



Plumtree–KAZA Corridor Exposure

The Crime–Terror Nexus Spectrum

SADC Implementation Gaps

A Secure Mobility Framework

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME, BORDER GOVERNANCE AND THE RISK OF RADICALIZATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The Zimbabwe–Botswana 5th Bi-National Commission,
Mobility Reform and the Structural Risk of Convergence

By Pedzisai Sixpence | Southern Africa Centre
for Mediation and Extremism Prevention

#Issue No. 2, 10 July 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines how transnational organized crime, border governance, and the risk of radicalization intersect in the Zimbabwe–Botswana border region, particularly in the context of planned identity card-based cross-border travel. It assesses whether expanded mobility can be implemented without increasing security vulnerabilities and identifies the institutional measures required to mitigate risks. The 5th Zimbabwe–Botswana Bi-National Commission (BNC), held in Harare from 19–22 April 2026, provides the policy entry point for this analysis, as it commits both countries to deepening cross-border integration.

This brief argues that the proposed reform will only succeed if it is implemented within a secure mobility framework that integrates border governance, intelligence sharing, financial surveillance, anti-trafficking enforcement, and community-level resilience. Key elements remain absent from the current arrangements, including biometric integration, financial intelligence cooperation, and formal alignment with SADC counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering/countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) frameworks. These are not technical add-ons; they are the core infrastructure that will determine whether expanded mobility strengthens or undermines regional security.

Evidence from other regions shows that mobility and security can advance in tandem. The European Union's Schengen Information System, as well as initiatives in ECOWAS and the East African Community, demonstrate the value of interoperable identity systems, coordinated border management, and real-time information sharing. Zimbabwe and Botswana should adapt these lessons, rather than replicate them, to develop a context-appropriate mobility framework grounded in interoperability, secure identity verification, and institutional coordination.

There is currently no confirmed crime–terror convergence along the Zimbabwe–Botswana border. However, the Plumtree Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) corridor, shared by these countries, already exhibits entrenched organized crime, including human trafficking, migrant smuggling, synthetic-drug flows, wildlife crime and corruption. While these dynamics do not automatically lead to violent extremism, they weaken governance and create conditions that extremist actors can exploit (ISS, 2025; Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021). In fact, structural vulnerabilities that typically precede such

convergence are present. Hence, the relationship between transnational organised crime (TOCs) and violent extremism is better understood as a spectrum, ranging from coexistence to convergence, than as a fixed causal chain, depending on context.

Key Findings

- The Plumtree–KAZA corridor remains exposed to trafficking, smuggling, synthetic-drug flows and corruption, consistent with broader organized crime patterns documented across Southern Africa.
- Counter-terrorism (CT) and Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks in both countries are weakly integrated with immigration systems and border governance.
- SADC institutions including the SADC Regional Counter-Terrorism Centre (RCTC), Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Co-operation Organisation (SARPPCO) and regional AML/CFT mechanisms, remain underutilized despite their potential to support coordinated implementation.
- There is no confirmed crime–terror convergence along the corridor, but risks are structural and could evolve if governance gaps persist.
- The Cabo Delgado insurgency illustrates how criminal economies and governance deficits can create conditions that extremist actors exploit and that military responses alone cannot reverse.

Gap in the Bi-National Commission (BNC)

- Current agreements strengthen border cooperation, but they omit critical components that include biometric systems integration, financial-intelligence integration and counter-radicalization measures
- Formal alignment with the SADC counter-terrorism and AML/CFT frameworks is not yet established.
- Inconsistent public reporting on the number and scope of agreements signed raises concerns about transparency, monitoring coordination and implementation accountability.

Central Policy Recommendation

- Zimbabwe and Botswana must implement national identity card-based travel within a secure mobility framework that combines biometric verification, intelligence sharing, financial-intelligence integration and strengthened anti-trafficking enforcement.
- This framework should be anchored within the SADC counter-terrorism and AML/CFT mechanisms and supported by a joint border intelligence unit with a clear mandate to monitor and respond to the crime–terror nexus.

