

Migration in West Africa: New study on Nigeria shows the ambivalence of biometric ID systems

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Busy street in Lagos, Nigeria. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Most states in West Africa lack reliable data on the number and origin of migrants living within their borders. Rulers often exploit this lack of

clarity in a way that consolidates their own position of power. Biometric ID technologies play a key role in this process, enabling participation in elections even in the absence of citizenship.

This is shown by a [case study](#) taking Nigeria as an example, which Prof. Dr. Martin Doevenspeck from the University of Bayreuth and Prof. Dr. Victor Chidubem Iwuoha from the University of Nigeria published in the journal *Territory, Politics, Governance*.

The two scientists collected extensive research data from November 2021 to June 2022 in four major Nigerian cities: Abuja in the north, Lagos in the west, and Enugu and Aba in the east. Interviews and discussions with migrants from neighboring Chad, Niger, Benin, and Togo, as well as other methods of empirical field research, provided first-hand insights into the economic, social, and political status of permanent and temporary migrants to Nigeria. In addition, journal articles, radio and television reports, Internet portals, and reports from organizations concerned with migration policy were evaluated.

Identity cards with built-in microprocessor

Nigeria requires all persons living in the country to register officially. A national e-ID card was created for this purpose: This is an individual ID card with a built-in microprocessor that contains a national identification number (NIN) and stores [personal information](#) as well as [biometric data](#), particularly fingerprints.

All data are simultaneously stored in the national identity database (NIDB). Anyone who is a resident of Nigeria, with or without Nigerian citizenship, is entitled to use this form of digital biometric registration without restriction. However, a national e-ID card is already a sufficient prerequisite for participation in elections. This is because it entitles the holder to be issued a permanently valid voter card, which in turn allows

voting in all future elections in Nigeria.

Participation in elections without citizenship rights

Linking unrestricted access to biometric registration to participation in elections contradicts the Nigerian constitution, which seeks to link the right to vote to citizenship. The high proportion of migrants thus leads to an enormous increase in the number of eligible voters. The study describes the advantages and disadvantages of this constellation: The migrants see themselves as potential voters courted by the country's political elite. They feel strengthened in their affiliation with the Nigerian state and can influence the political course of their country.

At the same time, however, they do not have the citizenship rights and travel documents provided for in the constitution, which limits their ability to travel to other countries for economic or social reasons. This "immobilization," in turn, is incompatible with the freedom of movement between states to which the member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—including Nigeria—had committed themselves as early as 1979.

Those in power, in turn, exploit this paradoxical situation to consolidate their position of power: They regard migrants, who often live in precarious conditions, as an attractive clientele that can be easily mobilized and persuaded to vote, also with the help of electoral gifts. It even happens that the government distributes additional voter cards to migrants, which leads to multiple voting and thus to election manipulation.

Instrumentalization of migration in West Africa

"Our study provides an example of how migration, which is highly

pronounced in West Africa, is often instrumentalized by those in power for their own benefit. Digitalization has enabled biometric identity card systems not only in Nigeria, but also in other West African countries, which are constructing new national affiliations and thereby devaluing the function of citizenship as the basis of national identity," says Prof. Dr. Martin Doevenspeck, who researches migration movements and border spaces in Africa at the Department of Geography at the University of Bayreuth.

Most migrants within West Africa today have no clear, internationally recognized [legal status](#) in either their countries of origin or destination that would give them legal access to travel documents. Power interests on the part of political elites cause this state of affairs to become entrenched. While the rulers bind migrants to themselves as voters, they also weaken their rights to international freedom of movement.

More information: Victor Chidubem Iwuoha et al, Dilemmas of 'biometric nationality': migration control, biometric ID technology and political mobilisation of migrants in West Africa, *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/21622671.2023.2205885](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2205885)

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