

# ***Carrot or Stick? Linking Nigeria's National Identity Number (NIN) coerced enrolment with Questions of a shared Nigerian Identity***

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## **Abstract**

Nigeria commenced enrolment to its national identity program in 2007, and enrolment numbers as of July 2023 stands at 101.6 million. National identity programs have proliferated across Africa in the past decade, and as with Nigeria's, they are targeted at developmental objectives such as streamlining government social assistance, fighting insecurity and tightening security around financial transactions. These objectives draw on sustainable development goal 16.9, and are often taken for granted, with few studies critically examining whether or not they are being achieved. Drawing on fieldwork in Ajegunle, a marginalized urban settlement in Lagos, in April 2022, this paper explores residents' linking of the difficult national identity number (NIN) enrolment process with broader questions of a fractured Nigerian national identity, and questioning the real usefulness of the NIN to their daily effort to eke out a living in one of Africa's most challenging socio-economic environments.

## **1. Introduction**

While other large federations in the world, such as the United States and Canada have moved on to forge a shared sense of a national identity, some scholars argue that Nigerians still struggle with a sense of a shared national identity or belonging (Bamidele 2015; Onwuegbuchulam and Mtshali 2017; Akinyetun 2020; Promise 2021; Peters 2012).

As demonstrated by the literature cited above, there is a whole body of research literature in the humanities and social sciences devoted to questions of national identity. Among the many narratives, one perspective conceives national identification as implying the existence of a subjective bond between an individual and the nation (Rafalowski 2016). Within this context, national identity is also defined as the emotional attitude people have toward the nation, or the subjective feelings and valuations of any population which possesses *common experiences* or one or more shared cultural characteristics, usually customs, language or religion (Rafalowski 2016).

These definitions specify an emotional relationship or bond between individuals and a nation. This attachment is built in several ways, for example, drawing from one of the definitions of a national identity above, the creation of *common* experiences through the provision of public services such as electricity, roads, and affordable healthcare. Within this context, the strength of this identity is determined by the strength and quality of delivery of the government's social contract with citizens.

This emotional attitude of individuals, or sense of a national identity, is also linked with questions of the legitimacy of political leadership. Here, legitimization expresses the extent of acceptance of government's economic and social policy (Rafalowski 2016), which in this context is the government's national identification program.

Drawing on fieldwork in Ajegunle, a marginalized urban settlement in Lagos, in April 2022, this paper explores residents' linking of the difficult national identity number (NIN) enrolment process with broader questions of a fractured Nigerian national identity, and how they questioned the real usefulness of the NIN to their daily effort to make a living in one of Africa's most challenging socio-economic environments. This paper maps out how residents of Ajegunle linked enrolment in a national identity project (a physical artefact) to the sense of a shared Nigerian national identity (a socio-economic reality) and what it means for their daily lives. Drawing from sociological definitions of a national identity above, residents argued against the sense of positive *common experiences* forged by the nation, arguing instead for a different set of difficult experiences in the marginalized, challenging, socio-economic context which describes their lives.

## **2. Nigeria's National Identity Project**

Nigeria's national identity project is administered by the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) and commenced in 2007 following the passage of the National Identity Management Commission Act in 2007 by the upper and lower houses of Nigeria's legislature – the Senate and the House of Representatives on May 17 and 23 respectively. The Act came into force after being signed by the President also on May 25, 2007 (World Bank 2016).

The National ID project is centred around the 11-digit National Identity Number (NIN), which is given after personal data such as personal information (name, parents' name, date of birth, place of origin, marital status, educational level, religion, telephone number, email address, employment status, place of origin of parents), physical features (gender, tribal marks, visible scars, disability, height, hair colour), residence status (house address, local government, state of origin, nationality, country of residence), personal reference numbers (driver's license, passport number, national insurance

number, other identity document, other designated document) and biometric data (photograph and fingerprints) is collected from individuals at enrolment centres around the country.

