



## **Nigeria at a crossroads:**

# **The political stakes of migration governance**

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- Since 2014, Nigeria has outlined several initiatives on migration, including a National Migration Policy, strategies on labor migration and diaspora matters, and a coordinating framework to reform migration governance. However, in order to have a significant impact, the policy frameworks need full implementation.
- When it comes to migration, the Nigerian government is active on policy development but less so on putting it into effect.
- This tendency is exemplified by a proactive interest in diaspora migration yet a much more reactive approach toward irregular migration and trafficking. Governance initiatives in this area are dominated by international and nongovernmental actors.
- At worst, there is a divergence of interests between the Nigerian government and the EU with respect to legal pathways, border management, returns, and reintegration.
- Despite a sophisticated governance framework, the country is stalling on action, with few actors calling for more engagement in migration governance and wide acceptance of the status quo.
- If the EU wishes to cooperate on migration, it needs to consider Nigerian interests (or the lack thereof) or risk increasing the divergence of interests and damaging the chances of implementation.

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### **The Political Economy of West African Migration Governance**

This policy brief draws upon a series of expert meetings and interviews carried out within the framework of the WAMiG project. The project explores how migration governance instruments and institutions are made and implemented, the stakes and stake holders involved or excluded and the societal discourse that surrounds these interests. The qualitative study focuses on four case studies – the Gambia, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

WAMiG is conducted by the Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute as part of the Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration (MEDAM).

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# **The political stakes of migration governance**

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## Introduction

As of October 2019, Nigeria's population stands at just over 200 million (Worldometers 2019), constituting the largest economy in Africa. In 2017, it had about 1.2 million immigrants (totaling 0.6 percent of the Nigerian population; UNDESA 2018). Nigeria also had 1.9 million internally displaced persons by March 2019 (UNHCR 2019), hosting around 30,000 refugees from neighboring countries—primarily from Cameroon.

Meanwhile, in December 2018 there were over 200,000 Nigerian refugees in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (UNHCR 2019). Additionally, that same year around 25,000 Nigerians applied for asylum in the EU.<sup>2</sup> Overall, among West African countries Nigeria has the highest number of asylum applicants in the EU.

The reasons for the high rate of emigration from Nigeria include the government's inability to retain skilled professionals, poor governance, unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and deepening poverty, among others. Though the causes are wide-ranging, migration issues do not matter politically, with little effect on election outcomes at the federal level. This is unlikely to change soon. Nonetheless, migration issues still have relevance for the broader societal discussion, leading one Nigerian policy adviser to conclude that "migration is not a political issue, but people talk about migration with emotion in Nigeria" (B9).

In this policy brief, we highlight some of the complexities related to migration governance in Nigeria, including proactive policies on diaspora matters but much more reticent approaches when it comes to governing irregular migration. In fact, the issues of border management, returns, and legal pathways even risk widening the differences between EU and Nigerian interests. Despite a sophisticated governance framework, the country is stalling on implementation. Few actors are demanding more engagement in migration governance and the status quo is widely accepted. The policy implications for the EU are discussed below.

This brief is based on a forthcoming qualitative research report.<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork took place between March and April 2019 in Abuja, Lagos, and Benin City. Unless otherwise stated, the information and opinions in this brief are based on 32 interviews with policy makers, politicians, civil society activists, diaspora leaders, and academic experts in Nigeria, Germany, and Ghana (see the appendix).

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<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, "Third country nationals returned following an order to leave—annual data (rounded)," 2019 (accessed September 11, 2019, from the Eurostat—Data Explorer website: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>).

