

# INTERIM OBSERVATION REPORT ON THE FIELD TESTING OF THE SMART CARD READER MACHINES (SRC)

*ISSUED BY*  
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- Introduction

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducted a field testing of the Smart Card Readers (SRCs) on March 7, 2015 in one ward in twelve states across the federation. The locations include; Oromenike Ward 1, Port Harcourt City (Rivers), Izzi Unuhu ward, Abakaliki (Ebonyi), Dalimore ward, Ado Ekiti (Ekiti), Mutum biyu II Ward, Gassol (Taraba), Dan maliki ward, Kumbotso (Kano), Raha ward, Bunza (Kebbi), Garaku ward, Kokona (Nasarawa), Egwa/gwada ward, Shiroro (Niger), Onigbongbo ward, Ikeja (Lagos), Igbo-ukwu I ward, Aguata (Anambra), Umuezei ward, Oshimili South (Delta) and Jama'are B ward, Jama'are (Bauchi). The exercise was conducted in 225 polling units and 358 voting points. The cumulative number of registered voters expected to participate in the 5 hour exercise was 171, 857 voters. According to INEC, the registration areas (RAs) were selected based on the distribution rate of the Permanent Voter Card (PVC). The 12 wards were reported to have full deployment of the PVCs and an appreciable distribution level of the PVCs<sup>1</sup>.

In pursuit of its goal of enhancing the quality of electoral processes through citizens' oversight [Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement \(YIAGA\)](http://www.yiaga.org)<sup>2</sup> deployed 195 observers to the 12 locations where the field test of the card reader machines held. The observers used a specially designed checklist for observing the field test. The checklist was designed to track the functionality and processing speed of the card readers. The table below is the breakdown of observers deployed by YIAGA for the exercise;

S/No	Locations (Wards)	No. of polling units	Number of Observers
1.	Igbo-ukwu	22	15
2.	Dalimore	23	25
3.	Dan Maliki	32	34
4.	Onigbongbo	31	13
5.	Raha	7	8
6.	Egwa/gwada	18	2
7.	Jama'are B	10	14
8.	Mutum Biyu II	13	14
9.	Umuezei	14	15
10.	Izzi Unuhu	16	18
11.	Garaku	14	17
12.	Oromenike Ward 1	23	20
TOTAL			195

- Political context

<sup>1</sup> Remarks at a briefing for members of the INEC press corps by the Chairman, Information and Voter Education Committee (IVEC), Dr. Chris O. Iyimoga, on Wednesday, 4<sup>th</sup> march 2015 at the media centre, INEC headquarters

<sup>2</sup> YIAGA is a non-government organization promoting electoral democracy and active citizens' participation. YIAGA is duly accredited by the electoral commission to observe 2015 general elections. Remarkably, the organization has been involved in observing the Continuous Voter Registration (CVR) and Permanent Voter Cards (PVC) since March 2014 till date. This has been made possible with due accreditation from INEC.

In recognition of the importance of free and fair elections, INEC has introduced the PVCs and card reader machines to eliminate electoral malpractices and fraud. The electronic authentication system involves the use of the Permanent Voter Cards and Smart Card Readers for voter accreditation at the polling unit<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the electronic accreditation is segmented into two levels; the verification and authentication of voter<sup>4</sup>. The verification authentication stage involves swiping of the Permanent Voter Card against the Card Reader for the purposes of verifying if the voter is the legitimate holder of the card and that the polling unit information in the PVC corresponds with details of the polling unit. It also enables the polling officials determine if the PVC is genuinely issued by the commission. The authentication stage involves matching the fingerprint of the PVC holder with the biometrics stored in the chip. Impressively, the card reader records number of PVCs verified/authenticated or declined with all the details of the voters. This information can be used to audit polling unit results and also determine whether accreditation figures have been altered or falsified.

The field testing of the Card Reader machines was conducted amidst an atmosphere of controversies regarding its reliability and efficacy. Fifteen political parties threatened to boycott the rescheduled general elections if INEC proceeds with its plan to deploy the card readers for the elections<sup>5</sup>. Some parties have also gone ahead to call for the sack of the INEC Chairman over the use of the card reader<sup>6</sup>. This new disposition of the parties contradicts their earlier position on the use of card readers for elections. Reportedly, INEC secured the approval of the political parties to use the card readers during one of its quarterly interface with political parties in 2014. In addition, the political parties consented and approved the *Guidelines and Regulations for Conduct of the 2015 Elections*.<sup>7</sup> The guidelines articulate the modalities for the use of card reader machines. For example, INEC in firm agreement with political parties introduced to use of incident report forms in the cases where PVC is verified by the card reader but the fingerprints is not authenticated. In ensuring the voter casts his vote, the Presiding officer will complete an Incident Report Form and the voter will be accredited to vote<sup>8</sup>.

