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Published in:
Politics and Policy

DOI:
[10.1111/polp.12653](https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12653)

Publication date:
2025

Citation for published version (APA):

Iwuoha, V. C. (2025). European Biometric Borders and (Im)Mobilities in West Africa: Reflections on Migrant Strategies for Border Circumvention and Subversion. *Politics and Policy*, 53(1), Article e12653.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12653>

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

European Biometric Borders and (Im)Mobilities in West Africa: Reflections on Migrant Strategies for Border Circumvention and Subversion

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Received: 20 February 2024 | **Revised:** 14 September 2024 | **Accepted:** 19 December 2024

Funding: This work was supported by British Academy (VF2/100815).

Keywords: biometric borders | biometric ID | deborderization | digital identity | European externalization strategies | migration control | security | West Africa

Palabras Clave: Fronteras biométricas | identificación biométrica | movilidad | migración | securitización | África Occidental | Níger | reborderización

关键词: 生物特征边界 | 生物特征ID | 流动性 | 迁移 | 安全化 | 西非 | 尼日尔 | 再边界化

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the European biometric ID installations and securitization practices at West African borders harm African migrants and compromise the security goals of Europe and Africa. Using Niger's experience, I contend that migrants' poor adaption to the biometric border processes is closely connected to their identity conflicts, as well as their atomization and weakening of their social integration. The new border security measures are implicated in the state's criminalizing and dehumanizing practices which migrants and borderbrokers experience every day. I coin two concepts, namely, biometric reborderization and agentic deborderization, to draw close attention to ways by which the European biometric projects are significantly reconfiguring African borders. These borders now represent both a dynamic space for migration control, and contested sites of biometric circumvention and subversion by biometric noncompliant migrants who constantly negotiate alternative means for mobilities. Moral mobility agents contest/circumvent European biometric reborderization via the use of parallel border routes.

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ABSTRACTA

Este artículo sostiene que las instalaciones europeas de identificación biométrica y las prácticas de titulización en las fronteras de África occidental perjudican a los migrantes africanos y comprometen los objetivos de seguridad de Europa y África. Utilizando

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la experiencia de Níger, sostengo que la mala adaptación de los migrantes a los procesos fronterizos biométricos está estrechamente relacionada con sus conflictos de identidad, así como con su atomización y debilitamiento de su integración social. Las nuevas medidas de seguridad fronteriza están implicadas en las prácticas criminalizadoras y deshumanizantes del Estado que los migrantes y los agentes fronterizos experimentan todos los días. Acuña dos conceptos, a saber, reborderización biométrica y desborderización agente para llamar la atención sobre las formas en que los proyectos biométricos europeos están reconfigurando significativamente las fronteras africanas. Estas fronteras ahora representan tanto un espacio dinámico para el control migratorio como lugares disputados de elusión y subversión biométrica por parte de migrantes que no cumplen con la biometría y que constantemente negocian medios alternativos para la movilidad. Los agentes de movilidad moral cuestionan/eluden la reborderización biométrica europea mediante el uso de rutas fronterizas paralelas.

抽象的

本文论证，西非边境的欧洲生物识别ID安装和安全化做法伤害了非洲移民，并损害了欧洲和非洲的安全目标。根据尼日尔的经历，我认为“移民对生物识别边境程序的适应性差”一事与他们的身份冲突，原子化，以及他们的社会融合弱化密切相关。新的边境安全措施与“移民和边境经纪人每天经历的国家犯罪化和非人性化实践”有关。我提出了两个概念，即生物识别再边界化(biometric re-borderization)和主体去边界化(agenting deborderization)，以聚焦于欧洲生物识别项目如何显著重新配置非洲边界。这些边界现在既代表了移民控制的动态空间，也代表了不遵守生物识别的移民所在的生物识别规避和颠覆的争议性场所，这些移民不断协商替代性的流动方式。道德流动主体通过使用平行边境路线来对抗/规避欧洲的生物识别再边界化。

1 | Introduction

By signing up with European migration actors for the construction of virtual borders using biometric ID identifiers, surveillance technologies, and central migrant databases, West African countries are becoming biometric states. Biometric facilities and IT equipment such as the Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) have been installed across a number of West African countries. The 2018 biometric installation in Burkina Faso—at Niger’s Kantchari/Makalondi border post—served as a well-publicized example of the European biometric borderization initiative in West Africa, which has resulted in some unanticipated consequences (Doevenspeck and Donko 2023). Many West African migrants move across this border every week, precisely, on a 12-h drive along the international route from the Burkina Faso capital, Ouagadougou, to the Niger capital, Niamey. The borderland forms a vital container for convoluted cross-border mobilities due to its location along these two countries. International buses, which were typically overcrowded, were constantly halted by security personnel who carefully searched migrant travelers as a result of the new biometric installation and tighter security dispatch at the crossings. As Zandonini (2019a, 1) puts it, “the passengers would be asked to wait to be registered with the new MIDAS, which captures fingerprints and facial images for transmission to a central database in Niamey.” A vital part of the European externalization agenda in West Africa is MIDAS, a highly portable and adaptable system that meets a critical need: gathering biometric information from all travelers passing through borderlands so that suspicious travel patterns can be identified and African migrants prevented from entering Europe.

The tightening of West African border corridors by Europe is indicative of some of the negative effects of widespread policing that result in an obsession with reordering people’s lives. Currently, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, is seriously stepping up its security measures in “third” countries (Donko, Doevenspeck, and Beisel 2022). This has resulted in the criminalization of refugees and migrants

(Fargues 2020; Bello 2022) and the violation of their human rights (Ligouri 2019). Such incidents have been reported in the Agadez region of Niger and along the borders with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria. Nigerien border security officials, working in tandem with Frontex border guards, have been known to harass, arrest, and stop citizens of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at random on suspicion of irregularly transitioning from Libya to Europe (Brachet 2018). The European Commission nonetheless characterizes this type of security cooperation as being “constructive and fruitful,” noting a 75% decrease in trips to Europe via the Nigerien-Libyan border route between 2016 and 2018 (Zandonini 2019b, 1). I reject these assertions in order to pose more pertinent queries and demonstrate how these security measures are also systematically generating disastrous outcomes that jeopardize the security goals of West Africa and Europe. What is more intriguing concerns the frequently disregarded migrant-smuggling complex—the everyday challenges, resilience, and growing mobility capital that enable the creation of informal agenting methods for enforcing and controlling their own mobilities. Only 371 of the 6550 smugglers operating in Niger who were identified by the EU’s “smugglers’ callback programme” in 2017 received a meager sum of €2300 (US\$ 2616) each to begin a new life. For the second phase, which would house up to 600 smugglers starting in March 2019, an extra €8 million was budgeted (Zandonini 2019b). Regretfully, an increasing number of unpaid smugglers have gone back to their hustle and are now transporting more migrants across the border for set fees (Brachet 2018; Ligouri 2019).

