciplinary methodology and Desk Research were employed to assess Trafficking in Persons (TIP), the ECOWAS Plan of Action (POA), and its implementation in Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative methodology, sourcing data from secondary outlets such as journals, official reports, books, and the Internet. Descriptive analysis was applied to the obtained data to draw inferences. The Desk Research method focused on reviewing existing literature related to the subject matter. Anti-trafficking reports from

organizations like UNODC, ILO, UNICEF, and IOM were used. Primary sources included national Annual Reports on the Implementation of the ECOWAS TIP Plan of Action, Reports from NAPTIP, and the Final ECOWAS Annual Synthesis Report on TIP in West Africa.

### **Trafficking in Persons in Nigeria**

Reports highlight Nigeria as a notable country for both internal and external trafficking in persons globally, serving as a source, transit, and destination country for various forms of TIP (EUROSTAT Report, 2015; USDS, 2019). Various transit camps exist across states such as Cross-River, Ogun, Akwa-Ibom, Oyo, and Osun States (Charlotte, 2017). Similar transit camps also exist in Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, Kaduna, and many other states in the northern part of Nigeria. The United States TIP Report 2017 notes that many Nigerian women and children are exploited globally for prostitution, domestic servitude, and organ harvesting. Scholars, including Mbakogu (2015) and Jones et al. (2012), attribute the aggravation of this phenomenon in Nigeria such factors such as high poverty levels, uneven resource distribution, greed, illiteracy, unemployment, weak legal systems, infrastructural decay, conflicts, insecurity, climate change, and other political and socio-economic crises.

Trafficked persons from Nigeria are directed within Africa to countries like Cote d'Ivoire, the Republic of Benin, Ghana, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, and Guinea. Leading European destinations include Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. In Asia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the preferred destinations for Nigerian traffickers (Delpont *et al.*, 2007 and IOM, 2019). The growth of trafficking in persons in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, is attributed to traffickers exploiting poverty, ignorance, greed, socio-economic downturn, and the free movement of persons (Olateru-Olagbegi, 2016). These activities have tarnished the image of Nigeria and other West African countries, impacting the integrity of the people.

Recognizing the impact of this phenomenon, governments globally have taken measures at different strategic and operational levels to curb the menace. In response, Member States of ECOWAS met and adopted the ECOWAS Plans of Action Against Trafficking In Persons, committing governments to fully ratify and implement international laws and protocols against TIP.

### **ECOWAS and Trafficking in Persons**

Established in 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) serves as a platform for promoting regional economic integration, development, and cooperation among West African countries (ECOWAS, 2016). Formed by the Treaty of Lagos in 1975, it consists of 15 member states, each using English, French, or Portuguese as an official language. As the oldest of the African Union's

recognized Regional Economic Communities, ECOWAS was amended in 1993 to become an economic union, aiming to raise living standards, enhance economic stability, and contribute to African continent development (ECOWAS, 1993). In 2001, ECOWAS officially acknowledged Trafficking In Persons (TIP) in the West Africa region as a violation of human dignity and took systematic steps to address the issue. The ECOWAS Declaration and the Plan of Action were signed during a meeting in Dakar, Senegal, attended by 15 member states (ECOWAS, 2019). Subsequent plans, including the Joint Plan of Action in 2006, the ECOWAS Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons (2008–2011), and the Strategic Plan of Action for the Combat of TIP in West Africa (2010-2013), were implemented to combat TIP (ECOWAS, 2019).

### **ECOWAS Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons 2018-2022**

In 2017, ECOWAS adopted its fifth regional Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons for 2018-2022 (UNODC, 2018). This plan urges member states to take pragmatic steps in preventing TIP, raising awareness, and enforcing anti-trafficking laws. It establishes frameworks for cooperation between border security and law enforcement agencies and emphasizes key areas, including:

1. Policy, Legislation, and Institutional Frameworks: Member states are obligated to establish appropriate legal, policy, and institutional frameworks to address TIP.
2. Protection and Support for Victims: Ensuring diligent prosecution of traffickers and providing support for victims to reduce vulnerability and exposure to other crimes.
3. Interstate Collaboration in Data Collection: Exchange of information on cases/trends and training of personnel, including special police units, border police, judges, and other law enforcers.
4. Strengthening Travel and Identity Documents: Measures to ensure authentic and relevant travel and identity documents while preventing the use of free movement protocols for human trafficking.
5. Coordinated Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanism: Ensuring effective coordination of national and regional TIP activities with mid-term and final evaluation assessments.
6. Prevention of TIP through Awareness Campaigns: Intensive awareness campaigns to prevent trafficking.

