



European Migration Control and the Migrant Smuggling Enterprise in West Africa: Using the Concept of Biometricycle to Explain the “Corporate Smuggling” Dimensions

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Abstract

This article discusses the European migration control system and its connection to the facilitation of migrant smuggling in West Africa. Using Nigeria’s experience, the paper explores the key developments that contributed to the expansion of the migrant smuggling business, namely, the European biometric ID systems, the digitalization of external borders, and intensive border securitization. These key measures are linked to the emergence and deepening of the operations of the new identity and document fraud cartel in Nigeria, a sub-component of the smuggling business model. I delineate a new conceptual framework, “biometric border paradox,” to depict the contradiction of the European migration control system in its external borders in Africa. The problem is linked to the new form of biometric ID and travel document fraud in corporate (government) agencies: the “corporate smugglers.” I coin two key concepts to describe this modality: “biometricycle” and “biometricyclists,” which refer to a tricycle-smuggling network that operates through the biometric ID system, involving three groups: local identity-faking entrepreneurs, IT experts, and corporate officials within the government’s biometric ID sector and immigration service. Vulnerable migrants who do not comply with the new biometric ID systems fall victim to biometric ID and travel document fraud, which exposes them to certain types of identity conflicts, state criminalization, and loss of social integration.

Keywords European migration control · Biometric ID system · Migrant smuggling · Biometricycle · Biometric border paradox · Document fraud

Introduction

In recent years, African migratory patterns have been characterized by migrant smuggling much more than legitimate cross-border travel. As many as 292,985 African migrants were believed to have been smuggled through the Mediterranean routes and the Western African Atlantic routes into various European countries, including Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain in 2023 alone (IOM, 2024). On average, each year, some 55,000 migrants are likely smuggled from West, East, and North Africa into Europe, generating an average of \$150 million in revenue for criminals (UNODC, 2025). The reasons for the expansion of the smuggling business in Africa remain understudied, yet they

are more external than internal. First, the European externalization policies in third countries, which bring European migration control directly to the fringes of African borderlands, are becoming stricter and tougher than ever expected but have also unquestionably received overwhelming subscription by African governments. These policies are strategic and multi-centered, including stationing European border security officials, installing biometric border systems, and providing cash compensation to repentant smugglers through their national governments.

Second, African governments appear to feel more obligated to deliver these mandates to their European counterparts, which is a major conditionality to grab jumbo chunks of the European migration control budget mapped for third countries. For example, in West Africa, member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are practically renegeing on their commitment to the ECOWAS free movement regimes, which accorded migratory free entry and exit permits to all nationals in

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the subregion, by enforcing the new European biometric ID system and invoking the exception for “inadmissible immigrants” (Iwuoha, 2025a). This criminalizes what used to be free movement of persons. But local facts show that these practices are having an exceptionally negative impact on African migrants and refugees who do not conform to Western conceptions of identity. Moreover, these policies have exacerbated identity fraud and illegal migration, as they have been designed without local knowledge and with a narrow conceptualization of security. Lastly, the worsening economic conditions and insecurity in Africa are pushing many African youths to foreign lands in search of greener pastures. Therefore, smugglers take this advantage to recruit a large number of migrant clients who are unable to access legal channels of migration but are willing to take risks in search of a better life abroad.

Migrant smuggling is a lucrative business estimated to be worth as much as EUR 5 billion or more per year (European Commission, 2025). Smugglers earned EUR 2.5 million in one trip involving the cargo vessel *Ezadeen*, intercepted on 1 January 2015 by the EU Joint Operation Triton, which had 360 migrants on board (European Commission, 2015). The major smuggling routes leading from West, East, and North Africa to Europe and from South America to North America generate approximately USD 6.75 billion a year (UNODC, 2025). According to the UNODC (2018) estimates, specific smuggling routes generate sizeable revenues. For example, smuggling into the European Union via the Western, Central, and Eastern Mediterranean routes generates USD 320–550 million; smuggling via land routes from sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa generates USD 1–1.5 billion; and smuggling via land routes to North America generates USD 3.7–4.2 billion. Profit-seeking criminals control the smuggling business across different world regions, which makes it a critical global concern. However, the complexity of the smuggling business model, which is mostly covert and run underground, also makes it very difficult to precisely determine the nature and size of this crime.

Article 3 of the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants defines migrant smuggling as “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or permanent resident” (UNODC, 2000: Article 3). This definition explains migrant smuggling in terms of (a) irregular entry—crossing borders without complying with the necessary requirements for legal entry into the receiving state—and/or when (b) a financial or material benefit is derived from such endeavor and/or when (c) “Fraudulent travel or identity document” is involved. Fraudulent identity documents are those (i) falsely made or altered by anyone other than a person or government agency lawfully authorized to make or issue them; or (ii)

improperly issued or obtained through misrepresentation, corruption, or duress or in any other unlawful manner; or (iii) used by a person other than the rightful holder (UNODC, 2000: Article 3). The role of migrant “facilitators” has also been identified and defined as involving the act of rendering assistance to irregular migrants without evidence of any financial or material benefit. Meanwhile, forms of cross-border mobility vary and could be classified in terms of travel documentation and assistance rendered, such as “regular and independent; regular and facilitated; irregular and independent; irregular and facilitated with no financial or material benefit; or smuggled by agents” (UNODC, 2022:4).

Reflecting on the Nigerian experience, this article links the smuggling business model to the emerging biometric ID and document fraud cartel in Nigeria. The key argument raised is that the nonconformity of most West African migrants to biometric ID systems exposes them to specific forms of identity conflicts, state criminalization, and loss of social integration, making them vulnerable to biometric ID and travel document fraud as alternative means to migration into Europe. The study investigates the new agency of biometric ID and travel document fraud as channelled through corporate agencies via a deeply imbricated corrupt and patronage system. Migrants are rapidly collaborating with emerging smuggler cells—“corporate smugglers” in government bureaucracies—to obtain the host’s national e-ID cards for cross-border movements, without being citizens. The Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community’s (AFIC) reports list 3100–5000 migrants with national e-ID document fraud cases in each African country annually (Frontex, 2023). Between 2019 and 2022, the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) confiscated over 5000 national e-ID cards from non-Nigerians, including Nigerian and Malian migrants. But European migration actors and donors do not see this unfolding African dimension of the issue hinged on local facts; hence, they reproduce counterproductive policies that stimulate dangerous migration.

Extant literature on EU externalization and biometric policies is sharply divided across border securitization (Acharya, 2016; Torpey, 2018; Frowd, 2020; Lavenex and Piper, 2022; Grünenberg et al., 2022; Iwuoha, 2025b) and human rights abuses and de-protection (Brachet, 2018; Fargues, 2020; FitzGerald, 2020; Ligouri, 2021; Bello, 2022; Dauchy, 2023). Other studies discuss EU anti-migrant smuggling policies (Brachet, 2018; Ursu, 2018; Ligouri, 2021; Sanchez et al. 2021; European Commission, 2021; Iwuoha and Doevenspeck, 2025a; 2025b). However, what remains understudied is the causal relationship between European migration control systems and the emerging corporate smuggler cells and their identity and document fraud dimensions in Nigeria and West Africa generally. This article precisely addresses this need.

While there is an abundance of research on the European external border policies and a great deal of research on some of their problematic consequences and externalities, there is very little research on these issues by African researchers. This study leverages this gap to introduce a new conceptual framework, “biometric border paradox,” to depict the contradiction of the European migration control system in its external borders in Africa. The problem is linked to the new form of biometric ID and travel document fraud in corporate (government) agencies: the “corporate smugglers.” This is further explained using the concept of “biometri-cycle” to depict a tricycle-smuggling network that operates through the biometric ID system, involving three groups: local identity-faking entrepreneurs, IT experts, and corporate officials within the government’s biometric ID sector and immigration service.

This article seeks to stimulate conversation with African scholarship and emphasize untold dimensions of the issue that an African perspective is uniquely positioned to identify and analyze. The study emphasizes that the European migration control systems in West Africa have intervened at several levels, negatively, as policies have been designed without sensitivity to local facts.

European Biometric ID Borders: The New Frontier of Migration Control in West Africa

Since 2018, the Integrated Border Management (IBM) unit of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has continued to install biometric ID scanners at several West African borders in cooperation with national governments. These heavily funded European biometric ID projects have significantly transformed African borders into biometric borders. The projects come in phases across Africa; the new Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) technology can be seen in several border posts between Burkina Faso and Niger (Kantchari–Makalondi), Benin (Malanville), Nigeria (Dan Issa/Farou, Dan Barto, Sassoumbroune, and three other borderlands), and Mali (Kundikaré) (Dauchy, 2023). MIDAS is also mounted in Gambia’s Upper Region’s new border post in Sabi, an expansive border region covering the country’s 749-km-long borderland with Senegal. In Sabi alone, more than 4000 traveler entries were recorded on MIDAS in the last quarter of 2021 (IOM, 2022). The MIDAS is an EU tool for migration control; it collects migrants’ data in real time and utilizes it as the statistical basis for developing EU migration control formats.

