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Debate on Towards Improved intergovernmental Coordination in Border Management

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION IN BORDER MANAGEMENT: MEETING HUMANITARIAN AND SERVICE DELIVERY OBLIGATIONS

Background Paper

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1. INTRODUCTION

Border management constitutes a critical governance function through which states regulate the movement of people and goods while safeguarding national security, economic interests, and human rights. In an era characterised by increasing international mobility, regional integration, and evolving transnational security threats, border governance has emerged as a central policy concern for many countries, including South Africa. Within the South African context, these challenges are particularly pronounced due to the country's position as a regional economic hub and a major destination for migrants, asylum seekers, and cross-border traders within Southern Africa.¹

Consequently, the dynamics of migration, irregular border crossings, asylum management, and cross-border trade place considerable pressure on the country's border governance framework.² Addressing these complex and interrelated challenges requires a coordinated and integrated approach among multiple spheres of government and state institutions responsible for border control, migration management, humanitarian protection, service delivery and the facilitation of legitimate trade and movement. Historically, South Africa's border governance framework was characterised by fragmentation, with multiple government departments operating independently within the border environment. This institutional fragmentation often resulted in inefficiencies in service delivery, delays at ports of entry, and limited coordination between agencies responsible for immigration, customs, security, and health services.

In response to these challenges, South Africa established the Border Management Authority (BMA) through the *Border Management Authority Act, No. 2 of 2020*. The BMA was officially launched as a Schedule 3(A) public entity on 1 April 2023³, with the objective of creating an integrated and coordinated border management system. While the establishment of the BMA represents a significant institutional reform, the effectiveness of border management still depends on broader intergovernmental cooperation across national departments, provincial administrations, municipalities, and regional partners. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the importance of improved intergovernmental coordination in border management while highlighting the need to meet humanitarian and service delivery obligations.

2. HISTORICAL FRAGMENTATION OF BORDER GOVERNANCE

Prior to the establishment of the BMA, South Africa's border environment was managed through a **multi-agency system** involving several departments and institutions. Key agencies operating at ports of entry with specific responsibilities included:

- **Department of Home Affairs:** immigration control and processing of travellers.
- **South African Police Service:** law enforcement and crime prevention.
- **South African National Defence Force:** border safeguarding operations.
- **South African Revenue Service:** customs and revenue collection.
- **Department of Agriculture:** inspection of agricultural goods.
- **Department of Health:** port health services.

These stakeholders each held specific functions, such as customs, immigration control, law enforcement, public health screening and agricultural inspections, based on their individual legislative mandates. While each institution plays an important role in border governance, the

¹ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2023)

² Ibid

³ BMA (2023)

absence of a central coordinating authority has historically resulted in fragmented decision-making, overlapping mandates, and limited information sharing.

Research by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicated that **fragmented institutional arrangements can undermine governments' ability to respond effectively to migration pressures and humanitarian needs at border posts**.⁴ These challenges often contributed to delays at ports of entry, inefficiencies in border control processes, and difficulties in responding effectively to emerging security threats. Therefore, the establishment of the BMA represents an attempt to transition from a fragmented system toward a **single integrated border management framework**.

3. SOUTH AFRICA'S BORDER ENVIRONMENT AND MIGRATION DYNAMICS

South Africa shares land borders with six neighbouring countries: Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Eswatini, and Lesotho. It operates **71 official ports of entry**, including land border posts, international airports, and seaports. Migration and cross-border mobility in Southern Africa are driven by several factors:

- Economic opportunities.
- Trade.
- Tourism.
- Humanitarian factors.

Statistics from the BMA illustrate the scale of cross-border mobility in the country⁵. For example:

- Approximately **4.9 million travellers** passed through South Africa's ports of entry between **December 2025 and January 2026**.
- Of these travellers, about **3.53 million were foreign nationals** and 1.37 million were South African citizens.
- Ten major ports of entry process **over 75% of all cross-border movements**, including OR Tambo International Airport, Beitbridge, Lebombo, and Maseru Bridge.