There are an estimated 7000 enrolment centres in the country (ID4Africa 2021). The data collected is recorded in an enrolment form, a copy of which is available for download on the website of NIMC (NIMC 2023b). Enrolees must be at least 16 years before their data can be captured, although individuals younger than 16 can be enrolled as minors (some of my interviewees in Ajegunle Nigeria reported having done their first NIN registration as minors). NIMC accepts sixteen feeder documents individuals can present prior to enrolment, thus reducing occurrences of exclusion for lack of feeder documents. These documents include the old National ID card, voter's card and driver's license (NIMC 2023a). Enrolment began in February 2012 (World Bank 2016), and was compulsory from January 2019 (Orija 2018) as a requirement to obtain public and private services such as SIM cards, opening a bank and pension account, issuance of international passports and driver's license.

Nigeria's national identity also includes a smart card and a mobile app for authentication and verification. The production of the smart card was discontinued when it caused the national ID project to exceed budget projections (ID4Africa 2020). Currently, after enrolment, individuals are given a NIN paper slip containing identity information. Nigeria's enrolment for the national program has currently stands at 85 million spread across its 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The constitution of enrolment data by gender is male (56%) and female (44%) (NIMC 2023b).

### **3. Identity and marginalized urban environments**

National identity projects like the type implemented by Nigeria are generally implemented with specific policy goals in mind. In Nigeria, the goals elucidated by the Federal government for the national ID project included expanding access to financial inclusion particularly credit facilities, improving security while enforcing law and order, improving government service delivery and social transfers, improving interoperability between the government and the private sectors and the need to cut waste and fraud in government payrolls (World Bank 2016). In a nutshell, the national identity project was planned as a tool for bringing development to the nation.

Within the context of a nation, given the state of infrastructure, services and quality of life inherent within it, marginalized urban settlements have some of the greatest development needs (Davis 2006). Ajegunle is not an exception, being one of the most underserved urban environments in Nigeria (Ogunbowale 2012). Furthermore, residents of marginalized urban settlements have

peculiar characteristics which make them critical and needy recipients of the developmental gains the provision of identity can bring:

(i) A World Bank funded qualitative study (LeVan et al. 2018) found that in Nigeria's marginalized communities on average, birth registration is about 30 percent, and only about 50% of people have NIMC-issued national ID (NIN) cards. In these marginalized urban contexts at least 30% of those lacking IDs mentioned that it was difficult to enrol, and 20% said a lack of feeder documents required by NIMC (such as international passport and driver's license) as the major barrier to accessing the national ID.

(ii) Marginalized communities are strategic because they sometimes harbour "resistance populations" (Mahmud 2010). These could be populations who through years of experiencing government neglect in the provision of infrastructure and services become hostile to the government and its projects (including the ID project) within the community. This perceived government neglect breeds not just hostility but also mistrust, which impacts on levels of enrolment for the ID projects. Government mistrust is a much-studied theme in understanding the interactions of people with government sponsored projects in Nigeria and Africa.

For example, mistrust of government had an impact to lower participation in Polio vaccination in Northern Nigeria (Grossman, Phillips, and Rosenzweig 2018) because of government neglect in the provision of goods and services and was also a similar theme in the rejection of government intervention during the 2018 – 2019 Ebola outbreak in North Kivu, The Democratic Republic of Congo (Vinck et al. 2019). In both instances, the government's vaccination program could not be trusted because the government could not be trusted in its other more immediate roles in the community.

For some recent historical context, in Nigeria there was significant pockets of resistance and pushback against the government's updated national ID policy in December 2021 which required that people linked their NIN to their SIM cards (Okunoye 2022). Prior to this announcement in October 2021, security forces under the command of the government had violently put down the historic peaceful #EndSARS protests in Nigeria organized by young people demanding an end to police brutality and better governance.

