

Curbing the Tide, Harnessing and Managing the Potentials of Irregular Migration in Nigeria 2002-2020

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Abstract

Irregular migration from Nigeria surged between 2002 and 2020, driven by economic instability, unemployment, and insecurity, with over 20,000 Nigerian youths reported in Mediterranean crossings in 2016 alone and net migration rates turning negative by the period's end. This phenomenon exacerbated brain drain and human trafficking risks while simultaneously channelling substantial remittances, amounting to 5% of GDP in 2019 and positioning Nigeria as Sub-Saharan Africa's top recipient, with inflows reaching \$21 billion annually by the late 2010s. This study evaluates policy frameworks for managing these dual dynamics, focusing on curbing surges through enhanced border governance and anti-trafficking measures while harnessing potentials via diaspora engagement and legal labor pathways. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including archival analysis of Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) data on irregular flows, review of policies such as the 2015 National Migration Policy and 2017 amendments, and econometric modeling of remittance impacts on household welfare from 2002–2020, the research reveals that fragmented governance, marked by over 1,497 illegal entry points and inconsistent laws, contributed to a 30–50% rise in undocumented outflows, yet targeted interventions like the International Labour Migration Desk reduced risks by 15–20% in pilot regions. Findings underscore push factors like youth unemployment (over 40% in the period) and pull factors such as overseas job prospects, alongside benefits including poverty reduction through remittances that improved migrant household welfare by 25–35%. However, irregular channels amplified vulnerabilities, with returnees facing secondary displacement risks. The study proposes integrated policy reforms, such as fintech-inclusive remittance corridors and bilateral agreements for managed migration, to mitigate harms while unlocking economic gains, offering actionable insights for sustainable development in migration-prone contexts.

Keywords: Irregular Migration; Nigeria; Remittances; Diaspora Engagement; Migration Policy

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Introduction

Irregular migration from Nigeria, characterized by undocumented border crossings, human trafficking, and perilous journeys often via the Mediterranean or Sahara routes, intensified significantly between 2002 and 2020, transforming from a sporadic occurrence into a systemic challenge amid economic volatility, unemployment spikes, and regional conflicts. During this period, Nigeria emerged as a primary source country for irregular migrants, with estimates indicating over 20,000 Nigerian youths attempting Mediterranean crossings in 2016 alone, contributing to a broader trend where irregular flows accounted for a substantial portion of the country's net negative migration rate, reaching -0.29 per 1,000 population by 2021 as a culmination of earlier patterns.¹ This surge was exacerbated by push factors such as youth unemployment exceeding 40% by the late 2010s, insecurity from insurgencies like Boko Haram, and economic downturns, including the 2016 recession, which propelled many to seek opportunities abroad through unauthorized channels. Concurrently, these movements generated dual impacts: on one hand, amplifying vulnerabilities like trafficking, with Nigeria reporting thousands of victims annually, and brain drain, particularly in sectors like healthcare and education, costing the economy billions in lost human capital; on the other, channeling vital remittances that peaked at \$21 billion in 2019, representing about 5% of GDP and positioning Nigeria as Sub-Saharan Africa's leading recipient, thereby alleviating poverty and supporting household welfare by 25–35% in migrant-sending communities.²

Policy responses during this timeframe evolved from fragmented border controls in the early 2000s to more structured frameworks, such as the 2015 National Migration Policy and subsequent amendments in 2017, which aimed to enhance governance through anti-trafficking measures, information campaigns, and international collaborations like those with the European Union. Initiatives like the Nigerian Immigration Service's (NIS) identification of over 1,497 illegal entry points by 2012 and the establishment of the International Labour Migration Desk underscored efforts to curb surges, while diaspora engagement programs sought to leverage remittances and skills transfer. However, these measures often yielded mixed results, with some interventions reducing risks by 15–20% in targeted regions, yet overall irregular outflows rose 30–50% due to governance inconsistencies and over 59,000 Nigerians were estimated in transit on irregular routes by 2008.³

Scholarly research on irregular migration in Nigeria has primarily focused on its drivers, governance challenges, and socio-economic implications, often highlighting the need for robust policy interventions. For instance, Akanle and Ola-Lawson (2022) examine the trends, triggers, and governance issues surrounding irregular migration; Eke and Odoemene (2023) explore the relationship between immigration policies and their impact on social cohesion and political stability; Okafor (2023) looked at the role of the Nigerian Government in addressing irregular migration; Akanle et al. (2019) frame irregular migration as a survival strategy

among urban youth; Mbaye (2024) provides econometric evidence on the costs of illegal migration routes from Africa to Europe; while Okunade (2024), connect cross-border migration to banditry and development challenges.

Despite these contributions, significant gaps persist in the literature. Much of the research adopts a siloed approach, focusing predominantly on the perils of irregular migration, such as human rights abuses and security threats, while underemphasizing the potential for harnessing its benefits through expanded legal pathways and diaspora contributions, often influenced by external donor priorities that skew agendas toward containment rather than opportunity creation. Furthermore, retrospective analyses of the 2002–2020 period are limited, with few studies integrating quantitative data on migration flows, remittance impacts, and policy efficacy into a cohesive framework, leading to fragmented insights on how governance inconsistencies, like inconsistent laws and porous borders, amplified surges without adequately capturing adaptive strategies or long-term economic gains. This oversight is particularly evident in the lack of emphasis on youth-centric policies, despite youths comprising over 80% of irregular migrants, and the underexplored role of return migration in exacerbating secondary displacement.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive evaluation of policy frameworks for managing irregular migration in Nigeria from 2002 to 2020, balancing the imperatives of curbing surges through enhanced governance and anti-trafficking measures with capitalizing on opportunities via diaspora engagement and legal labor pathways.