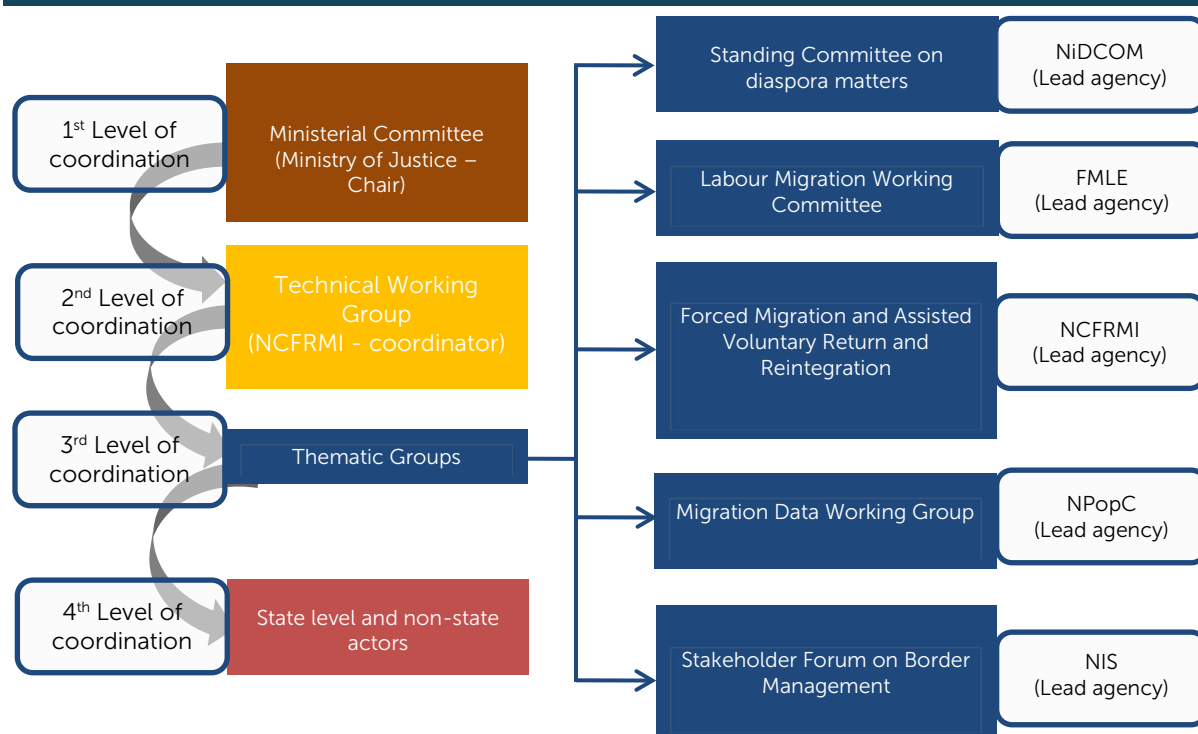
<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank Melanie Radike and David Benček for their comments on earlier versions. All errors remain our own.

## A comprehensive migration architecture

In May 2015, Nigeria adopted a National Migration Policy. Subsequently, a Migration Governance Framework (MGF) was also developed as the implementation framework for the policy with support from the Swiss government and partial funding by the 10<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund (see table 1 in section 4).

The MGF has four levels of coordination (see figure 1), namely a ministerial committee, a technical working group, thematic groups, and state and non-state actors. The technical working group makes recommendations to the ministerial committee for approval. Five thematic groups cover the following topics: diaspora matters; migration data; forced migration, and assisted voluntary return and reintegration; labor migration; and border management. Each thematic group is made up of several government ministries, international organizations, and in some cases nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The final level of coordination includes state and non-state actors with migration desk officers.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1:**  
The levels of coordination of the Nigerian Migration Governance Framework



Source: Authors' elaboration based on interviews.

Note: NiDCOM = Nigerians in Diaspora Commission; FMLE = Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment; NCFRMI = National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons; NPopC = National Population Commission; NIS = Nigeria Immigration Service.

<sup>4</sup> Nigeria has a federal system with 36 states and 774 local government areas within the states. Non-state actors include NGOs, civil society organizations, and people from local government areas such as chiefs, priests, and community leaders.

The MGF plays a key role as the first implementation step of the National Migration Policy. It further elaborates on the different migration trends identified in the policy and shows the coordination and governance of these trends. The thematic groups focus on these migration trends, for which specific policies are developed and put into practice under the coordination of a lead government agency. For instance, the National Labour Migration Policy 2014, and the draft national policy on diaspora matters (NPDM)<sup>5</sup> are considered sectoral policies. The newly created Nigerians in Diaspora Commission will oversee application of the diaspora policy when adopted. Altogether, the National Migration Policy, the MGF, and these sectoral policies are set to transform migration governance in Nigeria—if fully and effectively realized.

Thus, the Nigerian government is active on migration policy development but less so on implementation. The political will that led to the current, impressive migration policies and governance framework in Nigeria does not correspond to the political will for carrying them out. This is transparent from the lack of a federal budget and funding for migration-related activities. Moreover, the low synergy among different actors despite the migration framework is also partly to blame for the lagging implementation of migration-related policies. Meanwhile, the role of civil society organizations and NGOs in the implementation framework is both limited and unclear.

