



# Migration and development dynamics in Ekpoma, Nigeria

Ekpoma is a town in Edo State, known nationally for its university and education institutions. Given high outflows of migration in the State, migration interventions and campaigns are salient in Ekpoma.

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International migration is common, with individual or collective migrant investment contributing to the prestige associated with migration.

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Migration aspirations are near universal; for instance, the large majority of 18–39-year-olds (92%) would migrate to a richer country if given the necessary papers.

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Return migration in Ekpoma is prominent but varied. Some return through official routes and reintegration programmes from Libya or Europe.



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Photo: Iro Aghedo for MIGNEX.

Ekpoma is a fast-growing town in Edo State, with around 95,000 inhabitants. It used to be a farming town, but rapid urbanisation and farmer-herder conflict means that just 1% of surveyed young adults are engaged in agriculture.

The town now centres around Ambrose Alli University, which was founded in 1982 as Nigeria’s first state-owned university. The expansion of the university and the policies of Ambrose Alli – a medical professor and politician – have led to educational expansion, with other higher institutions now based in

Ekpoma too. Over one-third (36%) of surveyed young adults are currently studying.

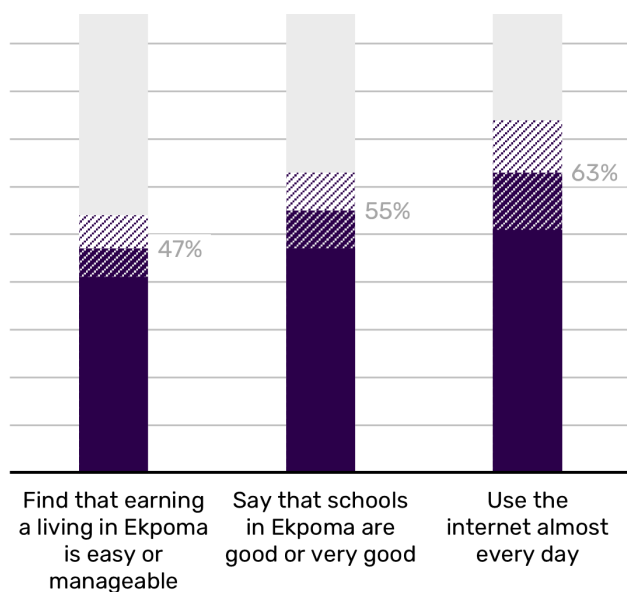
The university has had a great impact on the town’s growth, social structures, and livelihoods. Many people are now engaged in services and transportation, as well as metal fabrication, woodwork, and other non-farm manual work. Cybercrime, known locally as ‘Yahoo-Yahoo’, is also on the rise, and is seen as an alternative to migration. Just over half (53%) of surveyed young adults consider it very difficult to find a good job in Ekpoma.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data. The MIGNEX team also conducted research in Awe and Down Quarters and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Nigeria.<sup>1</sup>

**Migration from Ekpoma**

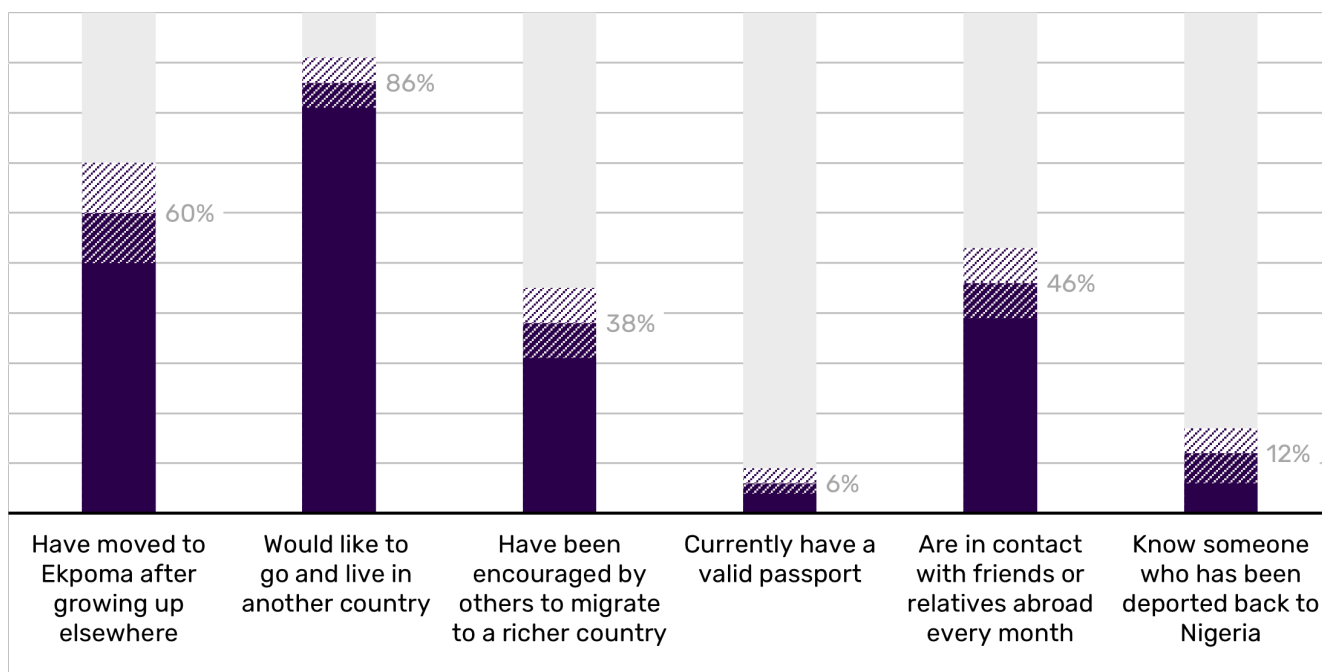
International migration is widespread in Ekpoma: nearly two-thirds (64%) of surveyed young adults have family or friends living abroad, predominantly in Italy (31%), the United States (18%) and other European countries.