INEC's insistence that the SCRs were satisfactorily tested before the rescheduling of the elections on March 7, 2015 has not secured the much needed conviction of some stakeholders. The major concern stems from the inability of the electoral commission to test run the machines on a large before national elections. It is argued that a test run of the machines will afford the commission an opportunity to address possible challenges the machines could pose during elections. Examples of such challenges include failure of batteries, arbitrary reconfiguration of the card readers and other unforeseen technical glitches. These concerns also formed the basis of legal actions instituted by some individuals

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<sup>3</sup> INEC Fact Sheet on Permanent Voter Cards and Card Readers

<sup>4</sup> INEC Election Manual 2015

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/03/polls-15-political-parties-5-presidential-candidates-threaten-boycott-over-card-readers/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/177957-4-political-parties-want-jega-fired-threaten-to-boycott-elections-over-card-readers.html>

<sup>7</sup> Q &As on Card Readers, 2015 at page 3

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

and political actors in several courts seeking injunctions and orders restraining the electoral commission from proceeding with its plan to deploy the card reader machines and Permanent Voter Cards for the March 28<sup>th</sup> and April 11<sup>th</sup> elections<sup>9</sup>

In response to these fears and concerns, INEC introduced modalities to deal with possible negative eventualities in the use of the card readers. The Commission purchased 35,000 back up batteries and 26,000 additional card readers to serve as replacements in the event a card reader fails during accreditation on the day of election<sup>10</sup>.

Undoubtedly, boosting citizen's confidence and trust in the use of the PVC and card reader machine is crucial to credible and peaceful elections. The PVC and card reader machines could undermine the elections and negatively impact voter turnout if its functionality and processing speed is not guaranteed before final deployment for the elections. It is against this background that INEC conducted the field test to reaffirm the functionality and efficacy of the Smart Card Readers (SRCs) before the elections.

- Legal bases

The Independent National Electoral Commission is statutorily empowered by the Nigerian Constitution<sup>11</sup> and the Electoral Act to issue guidelines in furtherance of its statutory mandate. This also guarantees the independence of the electoral commission as an arbiter or impartial umpire. In the exercise of this power, INEC issued the approved guidelines and regulations for the conduct of the 2015 general elections. The guidelines stipulate the role of duly accredited observers in elections. Election observers possess the right to observe the entire process including accreditation, voting, sorting and counting of ballots as well as collation, announcement and declaration of results<sup>12</sup>.

The Observation mission was undertaken in line with the inherent responsibility vested on civil society organizations to serve as watchdogs over activities within the entire spectrum of the electoral process<sup>13</sup>. Election is a process and not a one off event. The credibility of an election cannot be measured solely by the activities conducted on Election Day. Several pre-election activities precedes Election Day voting e.g. voter registration, political campaigns, training and deployment of election officers and materials, accreditation of party agents and observers. These activities if compromised could undermine the credibility of an election. Therefore, stakeholders in the electoral process should conscientiously monitor the conduct of these activities to ensure their conformity with legal and democratic standards as well as articulate recommendations for further improvements.

The goal of the observer mission was to observe the field testing of the card reader machines to ascertain its suitability and functionality ahead of the 2015 elections; generate evidence and produce an independent report on the viability of the card reader machines based on

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<sup>9</sup> <http://nigerianpilot.com/apc-queries-courts-jurisdiction-suit-use-pvcs/>

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Section 158, 159, 160 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Schedule, Part 1, F

<sup>12</sup> Manual for Election Officials, 2015 (Updated Version)

<sup>13</sup> INEC Guidelines for Election Observation

field observation; and improve INEC's operation and logistics plan for the 2015 elections through the provision of authentic and evidence based feedback.

In achieving these objectives, YIAGA ensured the observer mission was guided by the principles of fairness, objectivity, integrity, independence and professionalism as enunciated in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good governance, and the Global Principles for Non-partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations. YIAGA also ensured strict compliance with INEC Code of Conduct for Election Observers in the deployment of the observers engaged in this exercise.

- OBSERVATIONS ON THE FIELD TESTING OF THE CARD READERS

- a) General assessment

Based on field reports, the conduct of the exercise was peaceful and successful as the machines were visibly present in all the polling units where the exercise took place. Impressively, some voters defied the harshness of fuel scarcity and poor power supply to participate in the testing exercise. Though fraught with some challenges, INEC should be commended for utilizing the window created by the postponement of elections to perfect its preparations ahead of the elections. It should be restated that the field testing availed stakeholders the opportunity to assess the level of preparedness for the forthcoming polls.

- b) Commencement

In 92% of polling units, polling officials reported early to the polling station. The average arrival time across the PUs observed was 7:30am. 85% of polling units observed recorded early commencement of the exercise. The average commencement time in all the polling units covered by our observers was 8:05am. Some polling units commenced the exercise as late as 9:00am e.g. PU 008 Radan Maliki, Dan maliki ward and PU 028, Sheka primary in Kano state. We observed that the late commencement was not occasioned by late arrival of polling officials but late turn out of voters to the polling stations as was the case in Kano, Kebbi, Taraba and Niger states.

