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The Makers of Voters: How Sociotechnical Practices Uphold the Right to Vote in Cameroon

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(Presentation text, followed by slides)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure for me to be here in Brisbane and to take part in this panel to present the results of my recent research on population registers in Cameroon. I would like to thank Sofia, as well as all the other panelists, with whom I have been working for some time now, and who have played a key role in shaping this research. The directions and findings I will share today are, to a large extent, the result of their influence—both in how I approached the issue of population registers and in my reflection on the ethical and human rights dimensions they entail. Finally, I would like to thank the International Development Research Centre for funding this research and making it possible for us to meet here.

My presentation is titled "*The Makers of Voters: How Sociotechnical Practices Shape the Right to Vote in Cameroon.*" In the journal where this article will be published shortly, the title is slightly different. Nevertheless, my goal today is to briefly explain how I conducted this research, what types of population registers I examined, and what my findings reveal about the ethical challenges and human rights issues involved in these systems.

Slide 1

On voter registers as population registers

When we speak about population registers, many people immediately think of civil registration systems—or perhaps health records—but very few consider voter registers. I chose to focus on voter registers precisely to highlight their specificity and to show the growing importance of these infrastructures in societies that increasingly define themselves as democratic.

The voter register, as an infrastructure that records future potential voters, has become a cornerstone of participatory democracy in most African countries. Today, major political debates—on inclusion, the right to vote, and political representation—are often centered around the production and quality of voter registers. It is now widely accepted that a secure, transparent, and inclusive voter register is essential for organizing peaceful elections that are recognized by all stakeholders.

As a result, voter registers have become infrastructures that must be built carefully to ensure credible elections. One major strategy for building "trust registers" has been their technicization. The use of biometric technologies—on which Keith Breckenridge has done extensive work, and whose research provides valuable insights here—has become the new norm for creating digitalized voter registers believed to offer the required levels of security and reliability.

Although several studies have pointed out the limitations of this faith in biometrics, its use has increased in recent years, and it is likely that this trend will continue. What is particularly interesting, however, is how the introduction of biometrics in voter registration processes is transforming both how people are recorded and how their right to vote is technically guaranteed in Cameroon.

Slide 2

How do people enter the voter register in Cameroon?

My research set out to understand how individuals are enrolled in Cameroon's biometric voter register. This question offered a way to explore how population registers are constructed—not only through public policies and official procedures, but also through the everyday practices of registration agents, the role of machines and material tools, the forms of communication between the registration authority and the population, public responses, the logic behind enrollment campaigns, and the various constraints shaping registration experiences.

By examining these elements, I aimed to address a broader issue: the ethics of registration, human rights, and ultimately the right to vote.

To answer this question—how people actually enter the voter register in Cameroon—I conducted ethnographic research with Elections Cameroon, the national electoral body responsible both for managing elections and registering voters. I carried out interviews with officials at the central office and at local branches. I also observed the fieldwork of registration agents as they engaged with the public.

To analyze these interactions, I used a praxiographic approach, which focuses on the study of practices, based on the belief that these practices reveal key aspects of how institutions function in reality. I also drew on a large body of literature on population registers, as well as media and policy documents.

The analysis of this empirical material led to findings that I will now present.

Slide 3

How political longevity shapes the life of a register

One of the first findings of my research concerns how the political and socio-economic context affects the life of a voter register. Cameroon is currently governed by the oldest sitting president in the world. Since 1982, Paul Biya has consistently managed to win elections, giving the impression, as Achille Mbembe once put it, that Cameroon functions

like a disguised chieftaincy. In a few months, the country will hold another presidential election, and despite being 92 years old, Paul Biya appears to be a candidate once again.

This prolonged political rule is compounded by an economic crisis that has led to widespread unemployment and poverty. As a result, many Cameroonians have grown politically disillusioned. They no longer see the point in registering to vote, convinced that their participation will not change the country's trajectory.

This brings us to an important lesson about population registers: people do not always want to be included. Sometimes, they actively avoid being registered, for a variety of reasons. So, how do we build an inclusive register when the very people it is meant to serve do not wish to be part of it?

Slide 4

Registration criteria are technopolitical choices

Our research on the voter register in Cameroon shows that it is not enough to simply create a population register; what matters just as much—if not more—are the criteria that determine who can be included. These criteria are political decisions that can either promote inclusion or, on the contrary, deepen inequalities and exclusions.

One key criterion is age. In Cameroon, the voting register includes only people aged 20 and above. This may seem arbitrary, especially considering that the age of criminal responsibility in the country is 16. This raises an important question: if someone can be held legally accountable at 16, why must they wait until 20 to be granted the right to vote? In a country where over 60% of the population is extremely young, restricting voting rights based on age appears to be a political choice aimed at limiting the influence of youth and preventing potential challenges to those in power.