- Community resilience and public awareness initiatives should complement these measures to reduce vulnerability to exploitation.
- Institutional engagement with transport and tourism operators, civil society, traditional leaders, the media and diaspora communities will strengthen public awareness, early warning and local resilience against exploitation by transnational organised crime and extremist actors

01 INTRODUCTION AND POLICY CONTEXT

Zimbabwe and Botswana share a border animated by trade, labour mobility, tourism and deep social ties. As members of SADC, the AfCFTA and the KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area, both countries depend on cross-border movement to sustain economic integration. Expanded free movement, backed by sound governance, will improve cross-border trade outcomes over time (SADC, 2025). The 5th BNC reinforced this relationship through agreements on immigration, security, trade and border management, including proposals to permit travel on national identity cards rather than passports (Government of Botswana, 2026).

These reforms are unfolding within a regional environment increasingly shaped by transnational organised crime (ISS, 2025). Trafficking in persons, migrant smuggling, wildlife crime, synthetic drugs, illicit financial flows and corruption continue to exploit key border corridors, including the Plumtree–KAZA route. Methamphetamine consumption in South Africa reached an estimated 60.2 tonnes in 2020, with an illicit market valued at about US\$782.5 million (Meyer et al., 2024). Botswana has also recorded illicit financial flows of between US\$1.1 and US\$1.2 billion, exposing governance weaknesses that organised networks continue to exploit (Mubangizi & Sewpersadh, 2022).

This policy brief examines the Zimbabwe–Botswana 5th BNC of 2026 through the lens of transnational organised crime and radicalisation and violent extremism, assessing whether the proposed immigration reforms adequately address existing vulnerabilities and suggesting options for a more secure mobility framework.

Evidence Base and Analytical Approach

The analysis draws on institutional data from IOM (2024), SADC (2025), FATF (2021) and ISS (2025), alongside peer-reviewed scholarship on the crime–

terror nexus and organised crime in Southern Africa (Avdan & Omelicheva, 2021; Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021). Coverage of the BNC draws on official statements from the Governments of Botswana and Zimbabwe. All analytical conclusions are grounded in verifiable empirical and peer-reviewed sources.

02 NATIONAL CT AND P/CVE FRAMEWORKS

Both Zimbabwe and Botswana maintain legal and institutional frameworks for countering terrorism, organised crime and money laundering. Zimbabwe's architecture encompasses the Constitution, the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act and the Money Laundering and Proceeds of Crime Act; Botswana couples immigration controls with AML legislation and intelligence-led policing. The formal structures exist – the gap is between statutory design and practical enforcement. International AML standards implemented without adequate adaptation to local institutional capacity tend to produce compliance on paper rather than in practice, a pattern FATF assessments have consistently documented (FATF, 2021).

South Africa's experience reinforces this regional pattern: banks' unilateral termination of accounts to avoid compliance risk has created regulatory gaps rather than closing them, generating persistent weaknesses in the oversight of political financing, terrorist funding and cybercrime. Zimbabwe and Botswana, both formally aligned with FATF and ESAAMLG standards, are not immune to the same dynamic.

Inter-agency coordination in both countries remains persistently weak. The proposed travel arrangement cannot succeed as an isolated immigration reform – it must be understood as one component of a wider security ecosystem, designed from the outset to integrate with existing mechanisms.

03 SADC APPROACHES TO P/CVE

SADC has progressively developed a regional security architecture capable of coordinating responses to terrorism, radicalisation and organised crime (SADC, 2025). The SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation anchors this framework, supported by the RCTC, SARPPCO and regional

AML/CFT structures. A consistent regional lesson applies directly here: fragmented national legal frameworks for cross-border movement create exploitable openings that operational cooperation alone cannot close without legislative harmonisation.

Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) has shaped regional thinking on how organised crime, border vulnerabilities and violent extremism reinforce each other when left unaddressed (Chigudu, 2023). SADC has drawn the lesson that sustainable security requires strengthened border governance, intelligence cooperation and financial surveillance working in parallel with security operations – though implementation remains uneven across member states. Formally anchoring the 5th BNC’s outcomes within this regional architecture would extend institutional oversight to the corridor.