The scholarly discourse surrounding European externalization strategies and biometric cooperation in Africa addresses the dichotomous themes of border securitization and human rights deprotection (Lavenex and Piper 2022; Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Martins and Strange 2019; Thevenin 2021; Donko, Doevenspeck, and Beisel 2022). While the EU prioritizes migration return and reintegration contexts in its collaborative interest (Betts 2011; Bigo 2014; Frowd 2020; Ben-Arieh and Heins 2021), West African partners are primarily interested in donor funding and the security aspects

of intra-regional mobility (ECOWAS Strategic Plan 2011–2015 2011, 13). As a result, border externalization affirms unequal and divisive power dynamics in migration between the Global South and the West (FitzGerald 2020; Iwuoha 2019; Acharya 2016). The externalization of migration and biometric policies, as well as their rising politicization at the state and regional levels (Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016; Creta 2021), are seen by the African Union as a means of expanding control over African territory (Privacy International 2021). Other analysts insist that biometric ID technology is the new frontier of EU migration policy which has significantly redefined African borders (Bigo 2014; Zandonini 2019a; Creta 2021; Leonard and Kaunert 2022; Donko, Doevenspeck, and Beisel 2022). However, data on the relationship between EU externalization policies, their biometric rebordering features, and the cascading impacts on mobilities across West African borderlands are scarce. This research specifically addresses this demand.

Using the example of Burkina Faso—Niger's Kantchari/Makalondi borderland, I outline three crucial and well-articulated tasks. First, to use the concept of biometric rebordering to explicate how the new European biometric infrastructures are enabling digital territorial borderscapes that enforce the deconstruction of migrants' identities. This process undermines the administrative, decisional, sovereign, and territorial prerogatives of African states. I also examine the aspects of complicity that link national and European government actors to the criminalization of vulnerable migrants and the exacerbation of unequal access to free movement. Second, I highlight and clarify the intricate facets of European biometric regulations that hinder the free movement regime in West Africa. I also critique a particular mode of neoliberal (biometric) power relations that governs (im)mobility in a way that sustains global inequality. The third and final task is a sensitive one: coining the term “agentic deborderization,” I demonstrate how moral mobility agents use the identification and implementation of alternate border routes to challenge European biometric reborderization. I attempt to reconceptualize the term “de-borderization” in the specific sense of migrant mobility capital (agency), which is consequently exerted and reinforced in response to distinct European reborderization/securitization measures. This point grapples with the spatial forces that reconstitute “situatedness” and shifting temporalities in the contentious competition between external and local interests over the control of the borderland infrastructures and territorial spaces (Iwuoha and Mbaegbu 2021). I argue that West African borderland infrastructures dominantly conform to a historical pattern of informalities with divergent relationalities, which the present European biometricization and intensive securitization programs counteract. Reconstitution of border infrastructures often invigorates migrants and borderbrokers to look for alternative borderscapes as well as mobility architectures that resonate with their own historical sense of free movement. I particularly emphasize the cognitive disputes or disparities over evolving relationalities (Doevenspeck and Donko 2023), as per what can be contextually and ethically acceptable as constituting an “actual border” and/or an “arbitrary border” by the locals/migrants. Since migrants are increasingly opposing and rejecting the Western conception of formal borders based on the negative

effects of such a conception upon them, the arising complications often lead to struggles over border control among the competing actors (state and nonstate actors).

Last, I connect to the wider framework provided by decoloniality analysis (Nkrumah 1965; Ake 1982; Ngugi Wa 1986; Rodney 1974; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020) to link the European biometric policies to neocolonial and neoliberal power structures that sustain inequality around the world. The debates ignited in subsequent discussions resonate with the bias of the “Welsh School” conceptualization of security (Booth 1991, 2007). Emphasizing the rehumanizing and emancipatory potential of security work, or the lack thereof, the Welsh School offers a powerful analytico-normative tool to make sense of both the need for security and the need to highlight its ethico-political consequences. The studied case lends itself well to this type of analysis, as both the efforts to enhance border security and improve people's lives are present, but with—demonstrably problematic—ethical consequences. These problematic consequences are rightly captured in the autonomy of migration analysis that provides an adequate understanding of migrant agency and self-creation.

These critical approaches help us to develop existing scholarship by deepening the perspective that the European biometric ID systems in West Africa have failed, focusing on what is hypothesized as exceptionally dehumanizing and having a negative impact on vulnerable migrants, borderbrokers, women migrants, and refugees who do not conform to Western conceptions of digital identity. Moreover, it is hypothesized that, with less sensitivity to local facts, these policies have exacerbated corruption and unlawful migration, as they have been designed without local knowledge and with a narrow conceptualization of security.

This article is structured in tandem with its major arguments as already outlined in the introduction. I next move to a clarification of key concepts. In the third section, the theories of autonomy of migration are discussed while the fourth section contains the methodology. The fifth and sixth sections deal with challenges of the EU externalization and rebordering process and how biometric border installations interfere with the free movement regime in West Africa. The seventh section discusses how Niger's coercive enforcement of the biometric ID system has facilitated migrant criminalization and (im)mobilities. The eighth section unravels the progress of migrants' agency in the form of agentic deborderization. This is followed by a conclusion.

2 | Conceptual Clarification: Borders, State Control, and Biometrics in the Rebordering Process

In terms of conceptualization, borders are relational in that they are created, replicated, and altered within divergent social relations and networks (Paasi 2021; Iwuoha 2020). According to Löw and Weidenhaus (2018), borders impose the spatial dispersion of control, which both depicts relational areas and creates the relations between them. Furthermore, for Donko, Doevenspeck, and Beisel (2022), borders must be viewed as a relational space involving relationalities and multiplicities of interaction effects that have an impact on both the territorial space through which migrants travel. This is

because borders are dynamic spaces of power relations. Space is, thus, symbolic for relating with borderwork such as objects (border infrastructures), ideas (policies and interests), locations (borderlands), and people (borderland users). In this context, the state's enforcement of the European biometric system can be better understood as part of a border infrastructural upgrade, or "rebordering" process and spatial stretching (Johnson et al. 2011) on the African continent. Biometrics, thus, represents a specific modality or instrument of state rebordering in which biometric infrastructures are instrumentalized as a critical component of a state migration control regime to prune mobilities. The new biometric border, in turn, is seriously challenged by individuals who contest and subvert the border as a process, institution, and symbol (Iwuoha and Doevenspeck 2023).

According to FitzGerald (2020), nations externalize their monopoly of immigration control through extraterritorialization. Thus, a state's control over space and geographic borders is becoming less significant. For practical as well as logical reasons, manipulating territoriality is critical, since it leads to states sharing the rightful means of coercion over (im)mobilities in a way that raises interesting problems about state sovereignty. Therefore, the application of biometric systems by European authorities across borders in Africa amounts to a hyper-territorialization process that duplicates borderland territorial authority. As Torpey (2018) claims, the externalization of migration control weakens or eliminates the state's prescriptive monopoly of control over the acceptable methods of mobility. Thus, biometrics function as a remote control that articulates various forms of migratory enforcement at the boundary of a state's territory (FitzGerald 2020). Deterritorialization is defined by van Munster and Sterkx (2006, 238) as the growing external influence over state territorial frontiers in spite of the borders' physical location and symbolic significance. To the benefit of an externalizing authority, deterritorialization promotes rebordering behaviors that involve an increase in "border control and boundary congruence" (Popescu 2012, 77).