The MGF assigns leading coordinating roles to government institutions but with prominent roles for international actors as well, especially in return and reintegration management. Fostering ownership and state capacities to deal with migration issues remains critical. In the programming on returns, though a variety of actors are included at various stages, the central planning of operational activities remains in the hands of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). While some national actors have called for greater responsibility in this field, international actors often refer to a lack of capacity at the national level to maintain a flagship role.

## Political interest in migration governance in Nigeria

If anything, the current government is interested in dealing with the diaspora community, on which it has a proactive policy approach. There are over 15 million Nigerians in the diaspora, of whom over 27 percent live in the United States and the United Kingdom (UNDESA 2015). The government's multiple initiatives in this direction are decidedly energetic, based primarily on reaping the (considerable) benefits of remittances. Nigeria is the largest remittance-recipient country in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2018, the country received more than US\$24.3 billion in official remittances (an increase of US\$2 billion from 2017), representing 6.1 percent of Nigeria's GDP (World Bank 2019). Furthermore, in June 2017, the Nigerian

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<sup>5</sup> The NPDM was validated at a stakeholder's forum in July 2019. The draft policy is yet to be adopted by the Nigerian senate.

government issued its first diaspora bonds and successfully raised US\$300 million (Kazeem 2017).<sup>6</sup>

Diaspora policies are far-reaching and include an office assisting the president on diaspora affairs, a diaspora policy, a diaspora commission, a senate committee on diaspora matters, and strong support for the Nigerians in Diaspora Organization (NIDO).<sup>7</sup> In collaboration with Nigerian diaspora organizations, the government has been arranging global Nigerian diaspora conferences.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Nigerians in the diaspora are now enrolled (registration ongoing) in the Nigerian National Identification Database (Gbandi and Komolafe 2019). Our interviews confirmed that the government—through the Central Bank of Nigeria—is further aiming to set up a government-owned money transfer system for Nigerians abroad. These enterprising approaches by the Nigerian government are motivated by the development benefits arising from diaspora engagements, and do not translate into political rights. Diaspora members are not allowed to vote, and the government has few diaspora representatives in the cabinet. Policies on retaining highly qualified people in Nigeria (to avoid so-called brain drain) are not prioritized. In sum, the attention given to diaspora politics is partial, and focused on economic benefits.

## Divergent interests in irregular migration

When it comes to other policies like irregular migration, the government's approach is much more reactive if not outright contrasting with European interests, which dominate the policy area. Irregular migration is low on the radar of federal politics. A majority of Nigerian irregular migrants in Europe come from Benin City in Edo State, which has often been described as the corridor to Europe (Hoffmann 2018; Agbakwuru 2018). The high number of irregular migrants from Benin City is attributed to poverty and unemployment. Many of the migrants from Benin City end up in the sex industry in Europe. Some become actively involved in trafficking and smuggling operations for the lack of better alternatives (Osezua 2016; Plambech 2017).

Governance initiatives in this area, which unsurprisingly largely center on trafficking, are dominated by international and nongovernmental actors. The low interest of the Nigerian government to work on this issue is mirrored by the funds provided. For example, the government reduced the annual funding of the primary agency for combating human trafficking and smuggling (NAPTIP) from 2.5 billion naira (€6.2 million) in 2015 to 1.7 billion naira in 2016 (€4.2 million) (USDOS 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> The diaspora bond invites Nigerians living abroad to contribute funds to the country's 2017 budget deficit of US\$23 billion. Diaspora investors receive returns on their investment in such bonds (Kazeem 2017).

<sup>7</sup> NIDO was formed in 2000–01 as part of the government's initiative to tap into the knowledgebase of Nigerians abroad to promote socioeconomic and infrastructural development in Nigeria.

<sup>8</sup> The most recent, 2<sup>nd</sup> global Nigerian diaspora conference was held in the Netherlands in April 2019 (Gbandi and Komolafe 2019).

Meanwhile, a substantial portion of funding for governing irregular migration in Nigeria comes from development partners and particularly the EU. For example, as of March 2019, different EU-funded projects, including those on migration in Edo State, alone amounted to about €20 million (B3). Some EU member states, like Germany, France, Denmark, and Switzerland, also fund sensitization campaigns on trafficking and irregular migration. The huge discrepancy between internal and external funding (see table 1) demonstrates that the political interest in this topic is international rather than Nigerian. If anything, the Nigerian government is working reactively to the policy interests of the EU and its member states. At worst, there is a divergence of interests with respect to legal pathways, border management, return and reintegration.