Due to logistics reasons, the exercise started around 8:45am in PU 016 and 017, Onigbongbo, Ikeja, PU 011 and 012 in Oromenike Ward 1 Port Harcourt city. The polling officials couldn't commence the testing because there were no tables or chairs to set up the polling unit. In addition to logistic reasons, the exercise couldn't start early in PU 018 Kwakwa primary school in Niger state due to the distant location of the polling unit from the ward centre.

- c) Logistics & personnel

There was adequate deployment of polling officials for the exercise. An INEC monitoring team comprising National Commissioners and Resident Electoral

Commissioners were visibly present during the exercise. The polling unit Majority of personnel deployed for the field testing were substantive INEC officers. 8% of the polling unit observed had students, NYSC members and non students as polling officials. The following election materials were deployed to the polling units; Voter register, card reader, incident report forms and voter information and statistics form. The Permanent Voter Card distribution register was not deployed to all the polling units covered by our observers.

d) Functionality of the Smart Card Reader

- Battery: The battery of the card reader machines were fully charged before commencement in 79% of polling units observed. This was not the case in Egwa/Gwada Ward 04 in Niger state where the card reader batteries were 45 to 50% charged as at the time of commencement. Some polling units in Izzu Unuhu ward in Ebonyi state also recorded cases of 45 to 50% battery power level. Extra batteries were not deployed in most polling units. Only 3% of PUs had extra batteries according to field reports. At the end of the exercise, the battery life of the card readers was slightly above average in 75% of polling units covered by our observers.

However, the battery of the card reader deployed to PU 008 Angwan Habu, Nassarawa state failed to perform optimally. Efforts were made to replace the battery because no extra battery was deployed to the PU at commencement of the exercise.

- Permanent Voter Card verification: 98% of polling units reported that the card reader successfully verified all the PVCs presented by the voters and registered in the polling unit. However, there were reported cases of non verification owing to double accreditation or PVCs registered in different polling unit separate from the PU where the exercise was conducted.

In an attempt to verify the reliability of the card reader, Senator Andy Uba presented a PVC of a voter who had already been accredited at Iruanaka Hall PU 02, Igboukwu Ward, Anambra state. The machine declined the attempt to accredit twice. Also in Ihuafor PU 02, the card reader decline verification when a voter presented a PVC registered in different polling unit.

An incident occurred in Bubbugaje Sch PU 04 where the card reader failed to verify several PVCs at 12:00pm. The card reader was revived after the polling official rebutted the system.

- Fingerprint authentication: Based on observer reports, 75 % of polling units observed reported the card reader machines declined fingerprint

authentication. In other words, the card reader machines didn't authenticate the fingerprints of the voter despite verification of the card by the reader. Some polling units recorded 100% non authentication of fingerprints. For example, in PU 014, Izundu open space, the card reader declined the fingerprint authentication of all the voters that participated in the exercise. Similarly, Angwan Sani Gwada PU 011 also recorded zero fingerprint authentication. Field reports also confirm that in polling units where the SCR declined fingerprint authentication, the INEC officials completed the *Incident Report Form* at the polling unit.

We observed that voters with dirty, oily and greasy fingers experienced some delays with the fingerprint authentication. Women with Henna decoration otherwise called 'lalle' on their hands also encountered challenges with the fingerprint authentication. Attempts to wash the hands or fingers using water, detergent or spirit yielded positive results in some polling units but also proved abortive in some cases.

- Processing speed: The average time spent on the verification of PVC is 5 seconds as observed in 84% of PUs. Devoid of any challenges, 20 seconds was the average time used for fingerprints authentication. Cumulatively, a each voter spent about 25 to 30 seconds for card verification and fingerprint authentication. This was the case in 78% of polling units observed.

More time was expended on fingerprint authentication when the card reader failed to authenticate the fingerprints. Averagely, the polling officials expended 10 – 15 minutes in an attempt to authenticate fingerprints denied authentication at first instance.

- Back up Card Readers: Only 10% of polling units reported the deployment of back up card readers for the exercise. Most polling stations didn't have any back up card reader machines.

e) Voter participation and enlightenment

98% of polling units observed recorded very low voter turnout for the exercise. There was insufficient public education on the exercise in all the states where the field testing was conducted. It was rumoured in a state like Kano that all those who participate in the testing exercise may not be able to vote with their PVC during the elections. This rumour discouraged the people in Dan makili Ward, Kano state from turning up for the exercise. It took the intervention of influencers like district heads to dispel the rumour and encourage people to participate.