Migrants’ fingerprints and facial images are collected and analyzed across West African borders via the EU’s multiple interoperable biometric ID technologies, such as the MIDAS, West African Police Information System (WAPIS), and Criminal Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS). AFIS shares intelligence on counter-smuggling data

and operates risk analysis cells in eight African countries: Niger, Gambia, Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria (European Parliament, 2019).

Meanwhile, the Nigerian government has finalized the project of digital border installation across the country’s exit points. Nigeria spent 52 billion naira (\$39 million) in 2019 to install an electronic border surveillance system, including MIDAS and other biometric devices, to enable real-time surveillance and human biometric ID checks across Nigeria’s extensive 4447 km of land, air, and sea borders. In 2024, more than 80 checkpoints were equipped with the surveillance system to provide intelligence and monitor the movement of persons across the borders in real time. With the electronic gates mounted in Nigeria’s five international airports, the NIS officials have been able to detect suspicious travels and arrest suspected individuals who have criminal records, such as migrant smugglers and human traffickers (Tribuneonline, 2025). The e-border technologies are also linked in a central database that shares information with other relevant departments involved in combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking in Nigeria.

However, there is clear little evidence to suggest that these European migration control initiatives have scaled down the activities of migrant smuggling networks in Nigeria and West Africa generally, despite the EU’s rampant installation of biometric ID borders. What is always visible has been multiple cases of migrant criminalization, dehumanization, and abuse meted out to vulnerable migrants (Leonard and Kaunert, 2022) who lack the means and wherewithal to engage high-profile smugglers whose emerging criminal networks can overcome document- and identity-related barriers to irregular migration.

Nigeria’s Counter-Smuggling Responses: Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Nigeria is ranked 1st among smuggling countries in West Africa and 6th out of 10 in Africa, while in human trafficking it ranks 7th out of 10 (GI-TOC, 2023). The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAP-TIP) is the mainstream agency that combats human trafficking in Nigeria. The agency receives its legal power from the Trafficking in Persons Act (2015). This law criminalizes acts of human trafficking carried out for the purpose of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ harvesting. The law provides protection for victims of human trafficking and prescribes penalties for offenders. The Child Rights Act (2003) protects children from exploitation and criminalizes all forms of child abuse, including sexual abuse, child labor, and trafficking. The Money Laundering (Prevention and Prohibition) Act (2022) provides comprehensive legal and institutional capacity to combat money laundering and related offenses, including money laundered from human

smuggling and trafficking, sexual exploitation, and fraudulent overseas transactions. The Penal and Criminal Codes used are also important institutional frameworks adopted in Nigerian courts to prosecute and punish offenses related to criminal abduction, forced/child labor, smuggling, and sexual exploitation.

Importantly, the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) is primarily established to control human migration across all Nigerian borders and oversee all related matters thereto. The Nigerian Immigration Act No. 8 of 2015 prohibits and enforces the criminalization of migrant smuggling in Nigeria (see Part X). According to the Act, “No person shall, for financial or any other material benefit, by means of a fraudulent travel or identity document, procure[s] the illegal entry of a person into, or the illegal stay of a person in, a country of which that person is not a national or permanent resident” (Art. 64). For clarity, the Act defines illegal entry as “crossing borders without complying with the necessary requirements for legal entry into the receiving State and includes any crossing of a border at an irregular border point” (Art. 65 no. 4). Here, an irregular border point refers to “any point on any border of a country which is not an officially designated entry or exit point into or out of that country” (Act, 65 no. 5). Part XI mentions the major offenses relating to migrant smuggling, enablement of illegal residence, and the procurement of fraudulent identity or travel documents. Migrant smuggling is defined as follows:

Any person who intentionally or knowingly, in order to obtain directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, procures the illegal entry of a person into a country of which the person is not a national or permanent resident, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of ten years or a fine of not less than one million Naira or both, and is in addition liable to refund to the migrant all monies obtained from him in the course of the commission of the offence (Nigerian Immigration Act, 2015, Art. 64).

For smuggler offenses relating to the endangerment of the lives of migrants, subjection of smuggled individuals to torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, as well as exploitation, the offender shall be liable to 14 years of imprisonment or a fine of 2 million naira, or both. The offender is also liable to refund the smuggling fee received and pay compensation to the migrant, as may be directed by the court. The Act provides for the establishment of a directorate with responsibility for enforcing the criminalization of migrant smuggling, promoting restitution (see Part XII), and promoting civil liberties for smuggled victims (see Part XIV).

Nigeria’s National Migration Policy, adopted in 2015, provides the policy framework for combating migrant smuggling in Nigeria. This policy guide conforms to extant

migration control formats globally, including the UN Migrant Smuggling Protocol. It describes how NIS shall enforce migration control across Nigerian borders. This includes five international airports (Abuja, Enugu, Kano, Lagos, and Port Harcourt), six seaports (in Lagos, Cross River, Rivers, and Delta States), and 114 official land border crossings. The Nigerian land borders intertwine with Niger and Chad in the north, Cameroon in the east, and Benin in the west. Of the sixteen Nigerian states that have international land borders, the borders in northern Nigerian states connecting Niger experience the highest regular traffic (UNODC, 2022).

Combating migrant smuggling at the national borders has always involved a collaborative approach among law enforcement agencies. NIS works in collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Armed Forces, the State Security Service (DSS), the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Nigeria Customs Service, NAPTIP, and the Nigeria Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) in controlling Nigerian borders. The National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) is in charge of developing technical formats at the multi-agency technical committee level on operational activities related to migration.

NIS has made several arrests of Nigerian migrant smugglers across Nigerian borders. In recent years, most cases involved the provision of fraudulent identity and travel documents to migrants by smugglers (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2018). In 2018, some 209 migrants with forged documents were arrested in Niger, Adamawa, Kano, Edo, and Kaduna, while 34 smugglers were arrested in Lagos, Niger, Kano, and Edo states (NBS, 2019). This progress was made through proactive intelligence gathering, undercover operations, and outreach activities in partnership with local community groups (Optimity Advisors, ICMPD, and ECRE, 2015). NIS conducts regular patrols across key exit points such as motor parks in Kano, hotels, and local drinking joints in other northern borderland regions where most irregular migrations are planned by smugglers. Tip-offs from informants in Kano motor parks and Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport help NIS officials to closely monitor suspicious travel patterns originating from northern Nigerian borders to Niger’s Agadez.

NIS also adopts internal preventive approaches, such as denying passport applications suspected to be used for the facilitation of irregular migration. NIS processed and issued approximately 9.31 million passports from 2015 to 2022, with 1,899,683 being the highest record in 2022 alone. NIS produced 2,141,300 in 2023 and 1,836,533 in 2024 (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2018; Sahara Reporters, 26 January 2023; Punch, 6 February 2024; The Nation, 28 January 2025). Notably, NIS rejected all suspicious applications within this period. There are also supportive actions

from the local authorities in Nigeria, which help to intercept migrant smugglers and human traffickers by mounting roadblocks on checkpoints at night across major roads in the city.

Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) has been supportive of Nigeria's anti-smuggling campaign. In 2021, the EU launched the program Action Against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (A-TIPSOM) Project in Nigeria. The EU invested 10 million euros in this project to aid in policies that promote the protection of smuggled victims as well as the prosecution of offenders within the ECOWAS subregion (Vanguard News, 2021). The goal is to facilitate close collaboration between border security agencies and other law enforcement authorities to tackle smuggling in Nigeria. This also involves strategic partnership and synergy among a number of anti-human trafficking and smuggling stakeholder groups, which include the NIS, NAPTIP, Nigeria Police Force, and Network of CSOs Against Trafficking, Abuse, and Labour (NACTAL-Nigeria). The A-TIPSOM program is hinged on cooperation at the national, regional, and international levels, focusing on the 5 Ps strategy (Policy, Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership).

The French government's Ministry of Interior and the International Security Cooperation Department launched a project, the "Joint Operational Partnership (JOP)—Nigeria: Combatting migrant smuggling and human trafficking." The goal is to support NAPTIP's capacities and promote actions that facilitate the investigation and prosecution of smugglers. This is intended to strengthen regional and international cooperation towards dismantling human trafficking and smuggling networks. The project has a budget of €1.4 million, which will finance costs related to technical equipment, operational support, and training of personnel at a regional level (Milipol, 2025).