**Table 1:****Major migration-related projects in Nigeria, funded by the EU**

Program/project	€ million <sup>9</sup>	Source of funding	Timeline
EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration	346.9	EUTF	2006–
Action Against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants in Nigeria	10.15	11 <sup>th</sup> EDF	2018–21
Support for Reintegration and Reconciliation of Former Armed Non-State Combatants and Boko Haram Associates	15	11 <sup>th</sup> EDF	2019–23
Promoting Stability in Nigeria's North-East	5.5	EUTF	2016–19
Multi-Sector Support to the Displaced in Adamawa and Borno States	4	EUTF	2016–19
Promoting Resilience and Peaceful Coexistence among Displacement Affected Communities in North-East Nigeria	2.12	EUTF	2016–18
Strengthening Migration Governance in Nigeria and Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants	15.5	EUTF	2016–19
Protection of Migrants and Asylum Seekers Especially Children and Women Coming from Nigeria and Victims of Trafficking	0.46	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights	2016–19
Promoting Better Management of Migration in Nigeria	25	10 <sup>th</sup> EDF	2008–13

Source: Authors' construction based on interviews and multiple secondary sources.

Note: EDF = European Development Fund; EUTF = EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa; IOM = International Organization for Migration.

<sup>9</sup> Amounts are rounded to two decimal places.



## Legal pathways

Our research has found that many Nigerian actors see the EU as only interested in stopping irregular migration to “decongest” their countries,<sup>10</sup> while simultaneously restricting access to regular migration. Until now, none of the many resources put in place by the EU offer realistic opportunities for regular migration. For example, a recent report finds that despite the number of career training courses that the Nigerian-German Center for Jobs, Migration & Reintegration offered to Nigerians, there was no indication of any Nigerian able to access job opportunities in Germany (Olaiya and Chukwuemeka 2019). Although the job center is mainly purported to provide advice on the local labor market, it is in a position to provide information on job opportunities in Germany as well (B1). Interviews revealed that despite the reality of chances for Nigerians in the German job market being practically nonexistent, advice on how to apply for jobs in Germany is given anyway. This gives rise to a sense of unfulfilled promises and a frequent complaint that such job centers are not effective.

Nigeria is interested in regularized migration for its citizens. The labor migration policy therefore shows the various ways the government seeks to find partners in order to manage regular labor migration pathways. But this is yet to be implemented and, again, restrictive visa regimes in the EU are detrimental to cooperation on overall action against irregular migration and trafficking on the part of Nigeria. The limited legal pathways in fact enforce irregularity. Many irregular migrants perceive access to visas as a privilege of the high- and middle-income classes, thereby leaving a sense of futility in applying for legal documents and making irregular migration the only option for many people.

## Border control and management

Border management carries varying political stakes for different actors. The Nigerian Immigration Service oversees border control and management of over 114 recognized land border posts and many ungoverned land borders. Many of the anti-trafficking initiatives are based on the premise that the porous nature of Nigeria’s borders can be blamed for easing the movement of irregular migrants and traffickers within and across Nigeria. As such, border control and management are of interest to both the EU and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The EU wants to see professionally managed borders to check the flow of trafficking through irregular migration routes from Nigeria to neighboring countries and eventually to Europe. At the same time, ECOWAS is interested in harmonizing border management among ECOWAS member states in compliance with its protocols, such as free movement and a common approach. That is, the Nigerian-ECOWAS objective is to harmonize border management in order to *improve* mobility in the region, while the EU’s is to *reduce* mobility toward Europe.

Furthermore, inconsistencies in EU policies in the region are notable. For example, the Sahel regional project (GAR-SI SAHEL), which is funded by the EU through its Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, is aimed at stabilizing the target countries (including ECOWAS

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with a Nigerian academic, February 2019.

member states Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) through more effective control of borders (European Commission, 2019).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the EU is also funding the Support Free Movement of Persons and Migration in West Africa project (FMM West Africa), which aims at maximizing the developmental potential of the free movement of people and migration in the region by supporting implementation of the related ECOWAS protocols (FMM 2019). The inconsistencies in these policies (controlling and easing movement across borders, respectively) has the potential effect of undermining the regional integration plan in the long run. That is especially so for Nigeria, whose goals include, for example, restructuring its “immigration laws to ease migration rather than to control migration” (B13).