Another important criterion is nationality. Cameroon does not recognize dual nationality, which creates a serious obstacle for the many Cameroonians living abroad who hold two nationalities. These individuals are effectively excluded from participating in the political life of their country of origin. This exclusion benefits the ruling power by reducing political pressure—the fewer people who can vote, the less uncertainty and risk for those in power.

A final point about registration criteria concerns the Electoral Code, which sets the technical procedures for how people are registered. In Cameroon, this code remains controversial on many fronts, and calls for reform are increasingly voiced by political opposition parties and civil society actors.

This leads us to the conclusion that population registers—especially voter registers—are not neutral tools. They define the boundaries of political participation and are thus deeply political instruments. In short, population registers are infrastructures of power.

Slide 5

To Register is to negotiate and improvise

Our research in Cameroon shows that building a voter register is not just a matter of establishing legal frameworks or launching official projects. It also requires learning how to negotiate and improvise in a context marked by limited resources and weak infrastructure. This is exactly what field agents from Elections Cameroon have been doing for several years now, in ways that resemble what Michael Lipsky calls *street-level bureaucrats*.

But what exactly are these agents negotiating? They negotiate with central authorities for the financial and logistical resources needed to reach communities. They negotiate with traditional leaders to gain support and access. And they negotiate directly with the population, who are sometimes reluctant, suspicious, or even hostile. In short, they are constantly negotiating in order to register people.

Improvisation is another key part of the process. Agents often have to come up with on-the-spot solutions—many of them not foreseen in the legal framework—to respond to urgent problems in the field. This might include fixing a broken machine, working around missing registration materials, coping with funding shortages, or managing difficult conditions on the ground.

To describe these practices of negotiation and improvisation, I use the concept of *agility*. By this, I mean the ability of administrators, agents, and street-level bureaucrats to adapt to uncertainty, respond to emergencies, and mobilize whatever tools or rules are available—sometimes informal—in order to achieve their goals effectively.

In this context, building a voter register also means developing agile practices. These are especially important in countries like Cameroon, where such practices often determine whether the register can be completed at all. In fact, several agents acknowledge that without these forms of agility, the voter registers would not have the size or structure they do today.

Slide 6

Registering means courting voters—it's about marketing.

One of the key lessons from this investigation is that producing an electoral register is not just a matter of negotiation or improvisation: agents are sometimes compelled to go even further, actively trying to **court and persuade future voters**.

This is why, in my research, I introduced the concept of **electorate marketing**. Agents from Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), for example, explain that they often have to adopt strategies borrowed from the commercial sector: like a vendor convincing a customer, they attempt to “sell” voter registration as an attractive product—something beneficial for citizens. This involves producing radio and television ads, posters, press releases, and crafting messages that highlight the value of voting and civic participation.

In other words, these agents deploy a wide range of **persuasive strategies** to encourage people to register, even when they show reluctance or indifference.

This observation invites us to **reconsider conventional understandings** of registration campaigns. Contrary to the common assumption that people are eager to register but lack the opportunity, my study shows that **it is sometimes the citizens who resist being registered**, while the administration is forced to maneuver, convince, and push to meet its goals.

This paradox reveals a tension specific to the Cameroonian context: on one side, a political leadership that **claims—often disingenuously—to want to expand the electorate**, and an administration eager to appear efficient and neutral; on the other side, a large portion of the population that remains **distant or disillusioned** with the electoral process.

This complexity shows that building an electoral register is not only a technical or bureaucratic task—it is also a **struggle to mobilize, persuade, and rebuild citizens' trust** in democratic institutions.

Slide 7

Tracking the "Leave No Voter Behind" principle

To conclude this presentation, I would like to open a reflection on one of the fundamental principles guiding population registry policies today, both in Africa and worldwide: the principle of "Leave no one behind." This principle, central to the Sustainable Development Goals, states that every individual has the right to a legal identity and must be accounted for in public policies, particularly to ensure equitable access to basic social services.

In the context of my study, this principle could be reframed as "Leave no voter behind" – in other words, to leave no voter out. But a crucial question arises: what sociotechnical conditions truly make it possible to implement such a principle? How can we ensure that no one is excluded from the electoral register in contexts where citizens refuse to be registered, where material and human resources are lacking, and where political distrust is profound, under a regime marked by excessive concentration of power and a persistent democratic crisis?

These questions lead us to a central point: thinking about population registers means thinking about politics. Throughout this research, it became clear that these registers are not merely administrative tools. They are instruments of power, infrastructures of trust, and levers for redefining the relationship between the state and citizens.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the study of population registers—and their digitization—must continue to deepen, especially at a time when artificial intelligence promises to profoundly transform the way these registers are designed, managed, and used.

Thank you for your attention.



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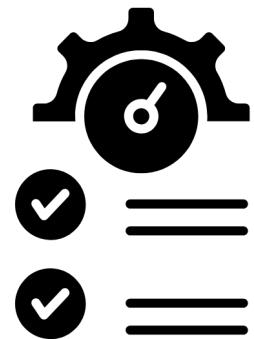
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Thanks !