04 EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON TOC TRENDS

The picture across Southern Africa is one of persistent and adaptive organised crime. The Africa Organised Crime Index 2025 finds resilience against criminal networks uneven across the region, with trafficking markets, criminal facilitation and governance vulnerabilities remaining chronic concerns (ISS, 2025). The Zimbabwe–Botswana border is not the region’s most affected corridor; however, its position within the Plumtree–KAZA network means it is not shielded from these wider dynamics (IOM, 2024).

Human trafficking remains one of the fastest-growing forms of transnational organised crime, with an

estimated 27.6 million people living in forced labour or forced marriage globally. Women and girls continue to account for the majority of detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2024a). Undocumented migrants at border posts such as Beitbridge and Plumtree remain vulnerable to extortion, exploitation and abuse, particularly women, children and labour migrants. Increasing use of digital platforms for recruitment further complicates border enforcement (CTED, 2021).

Synthetic drugs add a further layer of complexity. Eastern and Southern Africa function as both transit and consumer regions for methamphetamine and other synthetics, with networks exploiting internet-enabled coordination to remain resilient to interdiction (UNODC, 2025). Wildlife trafficking rounds out the picture – an adaptive system exploiting law-enforcement gaps, making it a corridor–security issue rather than a conservation problem alone (ISS, 2025).

Underlying all of these flows is the financial system that sustains them, enabling criminal networks to conceal and reinvest proceeds by exploiting weaknesses in beneficial-ownership transparency, cross-border financial monitoring and inter-agency information-sharing (FATF, 2021). Money laundering is not a secondary concern but the mechanism that makes criminal networks financially durable, allowing them to outlast individual enforcement operations. Closing these financial-oversight gaps along the Plumtree corridor is as essential to a secure mobility framework as biometric verification at the crossing itself.

05 UNDERSTANDING THE TOC–RADICALIZATION–VIOLENT EXTREMISM PATHWAY

The Crime–Terror Nexus: A Structural Risk, Not a Confirmed Threat

The relationship between organised crime and violent extremism is best understood as a spectrum rather than a switch – ranging from coexistence through tactical cooperation to full operational convergence, with context determining where specific actors sit at any given moment (Makarenko, 2004). Criminal networks do not inevitably produce terrorism; what they do is erode governance, normalise illicit activity and create the socio-economic conditions in which extremist actors find receptive ground (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021). Evidence from cross-national studies shows that violent non-state actors with developed trafficking capacity are more likely to possess the broader alliance networks associated with sustained insurgency, which is why trafficking-prone corridors warrant preventative attention even where no terrorist presence has been confirmed (Avdan & Omelicheva, 2021). The concern for Zimbabwe and Botswana is preventative, not evidentiary (CTED, 2021).

06 THE CORRIDOR AND NEIGHBOURING STATES

The Plumtree corridor is best understood as a node within a wider regional network connecting South Africa, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique and other neighbouring states — its greatest economic asset and its most significant security liability at the same time (ISS, 2025).

The border is, by regional standards, relatively stable, but corruption, informal crossing points and document fraud remain persistent challenges (IOM, 2024). Undocumented travellers face systematic exposure to extortion by criminal intermediaries and corrupt officials, driven by restrictive immigration policy and limited enforcement capacity.

The effectiveness of the BNC's mobility reforms will depend on how well they align with broader efforts to strengthen border governance, intelligence-sharing and law-enforcement cooperation. Plumtree is a strategic space where mobility, development, security and community resilience converge, and where the gains or losses from the Commission's commitments will be felt first.

07 COMMUNITY RESILIENCE & MEDIATION

Law enforcement and border security are necessary but not sufficient. Sustainable prevention of radicalisation requires investment in the communities that criminal networks and extremist actors target first (CTED, 2021; ISS, 2025). Border communities along the Plumtree corridor absorb the social and economic costs of trafficking and irregular migration before anyone else — making them both the most exposed and the most capable early-warning actors, if given the institutional connections to act on what they observe.