Key border crossings also experience significant volumes of trade and passenger movement. For instance, the **Beitbridge border** post between South Africa and Zimbabwe processes an average of **15,000 crossings per day** during routine periods, with much higher volumes during peak travel seasons. These statistics demonstrate the strategic importance of efficient border management systems capable of handling high volumes of people and goods while maintaining security and service delivery standards.

4. THE NEED FOR IMPROVED INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

Globally, border management has evolved from traditional territorial control toward **integrated, or rather, intergovernmental border management (IBM)** systems. Integrated border management emphasises cooperation between government departments, agencies, cross-border collaboration with neighbouring states, and partnerships with international organisations. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), **intergovernmental border management refers to a system in which government institutions responsible for border security, immigration,**

⁴ UNHCR (2018)

⁵ BMA (2026)

customs, and public health coordinate their operations to ensure efficient and secure border processes.⁶

Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that effective border governance **requires policy coherence, information sharing, and institutional coordination among multiple government actors**⁷. Within Africa, migration governance is also guided by continental frameworks such as the **African Union Migration Policy Framework for Africa**⁸, which encourages member states to develop coordinated and humane migration management systems that promote mobility while protecting migrants' rights.

South Africa occupies a strategic position within the African continent and serves as a major economic hub in the region. Since the country shares land borders with six neighbouring countries,⁹ the effectiveness of border management has direct implications for:

- National security.
- Economic development.
- Regional integration.
- Migration governance.
- Public health protection.

According to the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), the movement of millions of travellers and large volumes of goods through South Africa's ports of entry each year places significant pressure on existing border infrastructure and administrative systems.¹⁰ Effective coordination between state institutions is therefore essential for maintaining efficiency and ensuring that borders function as enablers of development rather than barriers to economic activity.

Effective **intergovernmental coordination is also essential because border management intersects with multiple policy domains**. Without coordinated planning and resource allocation, government institutions may struggle to respond effectively to cross-border crime, irregular migration, or humanitarian emergencies.

5. REGIONAL AND BILATERAL COOPERATION

Border governance cannot be addressed solely at the national level. Many challenges associated with migration, trade, and security are inherently transnational in nature. South Africa works closely with regional partners through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to promote cooperation on border management, migration governance, and regional integration.¹¹ Regional initiatives include:

- Joint border management operations.
- Information sharing between neighbouring countries.
- Coordinated responses to cross-border crime.
- Efforts to facilitate trade and mobility within the region.

Improving coordination between South Africa and its neighbours is particularly important for addressing issues such as human trafficking, smuggling networks, and irregular migration flows. South Africa has already taken steps to **strengthen cross-border collaboration through bilateral agreements and joint border management initiatives**. For instance, joint action plans between South Africa and neighbouring countries such as Eswatini, Mozambique, and Lesotho aim to

⁶ IOM (2019)

⁷ OECD (2017)

⁸ AU (2018)

⁹ BMA (2023)

¹⁰ DHA (2025)

¹¹ SADC (2024)

harmonise policies, strengthen joint planning, and improve the deployment of resources at ports of entry.¹² These initiatives are intended to facilitate trade and the movement of people, while at the same time improving border security.

The **One Stop Border Post** Bill [B12 – 2024] was tabled in Parliament in 2024 and is currently subject to processing in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP). The Bill allows officials from neighbouring countries to operate within shared control zones to streamline border processes and reduce delays.¹³ Amongst others, the Bill is intended to establish **common control zones** where both countries' officials can enforce their national laws, allow for **shared risk management, joint information systems**, and stronger anti-corruption controls.¹⁴ Such initiatives demonstrate how coordinated governance can simultaneously improve economic integration, service delivery, and border security.