The aftermath of the #EndSars protests saw many young people dead and wounded (Iwuoha and Aniche 2022). Many others were arrested, stopped from travelling, had bank accounts blocked and

threatened. Research suggests that the relationship people have with government dictates their attitudes to identity (GSMA 2019) and in line with that many read the request for the linking of the NIN to SIM cards as a tactic of government to ramp up its surveillance powers of dissenting voices in the country.

(iii) Closely related to the above is the reality that in many country contexts marginalized communities are usually the first settlement for recent migrants from rural areas from across the country (Davis 2006). That is, they often reflect an ethnic mix which threatens the political dominance of the resident ethnic group in specific localities (LeVan et al. 2018). For instance, Ajegunle contains a mix of the different ethnic groups of Nigeria – Hausa, Igbo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Benin etc within a dominant Yoruba ethnic population (Ogunbowale 2012). Hence some of the marginalization seen in slums stem from political reasons when political leaders resent communities sympathetic to their opponents (through ethnic connections) and are therefore perceived as threats to their continued political relevance.

This difficult relationship between government and the governed plays a role in the roll-out of identification programs. On the one hand, some governments across Africa have been known to deny identification to communities they fear could negatively affect their political chances – in these contexts the ID is accepted as a valid identifier for the purposes of elections. For example, marginalized communities like the Kenya-Somalis, Nubians and Kenya-Arabs in Kenya find it an onerous task to be captured in the government's identification program (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2007). On the other hand, these ethnic minorities too fear being captured in any formal government-sponsored identification program for fear it could be a weapon of constant government surveillance, exclusion and persecution.

(iv) It is also the case that the poor living conditions in marginalized urban settlements such as restricted access to government social support, low literacy and poverty levels make enrolment to the government's identity program difficult for potential enrolees (LeVan et al. 2018). For instance, factors such as distance to enrolment centres, cost of transportation to enrolment centres, illiteracy have been known to restrict vulnerable communities from accessing ID enrolment. Women are particularly vulnerable to social norms, religious beliefs and cultures which make it harder to enrol in identification programs. For example, women tend to carry the burden of domestic chores such as cleaning, washing and childcare which might place severe pressure on their time. Also, in certain religions women cannot be absent from home for lengths of time without the permission of a male

guardian. My fieldwork in Ajegunle reinforced the truth of these circumstances as exposed in the literature, with many interview respondents admitting similar experiences.

#### **4. Ajegunle**

Ajegunle, also called 'Jungle City' because of its ethnic plurality comprising virtually all the major ethnic groups in Nigeria but chiefly Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Ijaw and the Urhobo, is in Ajeromi-Ifelodun local government area of Lagos state Nigeria. Lagos state is Nigeria's commercial capital and most populous city based in southwest Nigeria, home of the Yoruba ethnic group.

Arguably Nigeria's biggest marginalized urban settlement, large parts of Ajegunle features overcrowding combined with extreme peripherality, situated at the edge of the Lagos coastline (Davis, 2006). Its coastal location is linked to its ethnic make-up: many of its earliest residents immigrated from adjoining areas through the sea (Ogunbowale 2012). In 1972, Ajegunle's population was estimated to be about 90,000 people sharing a mere 8 square kilometres of swampy land adjoining Nigeria's largest port – Tin Can Port, which naturally provided employment opportunities for many of its residents. Today at least 1.5 million people are cramped on only a slightly bigger land area.

Ajegunle has over decades acquired the reputation within Nigeria as the setting for violent crimes, ethnic clashes, prostitution rings, drug trafficking and juvenile delinquencies, such that the name "Ajegunle" in Nigeria is almost a stigma word for a dreaded/forbidden area. Nevertheless, Ajegunle has also remarkably been the site for many of Nigeria's cultural successes having produced some of the country's most notable musicians and illustrious sportsmen and women (Ogunbowale 2012). Indeed, many of these Ajegunle success stories allude their success to the resilience inculcated in them within its tough environment.