This provides an overview of how nation-states, sovereignty, territory, and borders have been profoundly altered by the introduction of digital technology into border management, as well as how their interacting consequences have been redefined (Johnson et al. 2011, 5). In particular, state sovereignty was rearticulated, stretched, and expanded as a result of the militarization and biometricization of borders (Jones and Johnson 2016). Thus, biometric technologies generate politically unconstrained territory while undermining state sovereignty and imperium (Longo 2017). For instance, European authorities have unilaterally used biometric power to sift and store border data and systematically control (im)mobilities, including the criminalization, mistreatment, and exclusion of unwelcome migrants (Metcalf and Dencik 2019). Biometric rebordering has resulted in the loss of the national state's authority over borders and borderland territories due to externalization. The term "bio-bordering" refers to the intentional partial suspension of the territorial underpinnings of state autonomy by way of biometric data sharing (Amelung and Machado 2019, 392). Basically, externalized spatial control over West African borderland territorial spaces has been enhanced and refined by European biometric rebordering in conjunction with securitization by

external troops. This highlights the establishment of a biometric territory ruled by outside forces. What is more, the procedure serves to strengthen the state's ability to manage immigration through the biometric frontiers by atomizing and marginalizing it.

Bordering encompasses all activities of boundary making and management, which either appears in the form of debordering or rebordering (Schimmelfennig 2021, 316). As Popescu (2012, 69–77) distills, "Debordering covers all activities that expand and open up boundaries, reduce (central) boundary control and decrease boundary congruence; conversely, rebordering refers to all activities of boundary closure or retrenchment as well as increases in (central) boundary control and in boundary congruence." While I link the European border biometricization and securitization as part of constructive and concrete measures aimed at externalized rebordering, I conceptualize migrants/smugglers' attempts to eke out new migratory routes as an act of "agentic debordering" which is distinct from the state-centric definition of deborderization. Generally, deborderization makes boundary inhibitory gaps narrower, thus increasing transnational opportunities and transactions. Schimmelfennig (2021) warns that debordering could negatively impact the collective security of bordering nation-states, exposing them to transnational crimes, espionage, and military invasions, as well as external political interference. Essentially, "pervasive debordering," involving rapid expansion and invention of new boundary routes, weakens the traditional competencies of nation-states (Schimmelfennig 2021, 312).

The intrusion of the European biometric system as a critical component of border control in third countries is popularly backed and consented to by third countries through mutual bargain and reward, on the pretext that such external biometric control has a central goal of the good of the people (migrants). It is also claimed that biometrics such as MIDAS and the West African Police Information System (WAPIS) act as a middle-ground or "panopticon" that produces an additional layer of knowledge and, therefore, are not expected to inherently subvert or substitute the bureaucratic and documentary state with a biometric one (Dalberto, Banégas, and Cutolo 2018, 28; Dauchy 2023). This is just one egregious attempt to deflect criticism on how common biometrics are in Africa. However, this claim is unfounded because newly generated biometric data and knowledge about African migration configurations are already statistically and systematically transformed into digital data, maps, and other visualizations that are spatially dynamic and transferable. These are primarily used for externalized migration control in Africa.

African borders have historically been omnipresent and ever-changing due to the fierce and desperate struggle between competing actors and competencies (i.e., the state, nonstate actors, external powers) over who has the right to exercise unchallenged power (i.e., to enact unilateral/overlying control) over borderland spaces. The EU periodically renegotiates this cyclical reordering and rebuilding of power relations with African states by dismantling the conventional state-centric territoriality. To challenge the European use of biometrics and securitization in the current rebordering process in Africa, it is necessary to highlight the distinct historical contexts of reborderization processes in Africa (such as precolonial, colonial, postcolonial,

and neocolonial/externalization epochs). As the next sections demonstrate, these ongoing changes in govern-mobility and re-bordering methods have frequently had a substantial impact on people's (im)mobilities.

3 | Theoretical Framework

This study engages the literature and theories of the autonomy of migration (AoM) which established the linkages between migration and migrant alternative actions and the strategy of “self-creation” in the web of capitalism (Mezzadra 2011; Scheel 2013). AoM analysis scrutinizes the role of the state in migration control through the rebordering process and migrant criminalization, both of which have significantly contributed to the escalation of migrant struggles and self-creation (De Genova 2007). On one hand, the AoM approach focuses on cross-border migration control actors, strategies, and practices. On the other, it considers the centrality of the state and borders as legal-political and historical constructs in shaping international (often informal) migratory flows (Ramírez 2023). Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, 60–66) see the biometric-controlled “border as method” and “epistemological viewpoint” from which to understand power relations that subjugate migrants and render them extremely vulnerable. This, they contend, deals with the subjective, relational, and embodied elements of border mechanisms and the ways in which they are challenged.

The concept of “autonomy” implies processes of self-creation propelled through radical actions—such as contesting border control measures—where the subjective dimension of migration shapes both the meanings of autonomy and alternative courses of action. Migrant autonomy, for example, is produced at points of friction within the obstructions of, and alongside, a dominant socio-technological space resulting in the proliferation of biometric border controls (Metcalf 2021). This depicts borders as contested sites of (im)mobilities with the concrete materialization of persistent violence, tension, conflicts, deprivation, and transformation (Hess 2017).

The European biometric system, according to Scheel (2013, 584), is characterized by “control bias” since it views migrants as “passive targets” and borders as “contested sites of intensified political struggles over mobility,” but fails to acknowledge the latter. Metcalfe (2021) stresses the force of power and violence within biometric borders, which act as powerful entities that produce violent power imbalances while enforcing (im)mobilities. As a result, migrant strategies and practices seek to disrupt and challenge the dominance of biometrics as a signifier of control, identity, and truth. This means that, faced with the pullback from migrants, biometric border control mechanisms do not ultimately fulfill contentious political targets of absolute mobility control.

In this study, the imprints of AoM are explored to investigate the precarious conditions of migrants as well as the conflictual relationships between the state, borders, and migrants, as conditioned or enforced by existing migration control regimes. It is imperative to note that AoM proponents do not equate migration autonomy or “self-creation” to migrants' absolute power or freedom from migration control regimes. They instead employ the

concept of autonomy to represent a relational concept between efforts to control and efforts (successful or not) to contest and subvert this often-oppressive control (Scheel 2019). Thus, where these attempts to challenge migration control forces are lacking, there would be no autonomy within migration, but only effective migration control regimes (Metcalf 2021). Castoriadis (1983, 310) also concedes that autonomy is relational and provides an “ontological opening,” moving beyond constituted institutional regimes and offering individuals new ways to constitute one's own world and laws, manifested through “self-legislation and self-creation.” This does not expressly imply the ability of migrants to create laws for themselves, but it depicts a reactive and relational force occurring at points of friction and attempts to undermine established social orders—in this case, the exclusion and oppression of migrants (Metcalf 2021). Thus, AoM theories present persistent debates that correctly capture migrants' ongoing struggles, tension, resistance, and the reconfiguration of (biometric) borders and migration (Nyers 2015, 28), thereby creating new knowledge about the prevailing forces driving these struggles.