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative analysis, focused group discussions, and observation in the Jibia border region in Katsina State, Nigeria, which shares a border with Niger. A 3-month investigation was conducted between October and December 2024, with follow-up contacts until November 2025. This involved some 12 participants in the Nigeria-Niger Jibia border region/close communities, who included Nigerian, Chadian, Nigerien, Beninese, and Togolese migrants, migrant facilitators, and border community members. These participants either engaged in cross-border migration or actively participated in the local economic life. The Jibia border stretches to Niger's Maradi border and presents a strategic and historically vital route for cross-border trade and commerce, especially for agricultural goods, livestock, and textiles. However, criminal activities also happen across this borderland region as border communities continue to experience a surge in cross-border crime and

insecurity, including banditry and smuggling, which affect their livelihoods.

In addition, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted in Abuja, Lagos, and Benin between September 2022 and March 2024. A purposive sampling method was used to select 16 stakeholders and experts in biometric ID and the digital enrollment program for in-depth interviews. This included 5 officials from the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) (3 officials from Abuja headquarters and 2 officials from the Benin regional office); 2 officials of the Nigerian Immigration Service in Enugu; and 9 National Identity Number (NIN) enrollment agents (three agents were selected each in Abuja, Lagos, and Benin). The researcher utilized the snowball/referral method to reach all the study participants. On occasions where face-to-face interviews proved impossible, other communication channels were explored, including Zoom meetings, emails, telephone calls, and WhatsApp calls/chats. Document analysis and systematic content analysis were used to interpret qualitative textual data, including those generated from interview transcripts as well as forensic reports from the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU).

Nigeria-Niger Migrant Smuggling Routes

The Jibia-Maradi border, which connects northern Nigeria to Niger, is a vital and prominent crossing point for both international migrant routes and traders. The Jibia-Maradi border region stretches about 1600 km (994 miles) long, connecting Nigeria's northwest state, Katsina, to Niger's Maradi. The borderland also extends to other neighboring northern states, including Kaduna, Kano, Sokoto, Jigawa, and Kaduna. In Niger, about five regions are bordering Nigeria, namely, Zinder, Tahoua, Maradi, Dosso, and Diffa. In 2022 alone, cross-border trade between Nigeria and Niger was estimated at \$226 million (Salmanu, 2024). However, the border was closed in August 2023 by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as part of the sanctions in response to the military coup d'état in Niger, which ousted former President Mohamed Bazoum. As expected, the border closure drastically cut the high flow of cross-border activities and trade in the borderland, devastating the thriving migrant economies run by local communities on both sides of the border frontiers. Beyond the immediate effects of the border closure on border communities, civilians in Nigeria and Niger faced soaring food prices and high unemployment rates.

However, economic life and normalcy returned to the border region in April 2024 following the lifting of the imposed sanction by ECOWAS. The local migrant economy bounced back, and migrant facilitators met at the border region and noted that their hardships were over. Meanwhile, the opening of the border coincided with the long-awaited declaration

that China had agreed to release \$1.3 billion in funding to complete the Kano-Maradi railway project, a railway project linking Kano, Nigeria's largest northern city, to Maradi in Niger. China's consortium, the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), covered about 85%, while the Nigerian government contributed the remaining 15% (Salmanu, 2024).

Smuggling Economy and Fees: Full Package or "Pay-as-You-Go"

The smuggling journey is fully dependent on how much migrants are willing to pay either for a comprehensive "full package" or the pay-as-you-go plan. While comprehensive deals are more expensive, they are also relatively safer, faster, and with a higher guarantee of success. But less financially capable migrants always opted for pay-as-you-go, in which they make payments in bits to different smugglers at specific points in the journey. West African journeys to Europe are very costly, segmented, and not straightforward. This is why many smugglers resettle their clients in North Africa for longer periods so they can earn sufficient money to cater for the impending expenses required for the rest of the journey. Nigerian migrants pay between \$2000 and \$3000 to smugglers, otherwise known as "burgers," who cross them from Agadez in Niger to Libya and into Europe (UNODC, 2025). Although the migrants at Jibia maintained that smuggling fees are not fixed but usually negotiated between the facilitator and clients, sometimes depending on a number of factors such as the perceived financial status of the clients, designated travel routes, anticipated bribery amounts, and accommodation needs.¹ However, migrants pay an average of \$600–\$900 each for their travel to North Africa. This is a comprehensive plan that covers smuggling fees, bribes, transportation, and miscellaneous expenses incurred on the trip (UNODC, 2022).

Other West and East African countries move through dangerous inland routes, including Gao, Addis Ababa, and Cairo, to reach coastal ports of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Turkey, from where they are smuggled by boats to their various destination points in Europe. Smugglers who had to maximize space for their "cargo" packed their clients like sardines in trucks or rickety boats during the journey, with many smuggled persons suffering various degrees of abuse from rape, beating, and starvation. Many smuggled individuals who arrived in Europe remain in debt bondage, and in most cases their families become victims of blackmail. Debt bonds are unusually high, meaning that

clients may never offset them in their lifetime, but the fear of deportation or violence keeps them perpetually in bondage. Apart from the huge financial returns, smuggling therefore reinforces organized criminality and fuels bureaucratic corruption through the bribery of border security officials across the countries of origin, transit, or destination. For example, migrants who arrived in Agadez had to pay 10,000 CFA francs (€15) to settle the police at the checkpoint outside the town, and of this amount, the municipal authorities received 1000 CFA francs (€2) (UNODC, 2011).

Migrants could pay between 100,000 and 120,000 CFA francs (€152–€183) as a smuggling fee when they pass through Niger's Agadez. This amount is usually shared with transporters, the passeurs, and the agent in the ratio of 60, 30, and 10%, respectively. To further reach the Libyan border, crossing through Dirkou, the Sahara garrison town, migrants move in convoys that could take 1 month. In this journey, migrants settle with the police for 5000 CFA francs, pay 2000 CFA francs to the gendarmerie, and 1000 CFA francs to the municipality, totaling 9000 CFA francs (€14). It is estimated that local authorities collected as much as 55.6 million CFA francs (€85,000), or €324,000 per year, in bribes alone in one single city (UNODC, 2011). On the Algeria-Mali border, migrants normally paid around 22,500 CFA francs (€34), whereas those that went through the officially closed Morocco-Algeria border paid higher amounts. Migrants who travelled through North Africa generally paid 90,000 and 225,000 CFA francs (€137–€343).

Nigerian Smuggling Industry and Operational Networks

Basically, most smugglers in Katsina and Kano, or "burgers," are respected natives of the border communities who enjoy a flamboyant lifestyle.² These smuggling specialists also recruit their kith and kin in order to aid their illegal operations and criminal activities, thus financing new forms of border insecurity. The smuggler pyramid is flexible and elastic, involving a complex network of actors such as the frontmen or touts, the intermediaries or brokers, and the high-level passeurs or "burgers," all of whom play distinctive roles and maintain specific forms of service and social relationships with the clients. The frontmen roam around the border regions scouting for naive or stranded migrants to link them up for business. The intermediaries or brokers are more experienced and knowledgeable in the business with far-reaching contacts, and they make ad hoc connections between clients and top smugglers.³ Normally, they are

¹ Interview with two Nigerian migrants, Jibia, October 2024.

² Interview with one Nigerian trader in Jibia, October 2024.

³ FGDs with one Nigerian and two Nigerian migrants in Jibia, November 2024.

the ones who bargain for the business at the first instance, informing their clients about all options beforehand prior to finalizing the agreement with the top passeur for the final decision. They are always in direct contact with individual migrants and organize their lodging and related concerns.

On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the top passeur to finalize transportation services for their clients and also arrange some policemen and security guards who play critical roles in the planning of the journey by providing short-term security, intelligence, and professional guidance for the journey. The Boko Haram, the former Tuareg rebels, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are the major bandit groups that control the smuggling routes from West Africa to the Libyan border, and these routes are very notorious for transporting hard drugs, including cocaine and cannabis, from West Africa to Europe. In some cases, migrants were approached by brokers who persuaded and convinced them to carry small wraps of heroin across the Sahara into Europe. Transporters, who lined up their trucks filled with migrants, always joined a monthly military convoy from the Niger army garrison at Dirkou, moving to Agadez for security purposes (UNODC, 2011, 2018, 2022; Ursu, 2018).