Evidence from Cabo Delgado, the Lake Chad Basin and the Horn of Africa points consistently in one direction: extremist groups gain traction precisely where state presence is weak, economic opportunities are limited and governance grievances are unaddressed (ISS, 2025). The withdrawal of the SADC Mission in Mozambique made this lesson concrete, as the structural conditions that had enabled the insurgency remained largely intact.

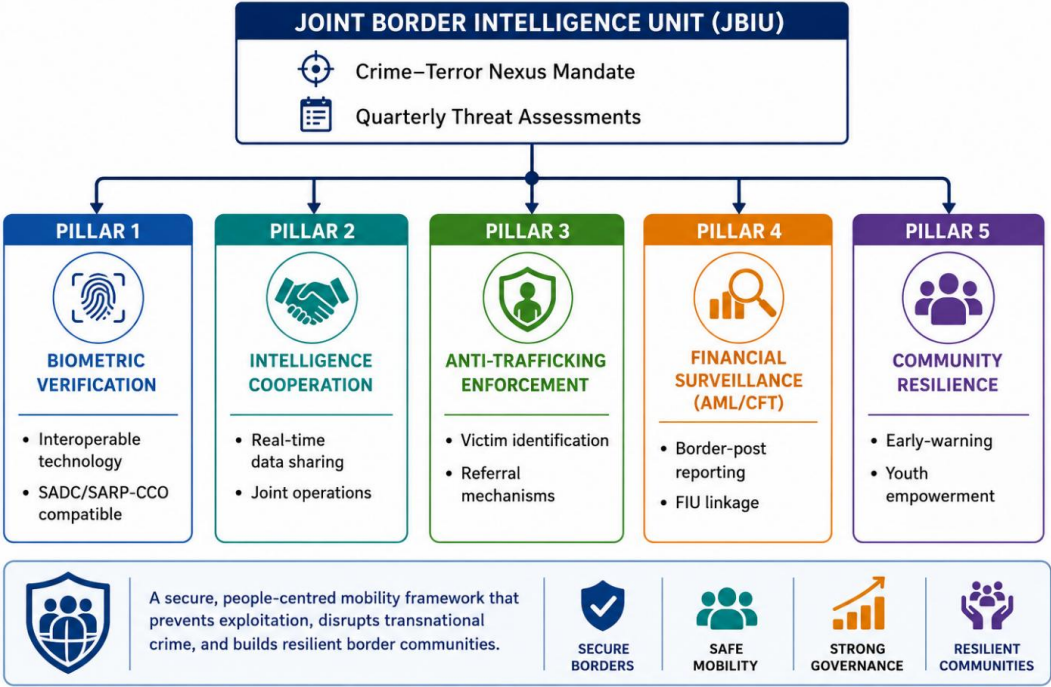
These dynamics apply directly to the Zimbabwe–Botswana corridor. Criminal networks routinely build community presence before extremist actors emerge, normalising illicit activity and creating patronage structures that compete with formal governance. Investment in youth empowerment, local economic development and trust-building between communities and state institutions is not supplementary to a security strategy but a structural component of its durability. Traditional leaders, religious institutions, civil society and youth organisations possess local legitimacy and early-warning capacity that formal security structures lack, and any framework emerging from the BNC should give them a formal role (CTED, 2021; ISS, 2025).

08 THE CASE FOR A TOC-RESISTANT MOBILITY FRAMEWORK

The 5th BNC (2026) has delivered genuine progress. The Immigration Cooperation MoU and the identity-card travel proposal reflect a real commitment to facilitating mobility and advancing regional integration (Government of Botswana, 2026). The Commission's core instinct — that mobility and security are not in tension but must be advanced together — is correct and commendable. Formalised immigration cooperation has the potential to channel currently informal cross-border movement into regulated pathways, generating benefits for trade, tourism and labour mobility that remain unrealised under the current passport-based system (IOM, 2024).