Most young people have plans to travel abroad, in search of better life and employment opportunities. Knowledge of different channels, costs, requirements, and other aspects of travel, such as exchange rates, is widespread.



**Figure 1. Indicators of development**

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.



**Figure 2. Indicators of migration dynamics**

Source: MIGNEX survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

With Ekpoma and Edo State considered migration hotspots, donor-funded migration campaigns on the dangers of irregular migration, trafficking and migrant smuggling are widespread. Many young adults know of a migration campaign through social media (39%), TV (33%) or radio (24%).

The dangers of irregular migration are well known. Nevertheless, it remains common because people feel they have no other choice due to the high costs and stringent requirements of regular migration channels.

Europe is the preferred destination of most migrants, though many become trapped in Libya or other countries on the way.

Internal migration is also common for education and employment, including by recent graduates looking to apply their new skills. Over half (57%) of surveyed young adults know of someone from Ekpoma who has migrated internally in the past five years.

### Migration aspirations

Migration aspirations are strong in Ekpoma, particularly for international migration. Most surveyed young adults (86%) reported that they would prefer to leave Nigeria in the next five years and the large majority (92%) would migrate to a richer country if given the necessary papers. Most young adults (95%)

think their family would approve if they migrated to a richer country.

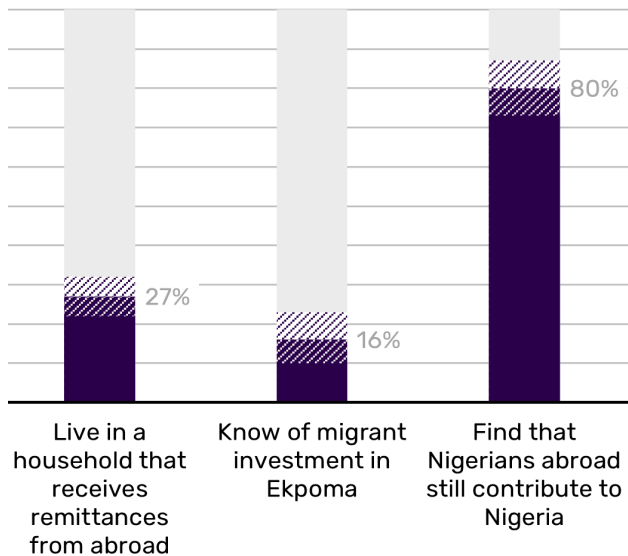
The buzz around international migration is further stimulated by prestigious social clubs for the mothers of migrants, who raise money for social events such as weddings. Other mothers' social clubs raise money for their children to migrate.

Nevertheless, people are realistic about the feasibility of migration given the high costs, even for irregular migration. In contrast to the high numbers of those who would prefer to leave, just one-third (33%) of young adults expect to leave Nigeria within the next five years.

Aspirations for internal migration from Ekpoma are also high, given the limited employment opportunities for graduates. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of young adults have seriously considered migrating internally in the past year.

*In less than three years, migrants return to build a house. Some government workers cannot build a home in their lifetime.*

Focus group participant



**Figure 3. Migration–development interactions**

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

### Return migration

Return migration in Ekpoma is common but varied. Some 15% of young adults have returnee family or friends - this includes retirees and those displaced by violence.

Some international returnees come back to invest in the town, creating employment opportunities. However, a larger share return with few assets, having been deported from Libya or European countries, for example through the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) return scheme.

More than one in ten (12%) young adults know of someone who has been deported – or have themselves been deported – from abroad. There is a large industry around reintegrating returnees, for instance through vocational schemes funded by international donors.

### In-migration

Nearly two-thirds (60%) of surveyed young adults in Ekpoma are internal migrants. This includes a large student population and internal migrants attracted by livelihood opportunities.

Other internal migrants have fled the insurgent violence and banditry that has engulfed much of northern Nigeria in the last decade. Ekpoma is also a transit town, with individuals stopping over on their way to the northern parts of Nigeria.

### Links between migration and development

Ties between Ekpoma people at home and abroad are active and strong. Over two-thirds (68%) of young adults have been in contact with migrant family or friends abroad in the past year. Remittances are common, mostly as supplementary income. While almost half (42%) of young adults with migrant family, relatives or friends had received remittances in the past year, few (3%) stated that remittances were the most important income for their household.

Nearly one-fifth (16%) of young adults know of migrant investment in Ekpoma. This includes education scholarships, and collective remittances. In addition to the migrant mothers' social clubs, other groups have supported infrastructure provision and public utilities. As such, migration is an important part of the fabric of Ekpoma.

### Notes

1. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Iro Aghedo and Precious Diagboya in November 2021, with assistance from Kenneth Abudu and remote collaboration with Moizza Binat Sarwar. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected young adults (aged 18–39 years) was conducted by Noi Polls in July–August 2021.

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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration–Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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