The smuggling economy is thus booming in Africa due to the long network of criminality involved, the bureaucratic connivance, and the willingness of clients to pay. Since journeys from Nigeria to North African countries could last for several months, the need for providing makeshift accommodation for migrants becomes extremely necessary. Usually “hustlers” or front agents are found scattered around the border communities acting as gateways to the leading smugglers who own lodging spaces, or “ghettos,” rented to clients for a specified period in readiness for the long journey.⁴ The ghettos are also found in Niger’s Agadez town center and lorry park areas, nicknamed “maassou ghetto” or “maï guida.” The ghettos, or “safe houses,” are located around the border crossings, and each apartment may contain a maximum of 10 persons. Meanwhile, Nigeria has also become a transit country. Nigerian-based Ghanaians who operate organized criminal networks arrange the transportation of migrants from Ghana to Antigua via Nigeria. The migrants are first transported to Abuja and Lagos in Nigeria, from where they board a chartered flight to Antigua and other countries, aided by corrupt officials at the airports (NFIU, 2025).

The question as to where the proceeds of smuggling are invested has also generated a lot of concern, particularly among anti-smuggling agencies and policy makers. Smugglers invest the proceeds from the business in different areas. This includes investing in real estate in popular locations, purchasing cars, trading in cryptocurrency, and investing in several legitimate businesses. A Nigerian smuggler who

recruited over 40 young girls for forced labor and sexual exploitation in Libya utilized wire transfers to launder his proceeds from Libya to Nigeria, which he invested in landed properties in popular cities in Nigeria. Similarly, a Nigerian woman who exploited young women from southern Nigeria for forced labor and sexual exploitation in Dubai under the pretext of a false job opportunity laundered her illicit earnings through the gold trade. She bought gold bullion in Dubai and smuggled it back into Nigeria and resold it through her legitimate gold business (NIFU, 2025). This exemplifies how criminal profits are reinvested into legitimate businesses, thus creating a façade of legality without any suspicions from government authorities.

Sometimes, the criminal proceeds are channeled through family associates, including families of trafficked victims. A Nigerian student received multiple fund transfers totaling USD 13,000.00 in 8 months into her account from Kuwait, also a destination for child labor and sex trafficking, via the Money Value Transfer Service (MVTS). She also received huge amounts from other locations abroad via the MVTS, which she resent to family associates and her accomplices using prepaid cards. In August 2022, a Lagos-based female smuggler received the sum of USD 1515.00 via MoneyGram from her collaborators in Lebanon and Cameroon laundered as family support even though she had no family ties with the sender. She resent about \$4582.70 to another Lagos-based collaborator in three transactions within 1 month (NFIU, 2025). In November 2022, a Nigerian female smuggler arranged the transportation of two girls from Ibadan, Oyo State, to Libya, through Sokoto, Kebbi, and the Republic of Niger. The financial network behind the operation involved an unlicensed Bureau de Change (BDC) agent in Kano and a collaborator in Libya. The BDC agent received ₦25 million weekly in US dollars from other agents in Dubai, who converted and transferred the funds to him based on instructions from the Libyan anchorman. The agent laundered more than ₦1.5 billion in 2 years through unregulated financial channels (NFIU, 2025). Teenage girls are also used to smuggle cash. A 15-year-old Benin girl who falsely obtained a Nigerian passport to facilitate her travel to Ghana for work was apprehended at the Seme Border by the Nigeria Immigration Service. She had with her US dollars equivalent to eleven million naira, which she claimed was given to her by her facilitator to deliver to her assigned madam in Ghana (NFIU, 2025).

At the Seme Border, the Nigeria Immigration apprehended a 15-year-old girl, a citizen of the Republic of Benin, who falsely claimed to be Nigerian using a fake Nigerian passport. During interrogation, it was discovered that she was not Nigerian but had travelled to Nigeria to obtain a Nigerian passport through an agent to facilitate her journey to Ghana for work. Upon instructing the driver to unload her luggage, officials later found that she was carrying US

⁴ Field observation in Jibia, October 2024.

dollars equivalent to eleven million naira. According to the girl, the agent had given her the money to deliver to the woman she would be working for in Ghana.

Smugglers and the Female Migrants

Between 2016 and 2018, more than 20,000 Nigerian women, many of whom were minors, arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean. The UN estimates that some 80% of this number were victims of human smuggling or faced great risk of becoming a victim (Scholz, 2019). Some female migrants travel independently and opt for full-package services, while others pay by installment and rely on their agents to get to their final destinations. Informants⁵ revealed that male travelers were always asked by smugglers to make their full payments, whereas the females were simply asked for part payment or no commitment fee at all as a way to attract them and encourage their patronage. This promotes the syndrome of debt bondage from the start of the journey, making female migrants more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, violence, and abuse during the journey and forced labor or prostitution at the final destination. In some cases, trafficked women were encouraged by smugglers to have sexual relationships with security operatives and even criminal groups as part of a settlement in order to facilitate their travel.

Smugglers are particularly interested in this arrangement, as it could help to cut down the amount of bribe they pay on the way by more than half, thereby saving more costs and making more income. In some situations, female clients who did not consent to sexual exploitation were stripped and raped on the way and, upon their destination, forced into prostitution by blackmail over the debt bondage. Even independent female migrants on pay-as-you-go pacts who ran out of money along the journey and became stranded were blackmailed into debt bondage and prostitution. Some female migrants blackmailed over debt bondage end up being “traded” by smugglers from one network to another, with repayment fees calculated based on estimated future earning capacity. Top passeurs are responsible for these agreements and maintain very effective transnational communication networks.

Besides, they employ their skills and far-reaching networks to arrange fake documents for these clients as required in specific locations in order to continue exploiting them. In 2017, one Nigerian smuggler trafficked 24 young women to Italy via Niger and Libya and collected all smuggling fees in cash. The victims were lured with the promise of job opportunities in Italy (NFIU, 2025). Smugglers also collaborate with old-time female migrants who arrange for temporary

accommodation for arriving females, some of whom are sexually abused and pushed into prostitution in order to offset or redeem their hanging debt bondage. These old-time migrants are regarded as madams who manage the girls as clients for the prostitution business and make remittances directly to top smugglers in charge. For instance, many Nigerian women who arrived in Italy have had to bear debt burdens of about £40,000 accrued for their journey from Nigeria to Italy, which they are obliged to repay by installments (The Guardian, 2016).

In a typical case of trafficking in persons,⁶ smugglers made phantom promises of securing legitimate employment to their clients and carried out rituals, voodoo, or “juju” ceremonies in the process of recruitment to gain psychological control over their clients. Potential female clients were always subjected to traditional oath-taking in shrine or ritual procedures that may require sacrifices that would be binding on them. These women were meant to believe that calamity and misfortune would befall them and their families at home should they ever nurse the thought of breaking the oath or reneging from fulfilling its demands. In some cases, the victims were asked to drink blood mixed with some substances, eat chicken hearts, and have powdery substances rubbed into cuts. This is how these unsuspecting young girls and women are forced into prostitution in the brothels across Europe. In one popular case tried in France, prosecutors estimated that 17 alleged victims, aged 17 to 38, contributed about 150,000 euros a month for the syndicate, selling sex for as little as 10 euros. The accused engaged in a variety of activities within the broad sex trafficking trade, from “madams” to pimps, from drivers of the trucks in which the women perform sexual acts to those laundering the proceeds of the trafficking (Info Migrants, 2019). The Nigerian government estimated the number of Nigerian teenage girls held captive by the sex-slave trade in Libya and Morocco at 10,000, most of whom come from Edo State, Nigeria (Salem, 2009). The value of smuggled women who engage in prostitution in their destination countries could be as much as \$228 million per year (UNODC, 2011). In the past, this practice used to be a popular business in Edo State, where parents encouraged their children to join and even made the connections on their behalf, but in recent times, these practices are also commonly seen in other parts of Nigeria. These smugglers collaborate with human traffickers in North Africa who smuggle these women into Europe for the prostitution business.

Biometric ID and Travel Document Fraud in Nigeria

Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are generally facilitated by the use of forged identity and travel and

⁵ Informal conversations with one facilitator and three migrants from Niger in Jibia, October 2024.

⁶ This was a popular view among all study participants in Jibia.

identity documents.⁷ Smugglers move their clients across borders undetected through the use of fraudulent identity and travel documents. There are specific ways by which smugglers carry out document fraud in Nigeria. First, by creating a false or forged document. This involves the recreation of a genuine document that may belong to real individuals in order to produce a counterfeit, fake, modified, or altered copy of the original document (i.e., by changing names, falsifying signatures, and dates). Second, genuine documents belonging to other individuals may be obtained through deception, coercion, or corruption from authorized government agencies. In other cases, real documents are obtained officially but with fraudulent identity and forged or fake supporting documents.⁸ Lastly, real documents belonging to other individuals may be used by other persons acting as impostors or look-alikes. For instance, false identification documents, including false birth certificates and national identification numbers, had been used to obtain passports in Nigeria (Iwuoha and Doevoenspeck, 2023). While the government is increasing the quality of identity and travel documents, smugglers are also improving the quality of document fraud. Forged documents have become so sophisticated that they can be reused several times for international travel. For example, visas can be reused several times throughout their validity date, while the same passport can be used to smuggle several look-alike individuals at different times. In addition to these levels of sophistication, new methods of document abuse involved document swapping to facilitate migrant smuggling by air. In some instances, passports, flight tickets, and boarding passes are swapped in airport transit zones.