What the current agreements do not address is the security gap that expanded mobility could expose, as crime-terror nexus monitoring remains absent from the BNC outcomes (FATF, 2021). Field research at the Beitbridge and Plumtree border posts found that child smuggling, document fraud, corruption and informal transport networks continue to facilitate illicit cross-border movement through official and undesignated crossing points. As many as 13–15 children could reportedly be moved in a single smuggling operation, with facilitators charging ZAR1,500–2,000 for routes to South Africa and US\$80–100 to Botswana (Mabvurira et al., 2022). Although not linked directly to violent extremism, these activities expose governance weaknesses that could equally be exploited as cross-border mobility expands. As demonstrated in Cabo Delgado, persistent criminal economies and weak border governance can, if left unaddressed, evolve

from organised-crime challenges into broader security threats (Chigudu, 2023).



Source: Author (2026) based on BNC outcomes (Government of Botswana, 2026), SADC (2025) and relevant literature.

Figure 1. The Zimbabwe–Botswana border corridor within the wider Plumtree–KAZA network.

09 INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Progress should be tracked across short-, medium- and long-term horizons: immediate priorities on institutional integration and intelligence cooperation; medium-term milestones on biometric coverage and trafficking detection; longer-term benchmarks on community resilience and sustained reductions in organised-crime activity along the corridor.

INDICATOR	WHAT IT MEASURES
Biometric coverage at Plumtree	% of crossings processed through a biometric system interoperable with SADC/SARPCCO databases before national rollout.
RCTC/RCTS integration	Formal linkage of the Immigration Cooperation MoU’s protocols to the SADC Regional Counter-Terrorism Centre and SARPCCO.
Trafficking detection & referral	Rise in victim-identification and cross-border referrals between Zimbabwe’s and Botswana’s national referral mechanisms.
Financial-intelligence integration	Extent to which border-post AML/CFT reporting links to the SADC AML/CFT Committee, ESAAMLG and national FIUs.
Crime-terror nexus monitoring	Joint border intelligence unit operational with explicit crime-terror nexus mandate, producing quarterly assessments.
Community resilience reach	KAZA-adjacent communities covered by structured counter-radicalisation and youth economic-opportunity programming.

INDICATOR	WHAT IT MEASURES
Corridor crime trends	Trend in interceptions, arrests and prosecutions for trafficking, wildlife crime and synthetic-drug offences at Plumtree.

Source: Author, 2026.

10 POLICY OPTIONS

Three broad policy options are available to Zimbabwe and Botswana in implementing the outcomes of the 5th BNC.

Option 1 – Maintain Existing Arrangements	Option 2 – Incremental Mobility Reforms	Option 3 – Secure Mobility Framework
Passport-based travel requires little additional investment and can continue immediately. Politically straightforward, but offers limited support for regional integration, keeps travel costs high and leaves border vulnerabilities largely unchanged.	A phased introduction of identity-card travel through pilot projects allows governments to strengthen border systems and build capacity before full implementation. Moderate cost, gradual benefits, reduced operational risk.	Identity-card travel implemented within a comprehensive framework aligned with SADC counter-terrorism, AML/CFT and TOC strategies – integrating biometric verification, intelligence cooperation, financial surveillance, anti-trafficking measures and community resilience. ★ PREFERRED OPTION

11 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the outcomes of the 5th BNC contribute to secure regional integration, mobility reforms should address border governance, organised crime and radicalisation vulnerabilities simultaneously.

For the Governments of Zimbabwe and Botswana

- Implement identity-card travel through a phased, security-conscious approach.
- Establish a Joint Border Security and Intelligence coordination mechanism to monitor trafficking, smuggling and crime-terror nexus risks.

For Immigration, Border Security and SADC

- Border agencies should adopt integrated management practices that enhance traveller verification while facilitating legitimate movement, with particular attention to document fraud and trafficking (UNODC, 2024a).
- SADC should leverage the RCTC, SARPCCO and AML/CFT structures – including through legislative harmonisation of cross-border

movement frameworks – to support secure mobility and TOC monitoring (SADC, 2025).