To implement the Plan, the ECOWAS Secretariat established the National Task Force on TIP in member states (ECOWAS, 2018). The task forces enhance cooperation, and coordination, develop policies, and recommend anti-trafficking measures. They also monitor and report progress to the ECOWAS Secretariat bi-annually. The 2018-2022 Plan of Action sets common goals for all member states, with implementation

monitored by the ECOWAS Secretariat and the ECOWAS Trafficking in Persons Unit, reporting through the ECOWAS Annual Synthesis Reports on TIP.

In 2003, Nigeria adopted the ECOWAS Plan of Action (POA) against Trafficking in Persons (TIP) as a deliberate effort to address the implications of TIP (Ike, 2015). The country remains committed to this issue, signing the 2018-2022, ECOWAS POA to sustain its fight against TIP. The assessment of the Plan's implementation in Nigeria will be based on six key areas. These are contained in the document on policy, legal, and institutional frameworks for the prevention and response to Trafficking in persons.

**A. National Policy Framework:** Nigeria has instituted several policies to combat trafficking in persons. These include:

**i. National Policy on Women.** Adopted in July 2000, focussing on women's and girls' rights against prostitution, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation. Through it, many wives of chief executives at the national and sub-national levels launched women-focused programmes to further push for the rights of women. Examples of the programmes are the Better Life Programme launched by Mrs. Mayram Babangida between 1986 and 1993; the Family Support programme, between 1993 and 1998; by Mariam Abacha; Child Care Trust by late Mrs. Stella Obasanjo in 1999-2005; The Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) founded by Mrs. Titi Abubakar Atiku in 2001, though many faltered after founders' spouses left public offices

**ii. National Gender Policy 2006.** Aiming at equal access to education, increased female enrolment in science and technology, gender mainstreaming, and eradicating gender-based violence and discrimination. It also focuses on enforcing anti-trafficking laws. Other policy documents include the National Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons, *the National Action Plan against human trafficking 2021-2025*, the National Policy on Child Labour, the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour (2013), and the NAPTIP's Gender Policy, 2021.

**B. Legal Framework:** Nigeria's legal framework against TIP includes Section 34 of the Constitution, the Criminal Code of 1916, the Penal Code of 1960, the Immigration Act of 1990, and the Child's Rights Act of 2003. The Trafficking in Persons Prohibition Law Enforcement and Administration Act (2003) is a significant declaration against trafficking.

**C. Institutional Framework:** Several institutions in Nigeria are dedicated to tackling human trafficking. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) was established in 2003 as the lead agency for implementing national, regional, and

international instruments on TIP. Over the years, NAPTIP has made significant strides in suppressing, preventing, and punishing perpetrators of TIP in Nigeria (NAPTIP, 2018). Notably, the establishment of NAPTIP resulted from Nigeria's commitment to the UN Protocol against TIP, Especially Women and Children. The Agency derives its legal powers from the Trafficking in Persons Prohibition Law Enforcement and Administration Act of 2003, reviewed in 2015, and is fully committed to preventing all forms of human trafficking (NAPTIP, 2018).

NAPTIP collaborates with Anti-Trafficking Units of security agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Nigeria Correctional Service (NCS), international organizations and relevant Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Functional organizations in Nigeria include Devatop Centre for Africa Development (DCAD), Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), Pathfinders Justice Initiative, Inc., Women's Consortium of Nigeria, Coalition Against Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children, Viable Knowledge Masters (VKM), and Edo State Taskforce Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT)

#### **Protection and Support for Victims of TIP**

The National Policy on Protection and Assistance to Trafficked Persons, launched in 2008, guides stakeholders in providing uniform and quality assistance to victims of trafficking. The policy covers reception, identification, sheltering, medical support, counseling, family tracing, return/repatriation, integration, empowerment, follow-up/aftercare, and disengagement for trafficked victims (NAPTIP, 2018). The Policy sets out measures on the protection, rights, and obligations of victims, referral of victims, etc. The review process of this Policy started in September 2019 (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2020).