Passport theft is very common and has become an important document fraud method used by smugglers. Stolen passports are resold and reused in the smuggling market. Sometimes, migrants themselves or their family members are involved in this crime, as they sell their own passports for a fee while reporting them lost or stolen to the authorities. In such cases, and of course, with the reality of official corruption, perpetrators get re-issued with new passports over and over again. A common technique used by smugglers to alter passport documents is to change the biodata page. This act is often facilitated by corrupt officials who effect these changes on blank pages of passports using official printing materials. An official of the Nigerian Immigration Service reports that;

We are receiving a lot of complaints of stolen passports and even cases of forged passports. We are not even talking of the cases of impersonation where crim-

inals sell passports to migrants who use other people's passports to travel, claiming ownership. All these are happening because many Nigerian youths who are jobless want to travel abroad to make money. As for how this is possible, I cannot say exactly, but I know that there are also some bad eggs in the immigration service who help these criminals to do these things.⁹

In rare cases, clients may be required to undergo plastic surgery or bodily alterations such as deforming one's fingerprint. The aim is to evade detection by facial recognition technology and fingerprint scanners so as to conceal identity theft (UNODC, 2010). While it is common to have impostors who are assigned stolen or altered passports, smugglers also work in collaboration with professional forgers who produce fake passports in document factories. Professional forgers are known to deploy high-powered imported technology to produce quality counterfeit identity documents.¹⁰ However, the recent sophistication of immigration services through the use of high-tech biometric recognition technology has raised new concerns with the possibility of quick detection of forged documents. This challenge has therefore increased the demand for smuggler-bureaucrat corruption.

The case of fraudulent visa procurement is also common. This involves the use of fake or forged supporting documents in the visa application to the issuing authorities.¹¹ Birth certificates, boarding papers, flight tickets, residence permits, foreign sponsorship, and invitation letters can easily be forged to achieve the purpose. Smugglers also use stolen identity documents in visa applications, most especially where the physical appearance of applicants for personal interviews is not required by the potential host country. The new practice adopted by professional "visa smuggling" agents is to create imaginary, nonexistent firms, organizations, or educational institutions, which will ostensibly provide sponsorship or invitation letters to visa applicants. Websites and social media accounts are also created to make it look real and genuine. But these are purely illusory companies operated by professional visa-smuggling dealers who operate under the cover of a "travel agency" but work in close collaboration with migrant smugglers. Similarly, fictitious events such as conferences, workshops, trade fairs, and sports festivals are used to fraudulently obtain visas for the purpose of migrant smuggling. Consular authorities who rely on paperwork evaluation of visa applicants without

⁷ Interview with 2 NIMC officials, Benin City, Nigeria, 2 November 2023.

⁸ Interview with 2 NIMC officials, Abuja, October 2024.

⁹ Interview with an official of the Nigerian Immigration Service, December 2024.

¹⁰ Interview with an official of the Nigerian Immigration Service, December 2024.

¹¹ Interview with an NIMC official, Benin City, Nigeria, October 2024.

physical interviews with applicants run the risk of issuing visas to fraudulent applicants.

Besides, smugglers engage experts with vast knowledge of immigration policies and visa application guidelines globally to provide them with technical advice on a variety of issues related to migrant smuggling into Europe and Western nations. Informal relationships built on bribery and corruption are often initiated by smugglers with employees of relevant agencies, including the police force, immigration service, identity-issuing authorities, and border security, in order to receive more advisory and cover their criminal tracks. When a bribe is involved, government officials turn a blind eye to the activities of smugglers, such as approving fraudulent documents and stamping them without proper checks. In some cases, the officials even aid the falsification and use of fraudulent travel and identity documents depending on the level of cooperation, corruption, and complicity mutually agreed upon with smugglers. Incidents abound where some corrupt officials who collected bribes but later changed their minds or asked for higher bribe amounts were threatened with blackmail should they renege on fulfilling the deal. Some officials who refuse bribes also face intimidation and receive threats from smugglers who insist on polluting them.

Smuggling Business Model and Document Fraud: Framing the “Biometric Border Paradox”

Smugglers maintain a closed operational network, often referred to as the smuggling business model. This notion is built on the conviction that smugglers maintain a wide range of well-resourced, informed, and flexible operational networks involving multi-layered chains of collaborations across diverse agencies, professions, and groups in different countries. These collaborative networks are relational and structured to operate underground while maintaining classified contacts with the outside world, including clients, government officials, and security agents (Iwuoha and Edgar, 2024). Hence, smugglers rely on smaller working groups and experts in specific professional fields to facilitate smoother operations and achieve their goals. It is in this sense that most global documents that deal with irregular migration capitalize on the concept of the smuggling business model. EU migrant smuggling policies deal concretely with this term, seeing the business model as a complex system that needs to be urgently dismantled to curb migrant smuggling into Europe (European Commission, 2015a). The business model is described as “network-based, forming active hubs where the intensity of smuggling activities is greatest” (European Commission, 2017, p. 6). This implies that migrant smuggling can also be seen as a “transnational service industry” (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen, 2013). The smuggling business model therefore operates as a network of service delivery (UNODC, 2018), with a notion

of profitability (Collet, 2015), but also represents a dangerous criminal model (Europol, 2020) linked to financial crime (EMSC, 2019), which requires “proactive financial investigations and effective asset recovery operations” (European Commission, 2015b).

However, the corporate smuggling business model is essentially built on reliance on the falsification of identity and promotion of document fraud. But the document fraud sub-component of the business model is yet to be clearly conceptualized or theorized, especially in the context of irregular migration originating from Africa. Basically, the smuggling business in Nigeria and, more generally, West and North Africa is facilitated through the use of forged identification documents. In Lagos, there are many forgery agencies that produce different types of identity and travel documents for a given fee. Due to the surge in youth migration, the forgery industry in Lagos is rapidly expanding as a critical migrant economy and thriving as a reliable source of revenue and livelihood to local operators.

Although much had been done to strengthen the institutional capacity of immigration services and identity-issuing agencies, especially through the provision of hi-tech fraud detection technology, it remained a big challenge to tackle bureaucratic corruption associated with document fraud. Document fraud, as a component of the smuggling model, is beyond the broader logic of demand and supply between two groups of actors: smugglers and migrants (Brachet, 2018), as defined in various European Commission documents and other global migration frameworks. Document fraud can be conceived as a sub-model itself with complex layers of contagious corruption: government officials and professional document forgers in the internal layer and smugglers and migrants in the external layer. But the document fraud sub-model also functions independently outside the external layer.

This is possible in cases where there are independent irregular migrants whose journeys are self-facilitated and not directly traced to smugglers or their co-agents. For example, recent studies show how many Tunisian and Algerian families plan their own irregular migration independently without the support of smugglers or facilitators (Sanchez et al., 2021). This kind of independent arrangement also defies the European Commission’s notion that migrant smuggling is essentially associated with a business model with profit linked to several chains of criminal command and smuggling networks. Besides, community-based patronage also comes into play where potential migrants leverage a community member’s connection with professional document fraudsters or corrupt government officials. These instances do suggest a form of business model: demand and supply, but not the kind of profitability as narrowly viewed by the European Commission and other global migration actors. Young people and children traveling unaccompanied who may agree

with smugglers to work off their bills (IOM, 2016) may be lucky to bond together with other migrant travelers who can help them to manipulate their travel and identity documents or link them to expert document forgers.

This reality clearly reflects the ambivalent/binary security character of EU biometric ID systems in Africa: first, as a tool for migration control, and second, as a contraption for identity conflicts and increased demands for irregular migration. I conceptualize this contraption as the “biometric border paradox.” The biometric border paradox is used to depict the contradiction of the introduction of European biometric ID systems as a tool of migration and border control in European external borders in Africa. This means that instead of the biometric ID programs controlling migration, they rather encouraged the opening up of alternative migration routes, strategies, practices, and processes widely adopted by migrants and smugglers. This includes the new form of biometric ID and travel document fraud in corporate (government) agencies. I coin two key concepts to depict this modality: *biometricycle* and *biometricyclists*. *Biometricycle* depicts a tricycle-smuggling wheel via a biometric ID system: first, local identity-faking entrepreneurs; second, IT experts; and third, corporate officials in the government’s biometric ID sector. The corporate *biometricyclists* depict corrupt immigration officials, IT experts, bureaucrats, and national identity officials who facilitate nationality swaps and ID document fraud in transit states. These original concepts, which I develop in this paper, will evidence exceptional contributions of *biometricyclists* to state-sponsored migration and migrant instrumentalization.