Escalating and harsher forms of state violence against migrants are increasingly rendering large numbers of individuals vulnerable and exposed to varying degrees of migration risks. In fact, “the migrant” has become threatened and attacked across the political spectrum in various countries, “paving the way for more extreme, often racially-charged, politics across the world” (Tazzioli 2023, 1). Glouftsiou and Scheel (2021) pin down different forms of state violence associated with biometric control such as deportation, endless detention, and physical violence connected to the forced registration of migrants' fingerprints. However, Glouftsiou and Scheel (2021) argue that despite the digitization of border controls which shrinks migrants' room for maneuver, migrants employ some strategies to contest, subvert, and challenge the digitally mediated border and migration controls. Thus, migrants amidst socio-technical border settings exercise their agency through acts of self-determination and dissent to contest or prevaricate biometric border controls such as fingertip burning and mutilation. This reveals the dynamics of violence and racialization that manifest at biometric and “hi-tech” borders.

Here, I aim to highlight the significance of the drastic tactics used by individuals who independently establish new border routes to subvert and evade the strict and extensive state biometric border controls. Specifically, I draw close attention to the relational effects of state- and externally imposed biometric border control regimes, as these actions have pushed individuals and nonstate actors toward exercising some extreme forms of actions such as exerting their agency to effect deborderization. This is achieved by creating new border routes in the bushes and deserts from which they can achieve their migration aspirations and accomplish new migratory movements, thus causing alterations and irregularities that further characterize the pace of migration controls. As Castoriadis (1983, 310) puts it, autonomy is relational and provides an “ontological opening” for individuals to constitute their own world and laws, enforced through “self-legislation and self-creation.” This clearly shows that radical imagination shapes transformation within societies, and that individuals could actually have the ability for self-creation (Klooger 2009). In this study's lenses: it signifies the ability to develop agentic mechanisms for deborderization within their own social worlds.

I articulate and propose a novel contribution: first, to view migrants' alternative self-enforced deborderization acts and strategies as a practice of self-migratory discovery that challenges the omnipotent socio-technical biometric border; and second, as a radical form of "autonomous" migrant agency. I integrate these novel concepts to contend that such agentic tendency to deborderize occurs because of what Metcalfe (2021, 53) termed "exclusionary elements within a socio-technical biometric border" that assert harsh and restrictive border policies through the identification and tracking of migrants on the move.

4 | Methodology

This research is based on document analysis (European Union, International Organization for Migration [IOM], and ECOWAS, Frontex documents, etc.), in-depth interviews, informal conversations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observation. About 28 in-depth interviews were conducted in the Kantchari/Makalondi borderland region between August 2022 and July 2023. This involved 5 border officials, 5 security officers, and 18 informal borderworkers (including taxi/bus drivers, retailers, shop owners, and passers-by/migrants) who were purposively selected as valuable participants. The researcher's adoption of in-depth interviews was necessary to elicit a detailed description of the situation on the ground from the participants, especially considering that it was an informal setting where everyone was on the move and very busy which made it difficult to use a questionnaire for data collection. Moreover, the majority of the respondents were illiterate and had trouble understanding or successfully reading printed materials. The in-depth interviews consisted of open-ended questions. Also, two ECOWAS officials were given an inquiry note at the Abuja office in Nigeria. The ECOWAS officials simply asked the researcher to write down a number of questions which they answered through a written reply. The key informants in the study constituted the two ECOWAS officials in Abuja, five border officials, and five security officers who were considered to be highly knowledgeable or aware of important developments regarding the studied border corridors and related issues of concern. On the other hand, the experiences of other participants and borderworkers were highly valuable as they depicted lived experiences within the community and they fully understood the conditions of vulnerable migrants vis-a-vis border control measures. In addition to the recorded interviews, the researcher engaged in informal conversations and discussions throughout the field study with diverse groups of informants which is reflected in the research. Due to their vulnerable status, migrants were not directly interviewed as part of this project, but the researcher sought to learn more about their situation from third-party and field observations. Institutional approved research ethics and practices, including informed consent, were adhered to in all cases.

Using content and construct validity, I evaluated the instruments' reliability and validity. This required a careful review of the questionnaire, interview, and FGD items to ensure that a given construct had all essential elements and excluded any that were not. I also trusted the analysis of specialists at Aberystwyth University's Department of International Politics in the United Kingdom. Before becoming a working, operational reality, the generated frameworks, ideas, and concepts were continuously

reevaluated and altered in light of literature reviews. As such, I was able to develop key concepts that helped to flesh out logical debates in a clearer thematic coherence. After the completion of the fieldwork, I maintained contact with the key informants through phone calls. What follows is, therefore, an account of the perspectives of major stakeholders as well as the lived experiences of local people within the borderland community who revealed how the European biometric ID systems were implemented and their consequences for the migrant populations. This is complemented with my own observations on their opinions, thus providing for more nuanced perspectives, objectivity, and reflexivity in the discussions.

5 | Externalization and Rebordering Process in West Africa: The European Biometric ID System

The EU's new frontier for controlling migration in West Africa is the biometric ID scheme. To collect, verify, and store immigrant data in centralized databases, several European biometric ID technologies were deployed across African borders showing that West African migration can be externally controlled by European migration actors. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) created MIDAS, one of these biometric technologies, which is installed at various border posts across 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 utilized to gather fingerprints and face image data from migrants which is then transmitted to a central database under local and European supervision (Zandonini 2019a). MIDAS is designed to identify questionable travel trends and stop unauthorized immigrants from entering Europe.

In 2010, the European Commission established the Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community (AFIC). As a framework for the European extraterritorial integrated border data management system, the AFIC facilitates migrant identity coding and analysis in EU fingerprint databases, such as the European Dactyloscopy (Eurodac) and Visa Information System (VIS). The AFIC launched its Risk Analysis Cells (RAC) in 2018 with the aim to obtain and share migrants' biometrics in relation to cross-border crimes and security threats across eight African countries: Niger, Gambia, Ghana, Senegal, Kenya, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria (European Parliament 2019). In addition, the Criminal Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) has also been implemented in West Africa. Table 1 shows the AFIS installation program in West Africa.

In collaboration with the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union established the Free Movement and Migration in West Africa Project (FMM) in 2014. The FMM: "aims to maximize the development potential for free movement of persons and migration in West Africa, by supporting the effective implementation of the ECOWAS Free Movement of Persons' Protocols and the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration" (European Commission 2015, 6). Nonetheless, the FMM pursues an ambivalent agenda such as facilitating "free movement" and controlling migration—apparently in opposing and contradictory forms. FMM multi-stakeholders, including the IOM, the International

TABLE 1 | Action document for the “Introduction of the Criminal Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) in West African Countries.”

S/N	Title/basic act	Coverage	Details
1	CRIS number	ROC/FED/042-872	Financed under the 11th European Development Fund (EDF)
2	Zone benefiting from the action	West Africa	
3	Zone/Location of action	West Africa and Mauritania	
4	Countries involved	Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo	
5	Programming document	Regional Indicative Program (RIP) for West Africa (2014–2020)	
6	Sector of intervention/thematic area	Peace, security, and regional stability	Development assistance
7	SDG sector	SDG16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions, SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries as per SDG 10.7	
6	Amount involved	EUR 15,000,000	EDF Contribution
7	Aid modality	Indirect management with the entity(ies) as specified	
8	Implementation modality	Indirect management with the International Criminal Police (INTERPOL)/OIPC	
9	DAC code(s)	15,132 Police	
10	Main delivery channel	11,000 donor government, and 47,000 other multilateral organization	

Source: Adapted from European Commission (2016a).