#### **5. National Power Grid Failures as Symptomatic of a Nigerian Identity**

In linking their National Identity Number (NIN) enrolment with a sense of a Nigerian identity, a tipping point and rupture was reached by Ajegunle residents on the week of April 4 2022 when the government, through the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), began to block the SIM cards of Nigerians not yet linked with the NIN from the mobile network. This action forced thousands of people who had resisted enrolling for the NIN to enrol. Nevertheless, it provoked some soul searching among Ajegunle residents who struggled to understand the reasons for the coerced enrolment for a physical artefact (national identity) which they deemed made little material

improvement to their socio-economic identities or realities. On the contrary, it has made life more difficult.

Since enrolment for the NIN was made a prerequisite for accessing services such as banking, new SIM card registration, new passport issuance etc, many residents had avoided seeking these services. For many the blocking of their mobile phone access was a straw which broke the Camel's back. Ajegunle residents interviewed linked this coerced enrolment, which was deemed insensitive, with their perception of their national identity as Nigerians typified by living with severe deficits of provision of public services. And although they could identify a couple, none was as glaring as the visible deficit in the provision of publicly supplied electricity. Interviews for this research study was conducted in over two working weeks (Monday – Friday) in Ajegunle, from about 9am in the morning to 3pm in the afternoon. In none of these days, at those times, was publicly generated power available. Many residents wondered what a NIN enrolment would do to improve their lives, especially as they had done several other government enrolments in the past, including previous iterations of the national identity project.

According to a 2017 study, in Nigeria on average, households experience electrical power outages at least three times a day (19 hours daily) and usually use less than 150 kWh annually, compared to 5,407 kWh for the United Kingdom (UK) or 12,988 in the United States (US) (Rubino 2017). This reality mediated my interview experience in Ajegunle Nigeria where most of my interviews were conducted with electricity generators or were done out in the open in order to get adequate ventilation. Despite the already poor public good provision in Nigeria, marginalized urban communities like Ajegunle often report poorer situations (Davis 2006; LeVan et al. 2018)

A direct consequence of this electricity short-fall is its effect on income through reduced income opportunities. According to a 2020 World Bank publication, the economic cost of power shortages in Nigeria is estimated to be \$28 billion, or 2% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank 2020). Small and medium scale businesses, which represent the scale of endeavour the majority of Ajegunle residents are employed in, are the most impacted by this electricity shortage (Ogundipe, Akinyemi, and Ogundipe 2016; Olawoyin 2020). Businesses which rely on stable electricity supply tend to purchase power generators. Those who cannot afford one, and its associated costs (fuel and maintenance) or are forced to shut down while the power cuts last. Ajegunle already represents a marginalized economic community where many live in to avoid the economic costs of living in more affluent areas. The coercion to enrol for the NIN was frowned on by some residents who highlighted the mismatch between the National Identity Number and their challenging socio-economic identity:

*“But honestly the government too is not trying. But the country is gradually improving. Before I had to travel to see my mother but now, I can call. The country is improving in some areas. So don’t just throw the baby with the bathwater out. You have to generate your own power, water, health etc so there is not much room for patriotism in Nigeria” ~ Interviewee 2*

*“We are a busy type in Nigeria, hustling for his life, although we were told this thing is important for us, but it is not easy to leave one’s business and queue for NIN enrolment. However [now] I think the NIN is important because they have blocked my means of eating. The way my customers are calling me I am meant [sic] to call back to get feedback, but I couldn’t.” – Interviewee 3*

## **6. Carrot or Stick? An Incentive, whole-development based Approach to National Identity Enrolment**

With an enrolment figure of 101.6 million as of July 2023, much of the NIN enrolment has been driven by coercion, first by denying access to private and public services, which culminated in the blocking of SIM cards not linked to the NIN by April 2022. In order to understand the mismatch between their socioeconomic identity/reality and the national identity enrolment expressed by Ajegunle residents, it is perhaps important to cite examples of incentive based national identification enrolment in the world.