The concept of “*biometricycle*” presents an innovative and multidisciplinary approach to conceptualizing and framing migrant smuggling facilitated via corrupt corporate systems in West Africa. This creates multiple levels of dialogue: national, European, and global. The framework, “biometric border paradox,” will be the first African theoretically grounded perspective to challenge the European biometric ID border agenda in Africa. My argument is supported by the “Welsh School” conceptualization of security (Booth, 2007), which opens a powerful analytico-normative tool to make sense of both the need for emancipatory security and its ethico-political consequences. The studied case lends itself well to this type of analysis, as both the European efforts to enhance external border security and improve people’s lives are present, with—demonstrably problematic—ethical consequences.

AI-Enabled Biometric ID Fraud

In recent times, generative artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly used to perpetrate high levels of document fraud

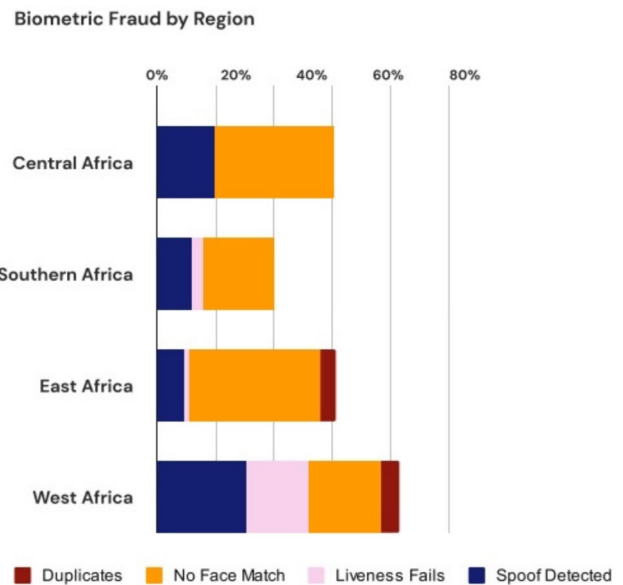


Fig. 1 Biometric identity fraud in Africa by region. Source: Smile ID (2025)

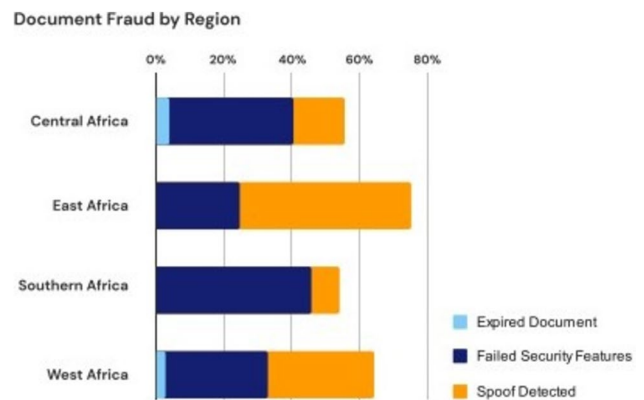
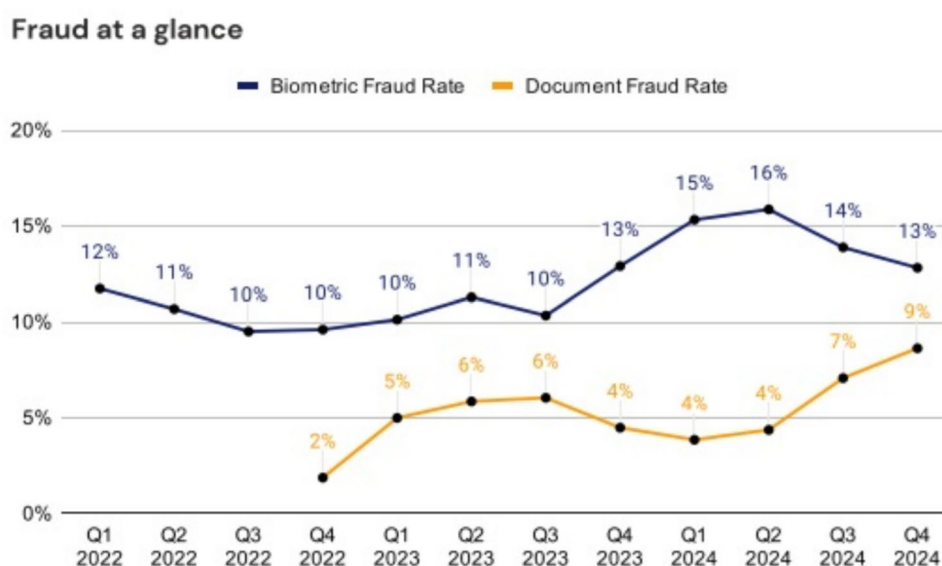


Fig. 2 Document fraud in Africa by region. Source: Smile ID (2025)

in Africa. Migrant smugglers employ professional document fraudsters who leverage AI tools to create deep fake documents and hyper-realistic biographical images, thereby driving a new wave of biometric identity scams and financial crimes. Beyond the facilitation of irregular migration, the rise in AI-powered biometric identity and document fraud in Africa has created a new form of digital security threat and identity verification challenge. Figures 1 and 2 show breakdowns of biometric identity fraud and document identity fraud in Africa by region, respectively. Figure 3 compares the trend of both biometric identity fraud and document identity fraud in West Africa between 2022 and 2024.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 are very illustrative. West Africa reports the highest cases of biometric identity fraud,

Fig. 3 Biometric and document identity fraud in West Africa, 2022 and 2024. Source: Smile ID (2025)



followed by East Africa. On the other hand, East Africa and West Africa have the highest cases of document fraud, respectively. Spoofing was ranked as the highest form of document fraud across regions, indicating a common strategy of using falsified or altered documents to circumvent verification. Documents with altered security features ranked second, suggesting that the forged documents did not bear traditional security components such as watermarks or holograms. Less frequent cases of expired documents were recorded, reflecting the deflection of expert forgers from outdated documents in view of the tightening up of verification systems. Particularly, Fig. 3 shows that West Africa experienced the highest rise in the cases of biometric fraud in the first half of 2024, with identity fraud recording about 15%.

Meanwhile, African governments are collaborating with European governments to boost traditional identity verification and strengthen document fraud detection capacity, but document fraud experts and criminals are also innovating with the use of AI-powered technologies. The AI tools enable almost perfect accuracy with fewer chances of detection, thereby rendering facial recognition and document verification systems highly susceptible to high-quality forgeries. Besides, the AI tools also guarantee mass production of fake identity documents. In 2024, for example, a clandestine platform, “OnlyFake,” became notorious for enabling the online creation of multiple counterfeit identity cards. Users who accessed the platform paid only \$15 per ID, which bypassed digital verification systems. The fraudulent platform decoded traditional impediments to document fraud, making it possible for low-level tech operators to access the system and make huge financial gains from it (Smile ID, 2025). Figure 4 shows some of the new forms of document manipulation techniques adopted by fraudsters in Africa, while Fig. 5 shows fraud distribution by ID in Africa.