## Return and reintegration

In 2017, a *CNN* investigative report revealed that stranded migrants, a majority of whom were Nigerians, were being sold as slaves in Libya (Busari 2017). The situation became a major embarrassment for Nigeria and according to the president, in July 2018 the government repatriated about 3,000 Nigerians who had been stuck in Libya on their way to Europe (*African Courier* 2018), in addition to the 1,700 Nigerians who had been returned by the government from Libya to Port Harcourt in January 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the Nigerian government, the IOM provides the most comprehensive return and reintegration programs in Nigeria with funding from the EU and EU member states. As of July 2019, the IOM had facilitated the return of about 18,000 Nigerian migrants to Nigeria from over 54 countries (IOM 2019b). This number includes over 14,000 returns under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration, returns by the Nigerian government, and other assisted IOM returns. In addition to IOM-assisted voluntary returns and the Nigerian government’s repatriations, 3,310 Nigerians were deported from the EU in 2018, with the majority from the United Kingdom (1,360), followed by Austria (485), Germany (470) and Italy (225).<sup>13</sup> The National Immigration Service usually receives these reported Nigerians in the country.

The Nigerian government is relatively tolerant and receptive toward the return of stranded Nigerians from Libya and other transit countries like Mali and Niger as a way of fulfilling its responsibilities to its citizens. However, returns from Europe are less accepted for a number of reasons. First, the main interest of the Nigerian government in migration is to attract remittances and diaspora investments for national development and growth. The dilemma

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, “GAR-SI SAHEL (Groupes d’Action Rapides—Surveillance et Intervention au Sahel),” 2019 (accessed September 11, 2019, from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa website: [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/regional/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapides-surveillance-et\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/sahel-lake-chad/regional/gar-si-sahel-groupes-daction-rapides-surveillance-et_en)).

<sup>12</sup> The repatriation in July 2018 by the government was in collaboration with the IOM and included reintegration packages. Yet Nigerians who had been repatriated by the government in January 2018 to Port Harcourt had not received reintegration packages. Subsequently, in February this year, with funding from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, the IOM provided reintegration assistance to those 1,700 migrants initially returned by the government of Nigeria (IOM 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Eurostat, “Third country nationals returned following an order to leave—annual data (rounded)” (2019).

therefore is that if Nigeria agrees with the EU on the return of Nigerians, this can affect the inflows of remittances and investment. Second, the high unemployment rate in addition to many other problems mean that returning these migrants back to Nigeria will further weaken the political, social, and economic infrastructure. Third, critics argue that European countries should find ways to regularize these migrants, especially those who have lived there for a long time and may by now be more familiar with their host country.

Helping the EU to identify and send back Nigerians would be an unpopular political move for the government. Considering that Nigerians blame their government for the high level of corruption, lack of good governance, unemployment, inability to retain skilled professionals, and many other challenges, any return agreement would further discredit the government. With returns so hotly contested in the region, like in Mali or Gambia, compliance with the EU on returns holds too many risks for domestic legitimacy.

## Policy implications

Nigeria is at a crossroads. There are a number of migration-related policies and a complex Migration Governance Framework waiting to be fully implemented, which could transform the way migration is governed to better protect those forcibly displaced and enhance the positive benefits from migration. Yet, the migration topic holds little political sway with the Nigerian government except for continuing to profit from the wealth of remittances from the Nigerian diaspora. Due to the complexity of Nigeria and the multitude of challenges, few actors are demanding more engagement in migration governance. The status quo is widely accepted, with no significant political or social group(s) showing particularly visible interests that differ from the government's in diaspora affairs, less restrictive visa regimes, or expanded regular migration channels. That being stated, the government refrains from verging onto politically contentious territory—like returns.

If the EU wishes to cooperate on migration, it needs to consider Nigerian interests (or the lack thereof) or risk further increasing the divergence of interests and damaging the chances of implementation.