Over the years, NAPTIP has developed several strategies for the prevention, suppression, and punishment of TIP in Nigeria, collectively known as the 4P's: Prevention, Protection/Assistance of Victims, Prosecution of Traffickers, and Partnership (Olateru-Olagbegi and Ikpeme, 2014). The NAPTIP leads campaigns for the repatriation of TIP victims and delivers risk assessments. The National Investigation Service, the Nigeria Intelligence Agency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the embassy of the victim's country in Nigeria also play critical roles. NAPTIP operates shelters with a closed regime, with one shelter located at NAPTIP headquarters in Abuja and another nine within its Zonal Commands (NAPTIP, 2018). State Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development and civil society organisations, including the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication

Foundation (WOTCLEF), also operate shelters (Olateru-Olagbegi and Ikpeme, 2014).

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) significantly contribute to preventing and supporting victims of TIP. For instance, the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) rescued, rehabilitated, and empowered 11,600 victims of human trafficking and child labour between 1999 and 2019 (Vanguard, 2019). These organizations are effectively integrated into the national referral mechanism for protection and assistance to the victims. Protocols and Standard Operating Procedures for the coordination of law enforcement agencies in response to TIP have been developed and implemented in Nigeria. Similarly, the national agency has produced the Protocol on Identification, Safe Return, and Reintegration of Victims of TIP (International Centre for Migration

Policy Development, 2020). Nigeria is the only country in West Africa developing such procedures to support the referral of Nigerian victims from countries of exploitation back to their country of origin (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2020). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nigeria is also working on proposals for bilateral cooperation agreements between the country and Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo by the provisions of the Plan of Action to strengthen these processes.

**Interstate Collaboration in Data Collection, Exchange of Information, And Personnel Training.**

Nigeria has benefitted immensely from the interstate collaborations as envisaged by the ECOWAS PoA in its fight against the phenomenon. These are represented in the table below:

S/N	Nigeria's international cooperation within West African sub-region
1	Sharing intelligence sub-regionally – using day-to-day communication according to the different national regulations.
2	Officers' exchange programmes with other countries' experiences. Example: NAPTIP has experience sharing engagements with Ghana's Human Trafficking Management Board (HTMB), Republic of Niger's dedicated National Agency for Combatting Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (ANLTP/TIM), and The Gambia's National Agency against Trafficking in Persons, etc.
3	Cooperation on cases – responding to requests in cases of transnational TIP from other countries.
4	Local Forum of Police Liaison Officers based in the embassies of West African countries in Nigeria. Cases are presented, and challenges and practices are discussed at the Forum.
5	Capacity building – NAPTIP provides trainings for anti-trafficking authorities at the national level as well as for other countries in West Africa, e.g. Nigeria-Cameroon trans-border security meeting aiming at sensitisation of the relevant authorities on TIP and the monitoring of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).
6	Joint investigations, e.g. joint investigation between Nigeria and Ghana on the case of Ghanaian girls kidnapped and trafficked to Nigeria to be exploited in "baby factories".
7	Memorandum of Understanding – through the Ministry of Justice, NAPTIP has signed MoUs on TIP cases with Benin and Mali. In 2011, 100 TIP victims were returned from Timbuktu. In 2018, two fact-finding missions to Mali were conducted; approximately 20,000 Nigerian women had been trafficked to mining areas of Mali. The cooperation helped in identifying the victims.

**Source:** International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2020)

**Prevention of TIP Through Intensive Awareness Campaigns.**

There are robust awareness campaigns against trafficking in persons at both national and sub-national levels in Nigeria. Development partners actively participate in these campaigns. In October 2012, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime supported Nigeria in launching a three-year anti-human trafficking campaign aimed at publicising the reality, dangers, and impact of human trafficking. Notably, celebrities Joke Silva and Jude Abaga were named as Goodwill Ambassadors to drive the campaign (UNODC, 2012). The lead agency, NAPTIP, has a strong communication structure for anti-human trafficking campaigns, with a significant presence in both conventional and social media. Its Public Enlightenment Department executes awareness creation and sensitization programmes in all states of the country utilizing its State Commands and Liaison Offices.