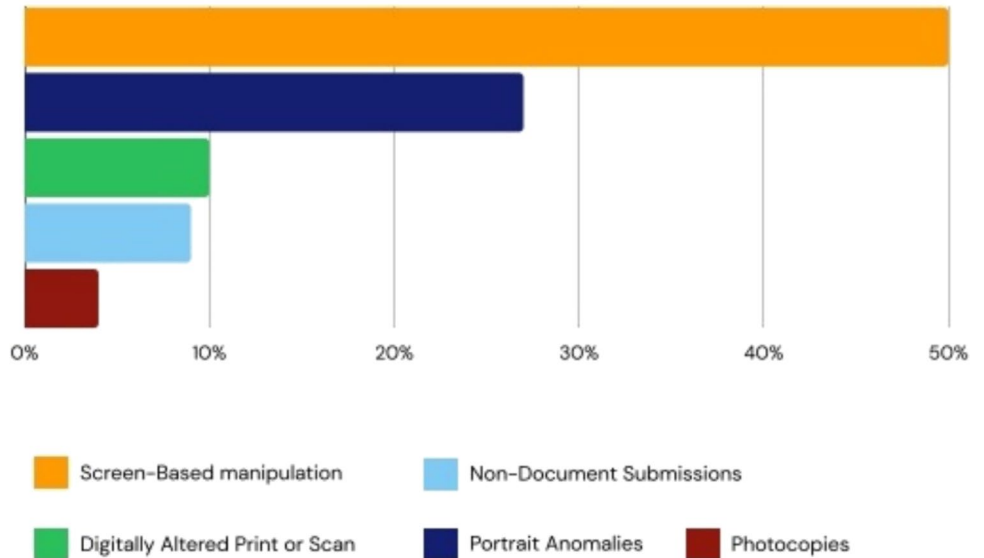
Figure 5 shows that fraudsters target Africa’s most common identity document, which is the national ID, with a fraud rate of 27% of all ID-related cases. The national ID is the most crucial document needed for international travel and cross-border migration, thus suggesting why it is a prime target for document fraudsters. Second is the driver’s license with a fraud rate of 24%, while the passport comes next at a 20% fraud rate. It is even surprising that despite the stricter issuance procedures involved in the obtainment of a passport, it still has a high fraudulent rate, obviously because of its critical importance as a first-hand document required in international migration. While the national ID and passport are obviously critical for migration needs, a driver’s license is also important, as it serves as a supporting document for applicants who seek either a national ID or passport documents. Besides, the use of a driver’s license has also become an everyday affair, exposing it to higher risks of misuse and easy forgery. This explains why it is also a major point of concern for criminals who forge these documents. At about 14%, voter ID remains a relatively low target for fraudsters considering that voter ID neither serves as a supporting document for the obtainment of a national ID card and passport nor is required for cross-border movements.

Work Permits and Alien Cards, which comprised the “Others” category, accounted for 19%. These results generally reflect the significant risks of ID document fraud as well as potential risks their bearers could be exposed to in situations of identity theft or identity framing by fraudsters. Notwithstanding the seemingly relatively lower fraud risks associated with passports and other specialized ID documents such as work permits, misusing them has always proven to be more dangerous at the international level. Particularly in cases where international travel or employment fraud is involved, the misuse of these documents or detection of their

Fig. 4 Emerging document manipulation techniques in Africa. Source: Smile ID (2025)

Emerging Document Manipulation Techniques

Breakdown of Emerging Document Manipulation Techniques



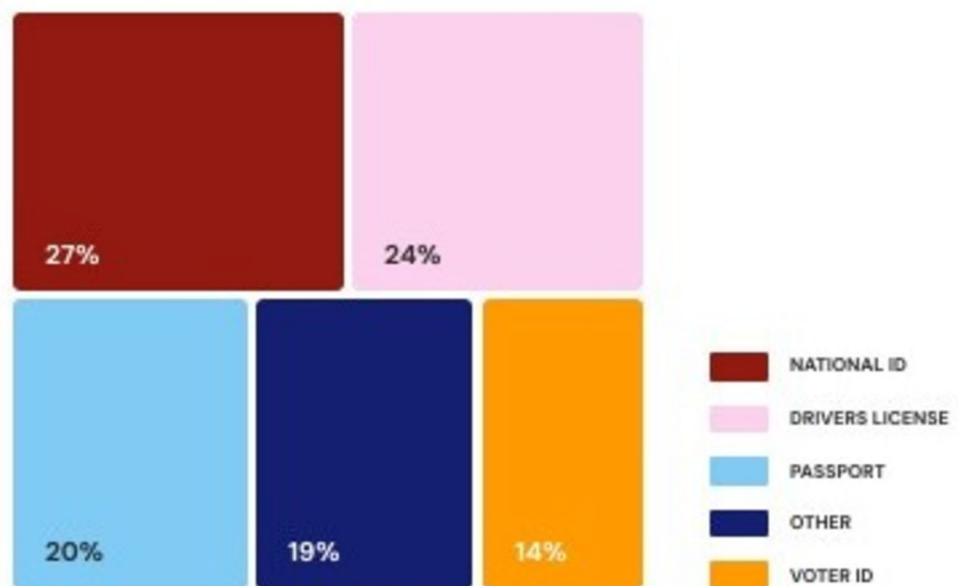
counterfeit could pose significant financial and reputational risks.

If we turn to the records in Europe, we see a slightly different scenario. The Europol annual report (2021) shows that identity documents attract higher demand than other document types, making them the most commonly traded type of fraudulent document. About 35% of reported document fraud cases were identity cards. The second is passports

(31%), followed by driving licenses (15%) and lastly, residence permits (7%). In Europe, fraudulent documents are seen as criminal tools that serve multi-purpose functions. This means that each document can be reused to promote different criminal activities. Most reported misused identity cards had Romanian, Greek, and Italian origins, while the most reported misused passports had Italian, Greek, and Israeli origins. Most documents were either counterfeit or

Fig. 5 Document fraud distribution by ID in Africa. Source: Smile ID (2025)

Fraud Distribution by ID



forged, while misused genuine documents had lower risks of forgery. In the reported cases linked to the fraudulent use of genuine identity or travel documents, about 89% involved the use of look-alike documents, in which genuine documents were used by imposters who posed as the legitimate owners of the documents, based on physical resemblance. These are mostly cases of lost or stolen documents masterminded by document fraudsters working under criminal networks (Europol, 2021).

The document fraud business appears to be more sophisticated in Europe than in Africa. In Europe, criminal networks operate fully equipped print shops where the fake documents are produced. The finished products are thereafter shipped to clients via courier firms. In 2020, the European Migrant Smuggling Center (EMSC) tracked down and dismantled four print shops in which hundreds of travel and travel ID documents were made for the facilitation of migrant smuggling operations. Again, forged travel and identity documents are increasingly traded online in social media and instant communication platforms, both on surface and dark web sites. Criminal groups utilize these online platforms to market and sell different types of counterfeit identity documents, providing the opportunity for both forgers and sellers to receive orders directly from potential clients (Europol, 2021).

Document Fraud and the EU External Borders

Document fraud poses a key threat to the EU's external borders. In 2022, some 26,249 fraudulent document users (or those in possession thereof) were detected within the EU external borders, while 19,341 fraudulent document users were detected within the EU countries. This represents a 5% increase from the 2021 figures, as suggested by the European Union Document Fraud Risk Analysis Network (EDF-RAN) (Frontex, 2023). Passports were reported as the most fraudulent document type, while biometric ID cards became the second most forged document in the EU within the period. Fake health/vaccination certificates and work permit documents were also reported to be commonly used but relatively low compared to passports and e-ID cards. In the use of counterfeit resident permits and fraudulent border stamps, about a 23% increase was recorded compared with the 2021 figures. Although most detections involved Russian nationals crossing over different EU land borders, cases of fraudulent visas were reported to have doubled, showing the highest increase of a single document type in the reported document fraud detection.

The visa document fraud involves mainly the detection of counterfeit or fraudulently obtained short-term (C-type) visas. However, the use of counterfeit documents was the most commonly reported document fraud type, depicting

about a 64% rise within the EU, seconded by impersonation, which represents 15% compared to all other cases (Frontex, 2023). One critical point to note is that in the recent past, fewer cases of document fraud detections at the EU external borders involved African migrants. For example, in 2022, only about 50 to 100 detections of fraudulent document users at the EU external borders involved Algerian, Angolan, Congolese, Ghanaian, Guinean, Somali, Gambian, and Senegalese nationalities each, while about 100 to 500 detections involved Nigerian and Moroccan nationalities each. Nationalities of Libya, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe had fewer numbers, recording about 20 to 50 detections each (Frontex, 2023).

While the increasing irregular migrant flow from Africa into Europe is well reported, more irregular cross-border migration is commonly practiced among many European irregular migrants. In the sense of logic, this implies a higher number of document fraud among European irregular migrants. Three key global issues in the post-COVID-19 era mounted intense migration pressure on the European borders, which further foregrounded the increase in document fraud among irregular migrants. These include, first, the war in Ukraine; second, the closure of the EU's airspace to Russian and Belarusian flights; and lastly, the increased migration control through the use of more sophisticated technology and border secularization by some EU countries.