Labour Organisation (ILO), and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), undertake interoperative border data collection, sharing, and verification, as part of measures to boost the capacities of partnering countries in migration control (European Commission 2015; FMM West Africa 2017).

The EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa was the major source of funding for the expansion of the EU biometrics agenda on the African continent as a whole. The EUTF, conceived in November 2015 at the Valletta Summit, is pivotal for the effective control of developments across migration routes by key EU institutions. By 2018, the EUTF budget had climbed to €3.4 billion, while €5 to €9 billion had been proposed for 2021–2027 (Claes and Schmauder 2020). In 2016, the EUTF set up the €500 million bilateral Migration Partnership Frameworks (MPF) in West Africa, involving Ethiopia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Senegal, as a direct response to the “migration (governance) crisis” faced at the EU external zones.

Importantly, the EU biometric program is boosting the expanding biometric and digital identity market in Africa. The fast-rising biometric market in Africa is estimated at €1.4 billion (Aït-Hatrit 2020), growing at an annual rate of 21% above other world regions (Toesland 2021). This is because almost

half a billion people in Africa have no proof of legal identity (World Bank 2021). For this reason, the World Bank rolled out the West Africa Unique Identification for Regional Integration and Inclusion (WURI) program in 2018 at the cost of US\$395.1 million. WURI participants include Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea (Phase I), and Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Phase II). These countries had been given directives to implement biometric ID programs as a precondition for citizens to gain access to basic services—healthcare and pensions, banking, social registries, and more importantly, cross-border mobility. The World Bank provided €4.4 million to ECOWAS, €1.8 million to Côte d'Ivoire, and €5.3 million to Djibouti for their biometric ID programs (World Bank 2020).

6 | Biometric Border Installations: Enforcing and Normalizing Unfree Movement

Interpol's WAPIS is an interoperative biometric system which is used to collect, harmonize, and share criminal data on migrants in EU-centralized databases across West African countries. WAPIS is very effective in keeping criminal records and tracking/controlling the movements of undocumented migrants within the ECOWAS subregion. In addition, AFIS has been introduced in Niger to complement WAPIS, but poor civil registry and identity systems have remained a major challenge

(European Commission 2016b, 3). In Niger, a 2003 law provided for national digital identity cards, but the cost of 2000 CFAF (around three euros) appeared to be too expensive and unaffordable to most citizens (Dauchy 2023). Many problems impinge upon and complicate identity systems in Africa generally, where over half of the continent's population has no legal proof of identity. Poor enrolments in national identity systems have drastically minoritized identity construction in the region with a significant impact on migration in Niger. Migrants' socioeconomic predicament and frustrating conditions amidst this challenge have worsened terribly, particularly with the new border biometricization and state-militaristic immobilizations which coercively reinforce the enactment of the unfree movement regime in the subregion.

The modern Kantchari-Makalondi border post, which had installations of biometrics and IT facilities, was built in 2018 through IOM's multilateral project "Renforcement de la sécurité des frontières du Burkina Faso, Niger, Phase II." The borderland forms an 18km stretch along the Ouagadougou-Kantchari-Makalondi-Niamey route which is mostly accessed by West African migrants moving to Agadez and Libya. Before the installation of biometric and modern IT equipment in 2017, the border used to record between 300,000 and 500,000 regular migrant crossings but after the biometric installations the number reduced drastically to less than 50,000 per year (IOM 2023; Doevenspeck and Donko 2023). In fact, most blocked migrants sourced alternative routes such as through Boni, Mango, and Banoukoura towns in order to complete their journeys to Niamey and Agadez.¹

The border post had about six MIDAS kits installed at both entrance and exit control points, and is operated by staff trained by the IOM, including immigration and police personnel. These personnel encoded migrants' fingerprint data into the EU-funded WAPIS database which matched all fingerprints with Interpol. The installation of the new biometric system coincided with excessive border post policing. This, instead of scaling down irregular crossings, further heightened migrants' need to seek alternative routes to circumvent the border barriers.

But after the event on April 18, 2020—when unknown gunmen broke into the border post and set it on fire, damaging the biometric equipment—there has been a notable difference during visits to the borderland. The researcher was told that the destruction of the border post was a reprisal in connection with the raiding of Fula border village by the military following a fracas in which one police officer was killed. The border post was temporarily suspended while the old border post was used temporarily.² Border officials stated that, although they have been using paper-based checks at the border, they have always exercised caution and remained vigilant against unprovoked attacks by criminals because of the growing risk that comes with migration.³ This gap impacted negatively on migration control within the borderland.

Despite this delicate security situation, border police patrol routines were conducted across multiple checkpoints in the borderlands and far beyond, extending to informal routes that connect Kantchari-Makalondi to Ouagadougou-Niamey,

and Agadez.⁴ The police patrol team moved on Hilux vehicles and motorbikes to scout for undocumented migrants and borderbrokers from whom they made huge incomes through the collection of "settlement fees" and bribes. When offenders refused to "cooperate" with patrol teams, they were invariably taken into custody and had their cars impounded.⁵ Smugglers who discovered new routes to prevaricate border controls exploited the situation to make higher incomes.⁶ Even those migrants who followed the official border post also paid bribes to facilitate their movement.⁷ One shop owner noted that "Here, even when you have all your papers, they (police) will still collect money from you if they notice that you're not from this country and don't have their papers."⁸ One migrant passer-by narrated that;

We pay a lot of money now to people (brokers/smugglers) who carry us across the borders, even the police too, we have to settle them. For me to cross the border and get to my destination, I will settle many people, including the immigration and police people. Those who carry us now collect big money. It depends on what you bargain with them, the price varies like 10,000 francs or much more. The price will be higher if you don't have travel documents they need.⁹

Shops, motels, ghettos, taverns, restaurants, parking lots, and amusement centers can all be found in the bustling borderland. However, border residents confirmed that the economic activities around the border region had drastically declined as a result of increased policing.¹⁰ Migrants rarely converged at the borders, so borderworkers counted terrible losses of patronages and incomes. One female restaurateur reckoned that sales had dropped more than 60% from what it used to be.¹¹ Local hustlers within the borderland who made between FCFA 5000 and 10,000 per day could no longer boast of getting more than FCFA 2000. As the migrant clientele dwindled, the makeshift lodges, sometimes known as "ghettos," where migrants spent the night before continuing on their treks, became abandoned. Local taxi drivers and transporters who provide local services and move migrants around also expressed deep regret over their significant income losses. One taxi driver lamented:

We no longer get as many passengers as we used to, except for smugglers; you know how risky that business can be now. But more people are even going into the business now because there is a lot of money in the job. You only have to cooperate with the police people and find your way across, or you follow the bad road and take the risk if you can.¹²

A similar situation occurred at the *poste de contrôle juxtaposé* (the Malanville border post in the Benin-Niger borderlands) where the MIDAS system had been launched. However, the staff had resorted to the manual documentation/registration of travelers. Police officers manually encoded criminal files into a digital system to substitute paper-based files. In this instance, the failure of both MIDAS and WAPIS was directly attributed to issues with IT equipment maintenance, specifically

from DERMALOG, a German company that creates AFIS technology, whose technicians were prohibited from entering Niger due to the security measures put in place by the company (Dauchy 2023).