There were reported cases of registered voter presenting their Temporary Voter Card for the accreditation. This was largely attributed to poor sensitization.

f) Security

Observers reported massive deployment of security operatives for the exercise. The major security institutions sighted in 85% of polling units observed are the Nigerian Police, Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps, Nigerian Immigration Service, Nigerian Prison Service and the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency. Only 15% reported the presence of military officers. The security agencies were civil and professional in the discharge of their duties.

g) Participation of Women and Persons with disability

98% of polling units had an average of two women as polling officials. There was very low participation of women and persons with disability in the field exercise. Majority of voters that turn out for the exercise were males.

▪ Critical incidents

- a. Double verification: Our observers reported double verification in Egwa primary school, Niger and Sheka Primary Sch in Kano state;
- b. Wrong configuration: In Busari B, Kebbi state, some voters reported to PU 003 Busari B where they registered and collected their PVC. They were denied accreditation because it was alleged that their voter details was wrongly configured to the card reader in PU 005 Sabe. The voters were referred to the polling unit in Sabe which is a distant 3 kilometres away from Busari. It should be noted that accessing the polling unit in Sabe requires travelling with canoe or ferry.
- c. Data transmission snags: Some polling units encountered network challenges when transmitting the collected information on the card reader to the central situation room or INEC central server in Abuja.

▪ Critical Challenges/Recommendations

- a) Difficulty in locating polling units: Some voters had challenges locating their polling units due to INEC's relocation of polling units from private buildings to public facilities. These voters reported at the centre where the continuous voter registration was conducted under the mistaken belief that the centre was their polling unit. This if not addressed could occasion chaos and tension on the day of election.

*Recommendations*

- LGA Electoral Officers should undertake massive public education on how to locate polling units;

- Without prejudice to the INEC Citizens Contact Centre domiciled in Abuja, a state and local government based information desk with reliable and accessible phone lines should be established to respond to questions posed by voters on election day;
- INEC should make a conscious effort to publicize the phone numbers of its Electoral Officers (EO) beyond uploading such information on its website;

b) Failure of Smart Card Readers to authentic voter fingerprints

*Recommendations*

- The INEC Voter Registry department and ICT department should run checks on the voter registry and data bank to ensure fingerprints match voter information details on the card reader machines. While we acknowledge that farmers and voters with dirty, oil or greasy fingers could face some challenges with the machines, the rampant cases of non authentication is suggestive that the voter information may not have been properly matched with biometrics or the machines could have been wrongly configured.
- INEC should conduct more exercises to improve the technical capacity of the polling officials. Polling officials should be adequately trained on best ways to handle the machines with diligence and care. A situation where polling officials attempt to clean the machines with their clothes or apparel is not acceptable;
- Adequate Incident Report forms should be deployed to the polling unit on election day. The line spacing on the current form occasions unnecessary delays in completing the forms. The spaces for inputting voter details on the form should be expanded;
- Finger print authentication should be limited to two fingers not 10. Once the machine rejects two fingers, a voter should be encouraged to fill the Incident Report Form and proceed for accreditation. This could prevent unnecessary delay and tensions on election day;
- There is need for INEC to boost confidence and educate the Nigerian electorates on the implications of filling the Incident Report Form. Some voter express scepticism about filling the forms as cases reported on similar forms during the Continuous Voters Registration and Permanent Voter Card distribution are still unaddressed;
- INEC should ensure polling officials exercise high sense of responsibility and caution when determining whether the image on the Card reader is the actual image of the holder of the card especially in cases where the image is unclear.

c) Low voter education and citizens participation

*Recommendations*

- There is need for massive public education on the card reader machines. INEC, Political parties, media organizations and civil society should undertake massive public education on the card readers;
- There's need for INEC to interface with party agents on the card reader. INEC should enlighten the party agents on the operations of the device.
- In conducting voter education, voters should be encouraged to report to the polling unit very early for accreditation on election day;
- INEC should utilize the phone numbers and email contacts of registered voters in its voter registry by sending electoral information using Short Message Service (SMS). SMS has proven to be a very reliable and viable means of reaching out to voters.

Other recommendations

- INEC should develop alternative ways of transmitting accreditation data from the polling unit to its central server in the event the GSM data service fail on Election Day.
  - INEC should deploy more female polling officials for the elections. This could encourage more women participation in the northern part of the country;
  - Polling officials should be properly educated on the role and duties of observers. Field reports indicate that some polling officials were hostile and non-cooperative with observers.
- Conclusion
- The card reader machine has proven to be a very efficient and reliable device for enhancing electoral integrity. We are convinced that the card reader machines if properly managed have tremendous potentials of preventing against electoral malpractices in the forthcoming elections. INEC has an opportunity to address the challenges experienced during the field testing exercise. Hence, our call that the deployment of the card readers machines for the 2015 elections should be supported by all stakeholders in the electoral process.