**Increasing Cases of Human Trafficking**

Despite efforts by the NAPTIP, ECOWAS, and the Nigerian Government, incidences of TIP are on the rise. In 2018, over 18,000 Nigerians, mostly women and children, were trafficked to Europe alone (Pathfinder Justice Initiative, 2020). The Global Slavery Index (2018) placed Nigeria as 32nd out of 167 countries with the highest number of modern-day slaves. In 2017, Nigerians accounted for about 21 percent of the 181,000 migrants braving the Mediterranean Sea to arrive in Italy (IMO, 2019). Sahara Reporters (2017) reported that in 2016, 38,000 Nigerians (70 percent of whom were women) were trafficked to Italy. Additionally, the Austrian Red Cross (2017) noted that over 12,000 Nigerians were in various prisons abroad as a result of TIP. In February 2017, no fewer than 3,887 were deported to Nigeria from Libya and Saudi Arabia. Eight days later, another batch of 149 Nigerians voluntarily returned to Nigeria, also from Libya. Within the same

month, a total of 258 trafficked victims deported from the North African country were received in Lagos. This trend necessitates an urgent investigation into challenges associated with the implementation of the ECOWAS POA against TIP, Especially Women and Children, 2018-2022 in Nigeria.

## **Challenges to Effective Implementation of the ECOWAS POA against TIP (2018-2022) in Nigeria**

### **A. Poor Criminal Justice System**

Nigeria is identified as having one of the largest networks of TIP alongside China, Lebanon, Liberia, and Guinea (Emejo, 2017). This trend is attributed to a poor criminal justice system in Nigeria, allowing apprehended traffickers to escape justice. Traffickers operate in well-organized and large cartels, perceiving themselves as 'above the law' due to the lack of proper enforcement of anti-trafficking laws. According to NAPTIP (2020), in 2018, 1076 cases of TIP I were reported, but only 206 cases were fully investigated, representing 19.1 percent of the reported cases, with 50 convictions (24 percent of prosecuted cases). Similarly, in 2019, 915 cases were received, 203 investigations were completed, and 25 people were convicted. The alleged weak justice system in Nigeria allows traffickers to evade prosecution by leveraging their networks and hiring smart lawyers who exploit loopholes in the legal system, hindering the effective implementation of the ECOWAS POA 2018-2022 against TIP in Nigeria.

### **B. Poor Funding**

insufficient funding for anti-trafficking activities poses a significant challenge to the adequate implementation of the ECOWAS POA against TIP in Nigeria. The ECOWAS Annual Synthesis Report on TIP in Africa (2019) highlights that inadequate funding for the execution of anti-trafficking policies and operations is the biggest challenge in combating TIP in Nigeria. According to Yuko (2011), high governance costs, recurrent expenditure, and a poor saving culture negatively affect funding for capital projects leading to insufficient funding for agencies responsible for implementing the stipulations of the POA. Agencies like NAPTIP, NPF, NCS, NIS, and NCS continually face challenges due to a lack of logistics and other operational facilities resulting from poor funding/budgetary allocation. For instance, in 2016, the FGN allocated approximately ₦1.6 billion to NAPTIP, a significant decrease from the initial ₦2.5 billion allocated in 2015. The budgetary constraints affect the operational efficiency of the agency, resulting in partial and ineffective implementation of the POA.

### **C. Poor Social and Economic Conditions**

The 2018-2022 POA prioritizes human capital development and inclusive economic development as strategies for reducing the incidence of TIP. Studies reveal that poverty and harsh economic conditions are significant drivers of TIP. Accordingly, the POA urges governments to formulate sound fiscal policies capable

of fostering socio-economic growth to attract citizens both domestically and internationally (ECOWAS, 2018). However, in Nigeria, over 60 percent of the population lives below \$2 per day, and the poverty rate is at 40.1 percent (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This situation is particularly acute in rural areas, leading to rural-to-urban migration that contributes to TIP. Social and economic challenges, such as poverty, uneven resource distribution, deprivation, inadequate infrastructure, and discrimination, among others, attract individuals, especially youths, to seek better lives in perceived better countries. This trend impedes the effectiveness of the ECOWAS POA in mitigating TIP in Nigeria. Despite government efforts, many of the basic socio-economic needs of the people remain unmet, compelling them to migrate in search of better opportunities elsewhere. This intensifies incidences of TIP. To effectively implement the POA, Nigeria must create a fair socio-economic environment that reduces poverty levels in the country. As Msuya (2018) observed, "No matter how well a plan is articulated, without effective implementation, it is like a toothless bulldog".