These biometric programs largely depict the EU's purposeful deconstruction of ECOWAS's 1979 free movement framework and replaced it with the enactment of "unfree movement" across the subregion. The intrusion of the biometric ID system in West African border management and control thus entrenches Europe's role as an important external actor (Frowd 2020) controlling the (un)free movement agenda in the subregion. In the same manner, ECOWAS authorities are bypassed to produce regional security knowledge that is dominantly preserved and controlled by European authorities. This reveals competing competencies in support of, or opposition to, (un)free movement in the subregion. Therefore, through centralized and cooperative biometric systems and databases (which are occasionally stored in the cloud and are freely accessible from Europe or elsewhere), digital infrastructures subvert the administrative, decisional, sovereign, and territorial prerogatives of African states while creating new digital territorial spaces/spatialities for both externalized control and direct political control. The fact is that European biometric/virtual control over African digital borderlands lubricates the vestiges of neo-neocolonial and neoliberal forms of power relations, which establish inequities in global migration governance. This shifts the grounds of debate toward an urgent demand for biometric decoloniality in Africa (Nkrumah 1965; Ake 1982; Ngugi Wa 1986; Rodney 1974; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020).

7 | State and Coercive Enforcement of the Biometric ID System: Criminalization and Securitization of (Im)Mobilities

In addition to MIDAS and WAPIS, roughly 14 more databases have been initiated in Niger, particularly by the UN organization that uses the Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS) to handle a variety of cases including refugees, migrants who have been caught or rescued in Niger, and asylum seekers. For instance, in return migration, the IOM exercises political and administrative authority in Niger by accessing its own legibility over foreigners in controlled camps where intercepted migrants or voluntary returnees are biometrically processed before their return. In this process, the IOM produces a biometric identity document for returnees (to avoid the possibility of double-aid requests), therefore bypassing the Department of Civil Status and Refugees within the Ministry of the Interior. Under the WAPIS, the responsibilities of both the IOM and Interpol were ambivalently similarized, shared, and reconciled in complex multitasking whereas the place of the state in data management remains copiously vague, depicting "rhetorical subterfuge" (Dauchy 2023, 12).

7.1 | Enforcement of Obnoxious Migration Law and Policies

The current mixed migration changes involving over 350,000 million West Africans are highlighted by free mobilities. Few

ECOWAS nationals possess a passport, biometric ID document, or other travel document because these were never required in order to migrate across borders.¹³ Previously, ECOWAS citizens without a biometric ID system on their travel documents were safe to go about without any problems in Niger, a well-known hub for mixed migration (labor, trade and services, agriculture, and mining). Foreigners were free to move across borders and their transporters were not subject to any explicit restrictions. At one time, a startling inflow of migrants into Europe across Libya's borders infuriated Europeans, who put pressure on Niger to repress migration. For example, in 2022, the IOM indicated that at least 159,944 people had transited from northern Niger into Libya which represented 25% of the total migrant population in the country, the largest share among all migrant nationalities (IOM 2022).

The Nigerien government passed Law 2015–36 on May 26, 2015, making a distinction between "illegal" and "legal" migration (République du Niger 2015). The law, effective from 2016, had other repressive policy initiatives inspired by the 2015 Valetta Summit. The migration policy of Niger is centered on three main goals: (1) repressive measures to toughen and deter migration; (2) facilitating development cooperation to create alternative livelihoods to the migration industry; and (3) achieving voluntary migrant return to West Africa through the IOM (Müller 2018, 38). Nigeriens have described this policy as the "diktat of Europe, to which the Nigerien authorities obeyed to hit the jackpot" (Tubiana, Warin, and Saeneen 2018, 30).

In order to restrict illicit migration, the EU first gave the Nigerien government €140 million to create a comprehensive digital register and biometric identity paperwork for migrant returnees. However, Niger sought one billion euros (Reuters 2016) and was granted €230 million in 2018 and €600 million from the EUTF between 2016 and 2020 (Claes and Schmauder 2020).

Before the infamous anti-immigration law of 2015, people could cross borders in buses and trucks that were legitimately run by private businesses like Rimbo. The transportation of migrants was suddenly outlawed by the new law as "illegal trafficking of migrants." Between 2016 and 2018, Niger's security forces apprehended 282 drivers, truck owners, "coaxers" (intermediaries), and "ghetto" owners who provided sanctuary to migrants. They also impounded over 600 cars (Claes and Schmauder 2020). More than 10,000 foreign nationals without the appropriate biometric identity documents were harassed, detained at the borders, or driven out of Niger in the first half of 2017. Due to this, the number of foreigners passing through Niger without the required identification documents decreased from 350 per day in 2016 to 60–120 per week in 2018 (Tubiana, Warin, and Saeneen 2018). Fewer migrants traveled across the Seguedine Segedim checkpoint along Dirkou and the Libyan border, from 290,000 in 2016 to 33,000 in 2017 (Zandonini 2018).

7.2 | Clampdown on the Migration Industry and Economic Depravity

In northern Niger, the migratory economy supported at least 100,000 individuals prior to the 2015 law. By 2017, that figure had

dropped to 6565. It may cost the EU an estimated €400 million to provide disengaged borderbrokers with alternative means of subsistence. Just 371 border brokers, however, were given meager sums to begin a new life—roughly €2300 (\$2616) for each person—while a further €8 million was allocated for the second phase, which would house up to 600 smugglers starting in March 2019 (Zandonini 2018). Aside from the grievances of numerous overlooked and underpaid smugglers, the €2300 awarded was insignificant in comparison to the sums that each smuggler made during their hustling in the forest. The beneficiaries of the migrant economy in the local community were often very unhappy about this. More significantly, the residents sharply questioned the politicians' openness in allocating cash, and they also blamed the EU for ignoring development-cooperation agreements in favor of an excessive emphasis on securitization.

In addition, the beneficiaries of the migrant economy were stratified, which made it very difficult for state and EU authorities to undermine the thriving industry. The beneficiaries include the local Tuareg (rebels) and Tubu communities, who are primarily smugglers; security forces who extort money from migrants and smugglers; and private individuals or traders who profit from migration, such as registered transporters and other providers of goods, services, and lodging. The significant benefits that both the Tuareg and Tubu populations derived from smuggling became a unifying factor in their coexistence, as they worked together in a precarious balance to cross one another's territory despite persistent wars in Libya. Actors perceived the new regulation as an affront to them and as a way for the corrupt Nigerien authorities to use EU migration cash for their own remuneration, feeding their extortionate inclinations at the borders. There were threats of fresh uprisings against the government unless hundreds of impounded cars and migrant drivers who were detained were freed. The impounded vehicles were only released in exchange for bribes ranging from XOF (West African franc) 1 to 1.5 million (around €1500–2300), but by the end of 2017, the state authorities had freed the detainees and ceased arresting smugglers (Tubiana, Warin, and Saeneen 2018, 28, 30).

Even though European and Nigerien migration interests converge at some points, it is ideologically of little benefit to Niger given that the European migration control agenda is detrimental to Niger's internal security. The migration surge and downsizing runs contrary to Niger's economic interests. This poses a risk of destabilizing the nation and inciting a plethora of enraged militias and citizens who depend on the migratory economy for their daily sustenance. This may, in the worst case, rejoin Islamist networks and spark a Tuareg insurrection. The closure of the Djado gold mines between Dirkou and Libya specifically coincided with the crackdown on the migration sector, which further fueled the smuggling business and had a crippling effect on youth unemployment (Molenaar, Ursu, and Tinni 2017).