For Financial Intelligence and Community Resilience

- Financial intelligence units should enhance cooperation in detecting illicit financial flows linked to trafficking, addressing implementation weaknesses documented in comparable regional AML/CFT regimes.
- Governments and civil society should integrate traditional leaders and youth groups into community-based resilience programming to reduce vulnerability to criminal recruitment and extremist influence (Chigudu, 2023).

Priority Recommendation

The most effective policy option is a secure mobility framework combining identity-card travel with biometric verification, intelligence cooperation, financial surveillance, anti-trafficking measures and community resilience programming.

The 5th Zimbabwe–Botswana Bi–National Commission has created a genuine opening for deeper bilateral cooperation and more integrated regional mobility. The identity-card travel proposal is not a problem, but an opportunity. Whether that opening translates into durable regional integration or simply expanded exposure to organised crime will depend on the governance decisions taken in the time ahead.

The central risk along the Plumtree corridor is not increased movement per se, but the interaction between expanded mobility and existing governance vulnerabilities – trafficking networks, financial opaqueness, weak inter-agency coordination and limited community resilience – which are likely to

deepen under the pressure of expanded mobility if the necessary safeguards are not in place. No confirmed crime–terror convergence exists along the corridor today, but the structural conditions that precede such convergence are well documented, and several are present here (Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2021).

A secure mobility framework that combines biometric verification, intelligence cooperation, anti-trafficking enforcement, financial surveillance and community-based resilience programming is both achievable and necessary. The Zimbabwe–Botswana initiative could serve as a practical model for how SADC countries advance regional integration without surrendering the security standards that make that integration sustainable.

REFERENCES

- Avdan, N., & Omelicheva, M. (2021). Human trafficking–terrorism nexus: When violent non–state actors engage in the modern–day slavery. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65(9), 1576–1606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027211010904>
- Chigudu, D. (2023). Islamic State and terrorism in Mozambique: Unpacking the insurgency and possible containment strategies. *African Renaissance*, 20(3), 95–116.
- Counter–Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate. (2021). Identifying and exploring the nexus between human trafficking, terrorism and terrorism financing. United Nations Security Council.
- Financial Action Task Force. (2021). Botswana’s progress in strengthening measures to tackle money laundering and terrorist financing [Follow-up report]. <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/countries/detail/Botswana.html>
- Government of Botswana. (2026). President Boko at the 5th Botswana–Zimbabwe Bi–National Commission. Government Communication and Information System.
- Institute for Security Studies. (2025). Africa Organised Crime Index 2025. ENACT. <https://africa.ocindex.net/>
- International Organization for Migration. (2024). Zimbabwe – Flow Monitoring Report, December 2024. Displacement Tracking Matrix. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/zimbabwe-flow-monitoring-report-december-2024>
- Mabvurira, V., Zengeni, F. K., & Chigevenga, R. (2022). Child trafficking and child smuggling in Zimbabwe: Legislation and policy gaps. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(1), 50–57.
- Makarenko, T. (2004). The crime–terror continuum: Tracing the interplay between transnational organised crime and terrorism. *Global Crime*, 6(1), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1744057042000297025>
- Meyer, J. et al. (2024). Estimating the illicit drug market in South Africa. [As cited in original source material].
- Mubangizi, J., & Sewpersadh, P. (2022). Illicit financial flows and governance weaknesses in Southern Africa.
- Omelicheva, M. Y., & Markowitz, L. P. (2021). Rethinking intersections of crime and terrorism. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), 1541–1565. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab012>
- Southern African Development Community. (2025). SARPCCO Centre of Excellence graduation ceremony, December 2025. SADC Secretariat. <https://www.sadc.int/latest-news/sarpcco-centre-excellence>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2024a). Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024. United Nations. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2025). World Drug Report 2025. United Nations. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report.html>



The Southern African Centre for Mediation and Extremism Prevention (SACMEP) is a regional transdisciplinary research and knowledge hub focused on mediation and preventing violent extremism across the SADC region. The organisation envisions a peaceful, secure, and resilient Southern Africa where violent extremism is proactively prevented, and mediation efforts are effective, inclusive, and data-driven.

For more information and collaboration contact: info@sacmep.org | www.sacmep.org