### **D. Corruption among Law Enforcement and Judicial Agents**

Corruption poses a significant challenge to the effective implementation of the ECOWAS POA against TIP in Nigeria. According to the World Bank (2007), corruption, defined as the "abuse of public office for personal gains or benefits," continues to impede development across various sectors of the Nigerian State. Elisabeth (2014) noted that corrupt law enforcement agents sometimes facilitate the movement of trafficked persons by falsifying travel documents for the traffickers. Corruption among judicial and law enforcement agents leads to the violation of some POA provisions, making law enforcement agents accomplices in the crime of trafficking. In the second quarter of 2019, NAPTIP prosecuted seven suspected officials complicit in trafficking, including NAPTIP officers, NPF officers, National Quarantine Service officers, NIS officials, and Nigeria Correctional Services officers (USDOS, 2019). However, only one conviction was secured. Similarly, in 2018 and 2019, there were allegations of military personnel involved in trafficking in the Northeast, with reports of soldiers coercing female detainees into sex in exchange for food. Despite modest government efforts, pervasive corruption has affected all levels of government, including security forces, undermining accountability for trafficking offenses (USDOS, 2019; NAPTIP, 2019). These challenges compromise the effective implementation of the ECOWAS POA 2018-2022 against TIP in Nigeria, which aims to strengthen member states' legal systems to address trafficking cases without exemptions.

### **E. Lack of Awareness**

Scholars and analysts have highlighted a lack of awareness among the public regarding the risks of exploitation (Akosile 2017; Otaru 2017). Another

challenge to effective international cooperation, especially between Nigeria and other nations, is the insufficient training for diplomatic personnel on TIP and high staff turnover. Regular TIP awareness and training for diplomatic staff are crucial, as they often serve as the first point of contact for the referral of victims in transnational TIP cases. Despite combined efforts by NAPTIP and Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is a need for increased investment in awareness campaigns and improved public communication regarding TIP and risk behaviours.

## CONCLUSION REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human trafficking constitutes a grave violation of human rights, posing a significant challenge to the establishment of a just global society. This illicit activity thrives on factors such as poverty, greed, inequality, sexual discrimination, and conflicts, among others. This paper critically assessed the implementation of the ECOWAS Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons (2018-2022) to identify gaps in its effective execution in Nigeria. Utilizing qualitative research methods desk research, the study revealed that despite the adoption of the ECOWAS Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons in Nigeria, incidents of trafficking persist.

However, the study showed that effective implementation of the ECOWAS POA against TIP is a potent measure in reducing the incidence of TIP in Nigeria. Despite the progress made by the NAPTIP and the Nigerian Government in addressing the menace, much more still needs to be done to prevent the practice and protect the victims. Additionally, the study identified challenges militating against the effective implementation of the ECOWAS Plan of Action against trafficking in persons in Nigeria including poor funding of anti-trafficking programs, corruption amongst law enforcement agencies leading to poor prosecution of traffickers, poor social and economic conditions of the people among others.

Considering the findings, this paper recommends the following actions:

- i. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) should allocate appropriate funding for the implementation of the ECOWAS Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons in Nigeria through legislative appropriation and by meeting conditions for accessing foreign grants.
- ii. The FGN should ensure the effectiveness of the Criminal Justice System in Nigeria to enhance trafficking investigations, prosecutions of trafficking offenses, and the imposition of adequate sentences for trafficking convicts.
- iii. Similarly, the FGN, in collaboration with NAPTIP and other relevant stakeholders, should take proactive measures to investigate and prosecute public officials suspected of trafficking-related

corruption and complicity in trafficking offenses. The FGN should strengthen collaboration between national and cross-border security agencies to facilitate effective information sharing and joint border patrol.

- iv. The FGN, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should reinforce bilateral and multilateral agreements between Nigeria and foreign counterparts for the exchange of information on Trafficking in Persons and/or illegal trans-border movement of persons. Additionally, the FGN should, through engagements with ECOWAS, enhance institutional collaboration in the West Africa sub-region in designing programs to address the prevention of trafficking, the protection and reintegration of victims of trafficking, and the prosecution of traffickers.
- v. The FGN should prioritise and domesticate the relevant stipulations of the ECOWAS Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons for effective implementation. In designing anti-trafficking initiatives, local programming should be aligned with national and regional anti-trafficking policies and statutes. The FGN should instruct NAPTIP to develop robust partnerships with concerned governmental and non-governmental bodies, both nationally and regionally, particularly focusing on awareness creation, prosecution of traffickers, or assistance to victims of trafficking.

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