8 | Agentic Deborderization: Migrants Challenge State Biometric Border Control and Securitization

The objectification of biometric ID technologies and migration securitization serve as a specific modality for Europe's migrant instrumentalization in West Africa. Biometric technologies are not neutral (Magnet 2001); they prevent or limit movements of certain

groups while favoring others (Nedelcu and Soysüren 2022), thus entrenching unequal migration. Biometric identification leads to "social sorting," thereby placing vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers, at a higher risk of mistreatment. In this sense, the technologization of migration monitoring and control (Ceyhan 2008) through biometric identification endemically undermines the aspirations of migrants while revealing their "deportability" (Broeders 2007; De Genova 2007)—now mildly called "migration return." Biometrics are instrumental in risk profiling, making it part of the governance of mobility (Amoore 2013).

This foregrounds biometric borderwork as a critical framework for the European objectification of migrants in West Africa—that is, to utilize biometrics to manipulate, control, and halt the infiltration of unwanted migrants into Europe. However, I maintain that despite the intentioned and orchestrated European biometric objectification of migrants, the pervasive and ambivalent character of biometric technologies has, instead, produced new opportunities for migrants' agency—that is, people's capacity to "make a difference" (Giddens 1984, 14)—such as raising migrants' capacities to contest or challenge the new structural constraints tethering their mobility, actions, and mobilizations. This is possible as a result of the constantly shifting intersections between border infrastructures and securitization which symbiotically reinforce complex social interactions that have constructed various agentic mechanisms and structural conditions. Using evidential illustrations, I frame the concept of agentic deborderization as a specific modality through which migrants without proper ID documents creatively avoid the state-imposed biometric border control and, alternatively, assert their mobility capital and resources thus subverting and contesting the European e-borderization measures. The term agentic deborderization offers deeper insights into the practices of subversion and contestation of European biometric border control whereby individuals who are without proper state-prescribed travel/biometric ID documents and are unwilling/unqualified/unable to get it, adopt the use of self-created alternative border routes in order to circumvent state border control.

Agentic debordering acts are a powerful tool for the aggressive assertion of migrant agency and are evident in various borderlands in West Africa, despite their lack of recognition. In this context, migrant agency suggests that migrants create and effectively occupy their own borderland pathways in order to manage their own mobilities. While resisting the limitations of state-centric reborderization, migrants use these self-created border routes to fulfill their migratory dreams. Above all, the use of self-created border routes help migrants who are non-Nigeriens and without proper documentation to avoid the hassles and long protocols involved in the state biometric registration process. The Nigerien–Libyan border triangle—which extends to about 600 km—constitutes a porous borderland space that guarantees unnoticed passage to highly experienced smugglers (Ursu 2018). Hence, European perceptions that migrant flows in Niger, particularly in the northern region of Agadez, have significantly reduced as much as 75% (as reported by the IOM) appears incorrect, or a mere "official" exaggeration of the actual situation on the ground (Tubiana, Warin, and Saeneen 2018). Reports show that there are many makeshift routes that smugglers have created to transport people over border restrictions. For example, migrant smugglers now use new routes that bypass Agadez and

TABLE 2 | Old and new irregular migrant routes reported by Niger authorities.

S/N	Routes	Information
1	Agadez/Arlit/Assamaka/Inguezzam/Tamanrasset	Tamanrasset main road is less risky
2	Agadez/Arlit/Inguezzam/Tamanrasset	Route bypasses the police station
3	Agadez/Arlit/Tchingalen/Bouss Adrar/Tchibarakaten	Migrants are housed in “garage” owned by facilitators. Crossing is by night and in small groups to avoid possible checkpoints
4	Agadez/Ténééré/Dirkou/Seguidine/DaoTimi/Madama/Toumo/Gatrone/Oubari/Sabahaon	Starting from Seguidine, the route is very dangerous, and migrants face a high risk of dying in the desert given the many cases of drivers simply abandoning migrants
5	Agadez/Dirkou/Seguidine/Chirfa/Djado/Janet in Algeria	This route is very dangerous; journey is done at night with only stars showing the way
6	Tchintabaraden/Azanag/Albada/Nabamgaré/Assamaka/Tamanrasset/Dabab	—
7	Tchintabaraden/Gharo/Tassara/Assamaka/Tamanrasset/Dabab	The routes departing from Tchintabaraden are preferred by migrants. Often, the transport is provided by vehicles from Libya
<i>New routes</i>		
8	The Tahoua-Agadez national road: Taza-Amokoye-Damboutan (transit point where migrants change to other vehicles)—Tagigalte-Gharo-Egawane-Ibrahmdadi—Bargate—Azanague—Birmami-Boussanga—Albada-Bifaraya-Inabangarette-Alkassara-Assamaka-Inguizame-Tamanrasset	Migrants reach Tahoua by bus, minibus, Toyota 4×4, motorbike, or on foot in order to avoid checkpoints. The cost of transport from Tahoua to Tamanrasset varies from 120,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (from EUR 180 to 230)
9	The Tahoua-Agadez national road: at the fork of Tchintabaraden road migrants take the road of Ibécétane—Chimiguirie—Akarama—Azelik	Leads to two different roads: -Azelik-Chimagaskare-Agzarmakarama-Louberate-Berkousaya—Albada-Birfaraya-Inabangarette-Assamaka-Inguizame-Tamanrasset;—Azelik-Tiguida-Farekase-Inabangarette-Assamaka-Inguizam-Tamanrasset
10	Dan Issa (border with Nigeria)—Maradi—Dakoro—Abalak—Akarana—Azelik	Migrants take one of the two roads described above (this road is mainly taken by Cameroonians)
11	The Tahoua-Agadez National Road: the fork of Tchintabaraden-Kao-TchintaEgawane-Ibrahmdadi-Bargate-Azamage-Birmani-Boussanga-Albada-Bifaraya-Inabangarett-Alkassar-Assamaka-Inguizam-Tamanrasset	This road is mainly taken by Nigeriens and some Nigerians posing as Nigeriens. In June 2017, 41 women were transported from Tahoua for an amount of 1, 789,000 CFA francs. The women were sold to another smuggler for 600,000 CFA francs. The convoy was then intercepted in the area of Egawane, where the smuggler and the facilitator were arrested

Source: Adapted from Frontex (2016) and Frontex (2017).

Agadez Regional Council, emphasized, “We’re trying to persuade the youth to respect the law, but we lack arguments” (Tubiana, Warin, and Saeneen 2018, 28). This clearly demonstrates the shortcomings of EU biometric rebordering and securitization in Niger. Due to dwindling moral authority and a compromised security sector, state authorities have resorted to smugglers. They have even hired certain smugglers to suppress their erstwhile colleagues who are still in business, as well as to apprehend, hold, and deport migrants. EU funds generously compensated these “partners” or “volunteers.” However, some of the militants from the Libyan Tubu group, who were also car owners and traffickers, acted as official border guards and collected money by charging smugglers and migrants who crossed their set checkpoints. These unlawful acts have further tarnished European biometric rebordering because of the plethora of artificial borders and checkpoints that have appeared with virtually no constraints.