In 2022, for example, the most detected nationality involved in document fraud was Albanian, followed by Russian. Iran ranked third in this order. In 2023, Iranians ranked first while Ukrainians ranked second in terms of the most prevalent nationalities detected at the EU borders with fraudulent documents. On the other hand, there has been an increasing trend of detections of document fraudsters, involving mainly Indian and Pakistani nationalities who arrive through the Arabian Peninsula airports. In this pattern, document fraud is mainly channeled through the air borders, which have become major hubs for threats. This growing incidence of detections, with the majority of detections on exit routes to third countries rising by 30% in 2021, is linked to the increasing exploitation of the EU's air Border Crossing Points (BCPs), which are key platforms for irregular migratory movements involving the use of fraudulent documents (Frontex, 2023). The most reported nationalities involved were the Syrians, Turks, and Albanians. Overall, push factors are constantly high, and as document fraudsters increase their professionalism in printing and use of identity fraud technologies, so does the increasing level of border checks with the help of improved technology for detection of document fraud. Inasmuch as there are notable regular shifts in risk profiles, routes, and types of document involved, document fraud remains a key method utilized by smugglers and irregular migrants in crossing EU external borders and in secondary movements within the EU, whether traveling

independently or enabled through a facilitated journey with a fee.

Despite laudable efforts and key investments made by the EU in fighting document and identity fraud, including the use of the European integrated border management (EIBM) system to tackle the increasing trend, there are still many challenges to grapple with in this domain. The irony is that, as Europol (2021) shows, the enhanced surveillance at the European external borders and improved security features for biometric identity and travel documents are unwittingly driving the demand for fraudulent documents and even boosting the fraudulent document economy. While visible progress has been made towards improving the recruitment, training, or redeployment of experts in document and identity fraud and fundamental rights, critical investments in border security and state-of-the-art facilities at BCPs are also paramount. The EU detection capacity and policing capability at external borders still need to be properly streamlined, with emphasis on close cooperation with stakeholders in third countries. This could help to enhance document fraud detection as well as protect victims of smuggling and human trafficking.

Corporate Smuggling: Bureaucratization of Document Fraud

Africa is experiencing a greater sophistication of legal migration processes, combined with an increasing level of border control and securitization. This, coupled with the increasing danger of illicit migration routes, has combined to bring into relevance the underground frontier of smugglers' business in Africa: travel document fraud in which state bureaucrats are complicit. Smugglers in Nigeria, or more generally, those in Africa and Europe, work hand in hand with government officials in both transit and destination countries to provide fraudulent, but seemingly original, travel documents to their clients, including passports and visas. Fraudulent travel documents have become a critical pillar of the smuggling industry, with smugglers increasingly engaging in the absurd practice of passport duplication, renting, and forgery, mostly in connivance with official government workers in the immigration sector. Travelers who lost their valid travel documents; new applicants who failed to pick up their produced travel documents; or candidates for passport renewal who never collected them were always exposed to the greatest risk of duplicating their documents by smugglers who sold them to their clients at exorbitant prices.¹²

Within the ECOWAS, for example, smugglers are deeply involved in the travel document racketeering, and

this underground trade is exactly the reason behind the success of the smuggling industry in West and North Africa despite the increased border security. In Libya, buying stolen or forged passports is a common means of identity transfer and theft insofar as the smuggled users were able to mingle their way in. In this case, they must be able to claim the ethnicity in the stolen identity in the passport and speak some Arabic language as backup evidence. Production of fake or fraudulently procured visas and invitation letters, probably to attend a conference or training program, is also rampant, a way by which smugglers swindle their clients who are compelled to pay hundreds of dollars in order to pass through border checks, both in transit and destination countries (Interpol, 2018). Bribes are often requested by public officials who collect huge sums of money and turn a blind eye to these crimes even when they sense foul play, both within countries (by police and military at security checkpoints) and at land and air borders (by border guards and other airport officials) (UNODC, 2021).

This is why smugglers also factor in the bribe settlement as part of their smuggling fee. The bribe collected does not have a fixed amount but can be subject to negotiation based on each case and according to the prevailing situation at a time. This shows how much smugglers can be highly connected with the law enforcement agencies, especially with many border security officials captured on their payroll. This, combined with the corrupt and lengthy justice system, explains why there have been low levels of arrests of smugglers in Nigeria and West Africa generally, and even when arrests are made, prosecutions and convictions are rarely conclusive.

Nigeria's fragmented ID landscape, on the other hand, encourages extensive, invasive, and unregulated biometric and biographic data mining and plundering, which produces duplicative data across several databases owned by big tech companies (Iwuoha and Devenspeck, 2025b). For example, from personal observation and as confirmed by interviewees, to enroll in Nigeria's national identity system, up to 80 personal data fields are extracted from an individual who, in their quest to access ID-tied public services, also submits a similar volume and type of personal data to multiple other ID systems for use and storage.¹³ Overpopulating optional or required data fields increases operating expenses in addition to requiring more time for registration, which lowers the daily number of registrations but, more importantly, opens up the risk for data extraction and forgery by criminal operators.¹⁴

¹² Interview with official of the Nigerian Immigration Service, December, 2024.

¹³ Interview with 2 NIMC officials, Abuja, October 2024.

¹⁴ Interview with 2 NIMC officials, Benin city, November, 2024.

The fact that the agents in charge of data collecting sites are typically unauthenticated, unsupervised, and without adequate monitoring systems poses a greater risk since they fail to adhere to the necessary requirements for data security and integrity (Innovation Village 2024). More concerning is that unsupervised roadside agents employed by government-licensed private enterprises to enroll individuals for NINs engage in sharp practices to make extra profits. The agents often collaborate with NIMC officials for data pillage.¹⁵ The new ID industry, which is now tarnished by elements of corruption and extortion, has actually been bolstered by the mandated use of NINs in Nigeria.

The emergence of a new dimension of invasive acts of biometric ID fraud is linked to the disturbing wave of unregulated bureaucratic biometric and biographic data mining and plundering in Nigeria. In 2022, a hacker nicknamed Sam claimed to have attacked the NIMC server and stolen over three million NINs owned by Nigerians:

I just simply got access to their [Nigeria's] data of internal files, users, and everything they have. I can download everything, even the whole bucket. I am sure that the bucket is full of juice. I wanted to look at more files, but as we have to follow bug bounty rules, I stopped doing more. I've got one more S3 bucket with nuclei, and it also contained about 4–5 gigs of data. (Sahara Reporters 2023, 1).

One private IT firm, XpressVerify.com, a sub-agent to an NIMC-licensed partner, had unauthorized and unrestricted access to the NIMC database and unlawfully sold out NINs and personal data of registered Nigerians. As reported:

Anybody can retrieve details, such as phone numbers, full names, NIN, address, and photographs of any Nigerian whose data is on the National Identity Database with as little as N200. The website does not confirm what type of person can check what type of information. There were no restrictions to the amount of NIN-related data that could be fetched. Vendors across different Nigerian cities have been checking the NINs and phone numbers of citizens from the same database NIMC ought to maintain and keep secure (Chioma, 2024:1).

In its playbook, XpressVerify.com created its own application programming interface (API) to grant access to other sub-agents who partook in the profitable crime. Although these acts were criminalized, the offenders connived with internal accomplices to achieve their aims. In other words, bribery and corruption by NIMC partners and vendors are connected to the increasing level of identity and document fraud in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This article discussed the European migration control systems and its connection to the facilitation of migrant smuggling business across Europe's external border in West Africa. Using Nigeria's experience, the paper explores the key European migration control measures that contributed to the expansion of the migrant smuggling business model. This includes the European capitalist-driven biometric ID intervention and its securitization programs across African borders. What this means is that Europe's tightening of external borders in Africa contributed to the expansion of the smuggling business network. In this paper, more focused attention is paid to the newly formed travel identity and document fraud cartel in Nigeria, a sub-component of the smuggling business model. The main contention is that the majority of West African migrants are vulnerable to identity and travel document fraud in their search for alternative means of migration into Europe. Non-compliance with the new European biometric ID systems exposes African migrants to certain types of identity conflicts, state criminalization, and loss of social integration.

Essentially, the new agency of biometric ID and travel document fraud is facilitated by corporate agencies through a system of deep-rooted corruption and cronyism. Besides, Nigeria's fragmented ID landscape also encourages extensive, invasive, and unregulated biometric and biographic data mining and plundering by biometric ID and document fraudsters. In order to obtain national e-ID cards for cross-border travel without being citizens, smugglers and even independent migrants collaborate with the newly formed smuggling cells, either "corporate smugglers" in government agencies or professional document fraudsters, to execute identity and travel document fraud for migration purposes. However, European migration actors and donors replicate counterproductive policies that encourage risky migration because they fail to recognize this developing African dimension of the issue based on local facts. This reality clearly reflects the ambivalent/binary security character of EU biometric ID systems in Africa: first, as a tool for migration control, and second, as a contraption for identity conflicts and increased demands for irregular migration.

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¹⁵ Interview with NIMC official, Benin city, November, 2024.

Data Availability The research data for this research is held by the author and will be provided upon request.

Declarations

Competing Interest I hereby declare that there is no competing interest regarding this article submission.

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