There are several policy implications that can be drawn from this for the EU and those of its member states that wish to work with Nigeria on the migration issue:

1. Without paying attention to Nigeria's interests in increased legal pathways, including labor migration agreements, the country's cooperation on returns and other matters of importance to international stakeholders is not likely to improve any time soon. Promises of legal migration opportunities must be made credible to have real impact. Advice on European job markets without being able to access them only increases frustration and suspicion. Therefore, the EU and its member states should consider a mix of options for expanding existing regular migration pathways, for instance,

- the Erasmus program, the blue card scheme, scholarships for skills training, and skills exchange programs for professionals;
- vocational training programs that are useful for both the Nigerian and European job markets to enable wider participation across socioeconomic groups and low-skilled workers to compete for regular pathways; and
- accessible visa regimes for short-term travel and visits.

While job opportunities on the Nigerian and regional job markets should also be improved, development projects based on the premise that they will stop migration are unlikely to work.

2. If the MGF is fully put into action, it has the potential to provide a sophisticated framework for the different migratory movements in and out of Nigeria. External actors as well as Nigerian policy makers should put pressure on the Nigerian government to implement it and all other migration-related policies. Still, actors should take note of the potential conflicts over funding and mandates among some of the leading government agencies and commissions in the overall governance framework. It is important for the EU and its member states not to undermine the existing governance framework but rather to address migration-related efforts to the proper level of coordination in order to avoid adding to conflicts and duplicating efforts.
3. For all its sophistication, the MGF leaves little room for nongovernmental and civil society organizations. While external actors continue to fund projects, they should be aware that the role of international organizations and their predominance in dictating migration management is becoming a concern for national actors. Empowering non-state organizations within the larger framework is needed.
4. As a regional powerhouse, Nigeria has a strong influence on ECOWAS and its neighbors in the region. The inconsistency in some EU external policies on migration in the region threatens the regional integration agenda of ECOWAS. Ultimately, continuing EU initiatives that undermine mobility in the region will not only lose Nigeria as a partner in migration governance, but also adversely affect the whole region.

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## Appendix

**Appendix:**  
**List of interviews on Nigeria's migration policy**

Date	Interviewee	Organization/profession	Place	Code
12.02.2019	Amanda Bisong	European Centre for Development Policy Management, Maastricht	Accra (via Skype)	A1
13.02.2019	Kenneth Gbandi	Nigerians In Diaspora Organisation	Hamburg (via Skype)	A2
14.02.2019	Austin Obinna Ezejiogor	Nnamdi Azikiwe University	Abuja (via Skype)	A3
14.03.2019	Dr. Sunday Onazi	Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity	Abuja	B1
18.03.2019	Frantz Celestin	International Organization for Migration	Abuja	B2
20.03.2019	Eleni Zerzelidou	Delegation of the European Union to Nigeria and ECOWAS	Abuja	B3
21.03.2019	Ambassador Jesper Kamp	Danish Embassy	Abuja	C1
21.03.2019	Imabong	Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation	Abuja	B4
22.03.2019	Emmanuel Agodi	Nigerian National Voluntary Service	Abuja	B5
25.03.2019	Tony Elumelu	Economic Community of West African States	Abuja	B6
25.03.2019	Orakwe Arinze	National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons	Abuja	B7
26.03.2019	Roger Hollo	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	Abuja	B8
27.03.2019	Mr. Roland Nwoha	Idia Renaissance	Benin City	C2
28.03.2019	Anonymous	Edo State Taskforce Against Human Trafficking	Benin City	D1
27.03.2019	Blessing Ehiagwina	Girls Power Initiative	Benin City	C3
28.03.2019	Bibiana Emenaha	Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women	Benin City	C4
28.03.2019	Anonymous	Migration Resource Centre	Benin City	D2
29.03.2019	Alenke O. Augustine	Academic (University of Benin City)	Benin City	D3
30.03.2019	Mattias Esene	International Centre for Migration Policy Development	Abuja	B9
01.04.2019	Unyime Johnson	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	Benin City	D4
01.04.2019	Charles Nwanelo Ken	National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons	Abuja	B10
01.04.2019	Lawal Hamidu	National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons	Abuja	B11
02.04.2019	Ismaila Dangou	Economic Community of West African States	Abuja	B12
02.04.2019	Dr. Lawal Abubakar	Nigeria Immigration Service	Abuja	B13
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### **About MEDAM**

The Mercator Dialogue on Migration and Asylum (MEDAM) is a research and consultation project funded by Stiftung Mercator. It aims to identify and close the gaps in existing research and to develop specific recommendations for policy makers from an independent European perspective.

Research partners are the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), the Migration Policy Centre (MPC) at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), a think tank in Brussels.

Further information: [www.medam-migration.eu](http://www.medam-migration.eu)



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