The re-containerization of migrants also developed quickly. About 70 “ghettos” in mudbrick compounds in Agadez city alone were documented by the Nigerien police prior to the crackdown on ghettos and their operators, including pick-up truck drivers, in 2017. These places containerized migrants who spent weeks or months getting ready for their next journeys. However, once they were submerged, the quantity of ghettos that were resurrected and freshly established could not be counted. With the gates always closed and the ghettos moving about Arlit, Dirkou, and Séguédine, they are now more covert, inconspicuous, and movable. Foreigners with strong and flexible networks, such as Senegalese, Cameroonian, Gambians, Nigerians, and Guineans, are increasingly in charge of the ghettos. Even then, these ghettos—which can house up to 200 people—are grossly overcrowded, filthy, unhygienic, and dangerous—especially in the absence of healthcare. However, migrants tolerate these constraints since they ensure their freedom to travel north. They

even shell out more money for smuggling, which has increased to the tune of XOF 500,000 (Molenaar, Ursu, and Tinni 2017).

The foregoing demonstrates the extent to which migrants are determined to control their own migratory patterns and mobilities despite the present challenges. Ironically, the EU border biometricization and securitization unwittingly entrenched smugglers' "deep placement" and not "displacement" in the borderland. The whole equation radiates the migrant-smuggler complex in which moral mobility agents challenge the European rebordering scheme. First, with the benefit of their "deep placement" or "rootedness" in borderlands, borderbrokers/smugglers help migrants achieve and control their own mobility aspirations. Second, through the act of debordering, smugglers re-enact free movement for migrants as enshrined in the 1979 ECOWAS framework. Third, while inventing new migratory routes, smugglers renegotiate borders by decentering European external borders; and by so doing, fourth, migrants recreate new border routes in opposition to state-centric/external control. This is possible through increased nonstate transnational sociospatial cooperation and networking (Faley 2016). Simply put, the migrant-borderbroker complex bluntly asserts migratory freedom and the audacious control of acclaimed borderscapes—by reinventing and reinforcing a historical and traditional sense of free movement prior to the enactment of the colonially determined borders.

These developments raise two important questions. First, what could have been a "better" approach for the EU to achieve its migration control agenda in Africa, instead of biometric "rebordering" which has negatively impacted on African migrants and their mobilities? Second, why are EU migration-security-development initiatives not effective in reducing the desire or the felt need for migrants to make their decision to travel? Generally speaking, a major problem with the EU efforts and initiatives in curbing migration in Africa essentially lies in its ineffectual approach which is designed to facilitate neocolonial contraption and replicate colonial forms of domination. The EU collaborated with the Nigerien government to enforce a clampdown on the local migrants and their crossers/facilitators (smugglers) without first providing an effective/workable alternative means of economic survival for these locals disengaged from the smuggling business. For example, under the migration-security-development nexus, the EU launched a smugglers callback program with cash payments (in millions of euros) to former smugglers through the government-manipulated register. The program was unsuccessful and marred by state corruption due to its poor implementation. Besides, the scheme was limited in scope and not effectively implemented by the government, thus, economic/life opportunities remained elusive for the locals/migrants. This reality of very limited or nonexistent opportunities not only instigates the need to travel to Europe for greener pastures but also encourages migrants and their smugglers to devise new pathways to make their journeys abroad against all odds. This calls for more policy diligence and proper articulation of workable and inclusive policy frameworks that can provide sustainable economic opportunities for the local people to dissuade them from traveling abroad through irregular means.

9 | Conclusion

This study contends that while the European biometric ID systems—MIDAS, WAPIS, and AFIS, among others—are deceptively presented as having a connection to development, migration, and security, their true purpose is to obscure and complicate migration through the criminalization and illegalization of migrants. This contributes to undermining the intrinsic freedom of movement that ECOWAS member states uphold. The "free-ness" of free movement is rebuilt in exchange, with the new biometricized system serving as the material subject of securitization and ECOWAS residents are placed as objects at risk and needing to be locally safeguarded, secured, or reintegrated. In all, "unfree movement"—or, at worst, unequal access to free movement as intended—has been accomplished, but too many new security issues have been left as low-hanging fruit to be extensively picked locally. Fargues (2020) insists that even though the European biometric control and migrant criminalization are bullishly enforced for securitization preferences, the local demands for human smuggling services remain persistent and are growing. In addition, the increasing immobilization of people has animated criminal organizations and the drug trafficking trade. Drawing on the experiences of several actor groups in Niger, this study foregrounded the ambivalent character of biometric borders which reinforces complex social interactions and produces new opportunities for radical and performative agentic mechanisms. Biometric intrusion provokes the capacity of migrants to act independently and circumvent institutional limitations placed against their mobilities. Cognitive disputes are, thus, radically revealed and they shape patterns of migrant-smuggler resilience/resistance measures in the form of self-creation, as they increasingly reject the Western conception of biometric borders as being ethically, morally, and practically unacceptable.

Going forward, both the EU and national state authorities should deemphasize the continuous clampdown on irregular migrants and prioritize locally inclusive initiatives to enhance migrants' access to lawful migration. EU efforts should be focused on providing an effective/workable alternative means of economic survival for these locals to discourage them from the smuggling business. The EU smugglers callback program, which was an essential part of the migration-security-development nexus, should be founded on a reliable procedure that gives direct funding to prospective migrants for human capacity building, entrepreneurship, development of business ideas, and the establishment of start-up businesses, instead of giving cash payments (in the millions of euros) to former smugglers through the government-manipulated register. The Niger experience has shown that directing these interventions through the government has yielded little or no impact as a result of state corruption and poor implementation. The EU should implement realistic and results-oriented intervention schemes for prospective migrants in order to widen their economic/life opportunities and dissuade them from irregular migration. On their part, the state authorities should develop practical and inclusive policy frameworks that could create an atmosphere that is more conducive to offering growth and economic opportunities that are compelling enough to discourage locals from traveling to Europe.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Dr. Kamila Stullerova of the Department of International Politics of Aberystwyth University, Wales, United Kingdom. She served as my academic host during the project period and made invaluable intellectual and editorial contributions to this research. The Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University, Wales kindly covered this article's open access fees.

Ethics Statement

I confirm that ethics permissions have been obtained from Aberystwyth University's Research Ethics Committee (ethics assessment ID: #24754).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

- ¹ Interview with a retailer, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 22 August 2022.
- ² FGD with three police officers, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 21–22 August 2022.
- ³ FGD with five border officials, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 23–24 August 2022.
- ⁴ Interview with three-member border patrol team, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 3 July 2022.
- ⁵ Interview with a retailer, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 22 August 2022.
- ⁶ Interview with a bus driver, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 8 June 2023.
- ⁷ FGD with three migrants/passers-by, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 10–11 June 2023.
- ⁸ Interview with a cloth seller, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 24 August 2022.
- ⁹ Interview with one migrant/passers-by, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 10 June 2023.
- ¹⁰ FGD with six members of the border community, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 12 June 2023.
- ¹¹ Interview with middle-age restaurant woman, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 12 June 2023.
- ¹² Interview with a taxi driver, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 12 June 2023.
- ¹³ Interview with two ECOWAS officials, Yakubu Gowon Crescent, Asokoro, Abuja, 14 September 2022.
- ¹⁴ Interview with one police officer, Kantchari/Makalondi border region, 21 August 2022.

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