6. HUMANITARIAN OBLIGATIONS IN BORDER MANAGEMENT

Border management policies must also comply with national and international human rights frameworks. South Africa's humanitarian obligations are grounded in several legal instruments, including:

- **The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.**
- **The 1951 Refugee Convention.**
- **The 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.**

These frameworks require governments to ensure that individuals fleeing persecution have access to fair asylum procedures and are protected from refoulement (forced return to countries where they may face persecution)¹⁵. Government institutions operating at ports of entry must therefore ensure that border management practices comply with both domestic law and international human rights standards. Humanitarian considerations in border management include:

- Ensuring fair and efficient processing of asylum claims.
- Protecting migrants from trafficking and exploitation.
- Providing access to basic services such as healthcare and legal assistance.
- Ensuring humane treatment during immigration enforcement procedures.¹⁶

Effective coordination between immigration authorities, social services, and humanitarian organisations is therefore essential for ensuring that border policies remain consistent with constitutional and international obligations. **The integration of humanitarian safeguards into border management systems is a key component of modern migration governance.**

7. SERVICE DELIVERY AT PORTS OF ENTRY

Ports of entry function as critical service delivery points where government institutions interact directly with travellers and migrants. Effective service delivery requires efficient immigration processing, customs clearance, and public health inspections.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Parliament of the Republic of South Africa (2025)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch (2015)

¹⁶ Ibid

Recent statistics highlight the scale of these operational demands:

- During the month of March 2024, **2.71 million travellers entered or exited South Africa** through ports of entry¹⁷.
- During the **Easter** travel period in 2025, more than **1.05 million** people passed through South African borders in only ten days¹⁸.

High volumes of travellers place pressure on border infrastructure and administrative systems. Delays in immigration processing, limited staffing capacity, and outdated infrastructure can negatively affect both travellers and cross-border trade. Improving intergovernmental coordination is therefore essential for ensuring that service delivery standards are maintained in high-traffic border environments. According to the World Bank, inefficient border processes can significantly increase the cost of trade and reduce economic competitiveness.¹⁹ For South Africa, improving service delivery at ports of entry is therefore essential not only for governance purposes but also for economic development and regional trade integration.

Key Policy Considerations for Parliament

In strengthening intergovernmental coordination in border management, Parliament may consider the following priorities:

- *Strengthening institutional coordination among national departments operating within the border environment.*
- *Enhancing regional cooperation through bilateral and regional agreements within the Southern African Development Community (SADC).*
- *Improving infrastructure and technology at ports of entry to facilitate efficient service delivery.*
- *Ensuring humane migration management, including adequate protection for vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers.*
- *Balancing security and development objectives by facilitating legitimate trade and travel while combating cross-border crime.*

Oversight Issues for Parliament

Parliament may consider focusing oversight on the following key areas:

Institutional Coordination

- The effectiveness of coordination between the BMA and other departments operating at borders.
- Whether the BMA has sufficient authority and resources to perform its mandate.

Infrastructure and Technology

- The condition of infrastructure at ports of entry.
- The implementation of modern border management technologies, such as biometric systems and digital processing.

¹⁷ Stats SA (2024)

¹⁸ BMA (2025)

¹⁹ World Bank (2025)

Humanitarian Obligations

- The treatment and processing of asylum seekers and migrants at ports of entry.
- Access to health services and humanitarian assistance in border areas.

Regional Cooperation

- Progress in implementing cross-border initiatives such as joint border management with neighbouring states.
- Alignment of South Africa's border policies with regional integration goals.

8. CONCLUSION

Border management represents one of the most complex governance challenges facing modern states. In South Africa, the increasing movement of people and goods across borders requires a coordinated and integrated policy response that balances security concerns with humanitarian obligations and service delivery needs.

The establishment of the BMA marks a significant step toward addressing institutional fragmentation in South Africa's border governance framework. However, effective border management requires sustained intergovernmental cooperation, improved infrastructure, and stronger regional partnerships.

By strengthening coordination across government institutions and integrating humanitarian considerations into border policies, South Africa can develop a border management system that supports economic development, promotes regional integration, and upholds the principles of human dignity and constitutional governance.

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