In Africa, perhaps the best example is enrolment for South Africa’s national identity, where 92% of the population above 15 years has a national identity document (World Bank 2019). This near total coverage is strongly associated with national ID based - access to social grant programs in the country provided through the coordination of multiple government agencies such as the Department for Home Affairs (DHA), the Department of Social Development (DSD), and the South Africa Social Security Agency (SASSA). Some of these grants include the older person’s grant, disability grant, foster care grant, care dependency grant, child support grant, grant-in aid, and social relief of distress. To be eligible to access these grants, one must present either a birth certificate (in case of children recipients); and/or an South African identity document (from age 16 onwards); or a death certificate (for a foster care grant). For context South Africa is one of Africa’s largest spenders on social grants, with grants accounting for 3.3% of GDP and 15.4% of total government spending in 2021 (World Bank 2021b), and is expected to reach 3.9% of GDP in 2023 (Crotty 2022). An estimated 47% of South Africans rely on some form of social grants (Patel 2023). For a long time, there was no formal social safety net system for the poor in Nigeria until the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) was launched in 2016. Even though it has over 12 million



beneficiaries and for the first time Nigeria now has a social registry for the poor, social spending is only 2.6% of GDP and lags low-income countries in Africa and around the world.

Contrasting the incentive based enrolment to South Africa's national identity to the coerced enrolment to Nigeria's national identity, it is pertinent to note that the Ajegunle residents interviewed for this study were not requesting for social grants from the government, just a sense of parity between their socioeconomic identities/realities and their possession of a national identity token. An example would be a marked improvement in electricity supply which would immediately improve the quality of their lives and their business prospects.

In many African contexts, there seems to be a mismatch between what national identity programs promise and what they actually deliver. National identity programs are sometimes couched in development terms which negate the need to level up in other aspects of development. Achieving SDG 16.9 which aims to provide identification to the millions who lack them globally will be ineffective if progress on all other SDGs is stymied. It is not likely that merely placing IDs in the hands of people without the provision of adequate healthcare, education, or social amenities will not lead to sound developmental outcomes.

Development scholars have also reflected on this. For example Ladner *et al* (Ladner, Jensen, and Saunders 2014) point out that in many countries there is a marked difference between what digital identity programs promise and what they actually deliver. In researching the question "does delivering legal identity improve the delivery of its associated social goods", they conclude that in countries with poor governance, fragile institutions, and resource poverty, legal identity makes little practical improvements in the lives of people without complementary reforms in all other sectors of national life. In other words, drawing from the context of the UN SDGs, it is futile to focus on SDG 16.9 while making little progress on all other SDGs.

## **7. Conclusion**

While other large federations in the world, such as Canada, have moved on to forge a shared sense of a national identity, some scholars argue that Nigerians still struggle with a sense of a shared national identity or belonging. This sense of a national identity or belonging is more tested or laid bare in marginalized urban environments where the instruments which might stir up patriotic or nationalistic sentiments – such as the presence of an efficient public services, are sorely lacking. This was the context in April 2022 where the government mandated that mobile phones not linked

with NIN record should be disconnected from national networks. The resulting difficulty, as people rushed to enrol for the NIN, made an already indigent population compare the physical NIN registration with the difficulties associated with the everyday Nigerian experience.

Couched within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16.9), which were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity (UNDP 2023), the roll-out of ID programs globally have had mixed results as regards to real improvements in the lives of people on the ground. As the world marks the mid-point in the SDGs timeline (The Global Goals 2023), and reflects if real progress is being made towards their achievement, there is a need to especially cast a spotlight on ID projects in Africa to assess their impact and who is really benefitting. The SDGs mid-point timeline also serves as a reminder that development programs cannot exist in a vacuum. IDs can really be empowering tools, only if they are properly situated within broader, well-executed development outcomes.

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