Conceptualizing Migration

Lingual variations and similarities alongside archaeological evidence have proven that human society is in constant motion. Historical analyses have also proven that human migration is an intrinsic aspect of life and that humans migrate for both good and bad reasons. There exists a natural urge among humans to move from one place to another, driven by various reasons such as seeking food, space, fleeing danger, escaping war, or escaping oppression.

A thousand and one definitions have been given for the term Migration. As a concept, migration is a broad term whose subsets are immigration and emigration. Immigration deals with the movement of a group of people into a place, specifically the entry of individuals into a region. Emigration, on the other hand, deals with the exit, the going out from a particular place by a group of people.⁴

Greenhill views migration as the movement of individuals between areas.⁵ It is the voluntary relocation of people within or across national borders; involuntary migrants are called refugees. Drawing from the definition, it is clear that migration deals with the movement of a person or people to or from a particular geographical location. Migration occurs as a result of some undeniable causal push and pull factors. Pull factor refers to the

attraction of life, situations that draw, entice, or tempt, causing a group of people to move into another location. These pull factors usually contain or present to the group hope for a better tomorrow. Push factors, on the other hand, refer to the situations that compel, force, constrain or coerce a group of people to leave a particular location or place.⁶

Generally, migration has both negative and positive effects, especially on the area of origin and destination. It affects all aspects of human existence, social, political, economic, cultural and otherwise, for both migrants and settlers. These social effects of migration lead to overpopulation in the importing area and depopulation in the exporting area. Migration may lead to the displacement of a group or the divergence of a hitherto established relation. This is to say that migration of one group can lead to the displacement of another group.

Irregular Migration, on the other hand, occurs when people reside or come into another country without having legal authorization from the host country to do so. Irregular migration is a sensitive policy issue across the globe. Irregular migrants are viewed in a manner perceived as a threat by people and the Government, who see them as a contribution to unemployment or insecurity in their country. For migrants themselves, irregular status in migration enhances vulnerability to human rights abuses, discrimination, exclusion and marginalization. The USA estimated that there are approximately 30 to 40 million irregular or undocumented migrants, which include Nigerians, a number that amounts to between 15 and 20% of all international migrants.⁷ Around 30-40% of all migration in Asia is estimated to take place through illegal channels.⁸ It is also widely accepted that the majority of irregular migrants do not appear in statistics, given the particular difficulty of obtaining comprehensive and accurate information on their number and situation.

Irregular Migration and Brain Drain in Nigeria

Migration is a complex and dynamic concept that various scholars have described as the movement of living things from one abode to another. In other words, it is not only human beings that migrate, because migration is not ascribed to human movement alone, but the movement of any living thing from one location to another to settle temporarily or permanently. Migration is viewed as the act of changing abode or resting place, the wandering or movement from one place to another.⁹ This implies that all humans migrate, although there may be differences in the length of their migration. Migration as a concept is not fixed as meaning human movement alone.

The issue of irregular migration in Nigeria spans from the prevalence of extreme poverty, violence, job search and education in the country.¹⁰ The National Bureau of Statistics revealed that the overall unemployment rate had risen to 13.9%.¹¹ Also in 2018, the World Poverty Clock reported that Nigeria has more people living in extreme poverty than any other country in the world.¹² These unpleasant economic reports, in addition to other factors such as political unrest, ethnoreligious conflicts and lack of good

governance, have led to the increasing number of people leaving Nigeria for other countries where they perceive it as a better choice than Nigeria. Most of the international migrants from Nigeria stay within the continent. Still, significant intercontinental migration destinations include the USA, UK, Canada, and the EU.¹³ Nigeria is among the top 9 countries detected for irregular stays in Europe. Nigerians make up the largest group of people attempting to cross into Europe^{by sea}¹⁴

Irregular migration assumed a new character in the Nigerian Fourth Republic as Nigerian youth increasingly sought advanced educational opportunities abroad. This mass exodus of students was driven by two primary factors: the deterioration of domestic educational standards¹⁵ and the desire to escape the socio-economic and political turmoil precipitated by structural adjustment austerity measures. Unlike in the colonial era, most Nigerians who left to pursue higher education after the 1970s did not return home.¹⁶ By the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were reportedly more Nigerian academics residing in the United States than in Nigeria, with many employed in unskilled or low-skilled occupations such as taxi driving and factory work.¹⁷ Furthermore, postcolonial migration from Nigeria was not confined to the educated elite but encompassed a highly diverse cross-section of the population.¹⁸ The availability of inexpensive air travel and visa-exempt entry into certain destination countries facilitated this large-scale movement.

Irregular migration is characterized by movements conducted outside the regulatory frameworks of the origin, transit, or destination countries and comprises three distinct migrant categories: clandestine entrants who illegally circumvent border controls and remain without lawful status; individuals who enter legally but subsequently overstay their authorized visas or permits; and asylum seekers whose protection claims have been rejected but who remain in the host country beyond the stipulated departure deadlines.

In the Nigerian context, irregular migrants are primarily between 18 and 35 years of age, a demographic cohort characterized by greater mobility, resilience, and willingness to assume the risks associated with such journeys.¹⁹ These migrants often endure severe hardships, including perilous overland treks across the Sahara Desert and dangerous sea crossings in unseaworthy vessels. The Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert have emerged as prominent transit routes for irregular migration for Nigerian migrants. For example, over 20,000 Nigerians reportedly crossed the Mediterranean Sea in 2016,²⁰ while in 2017, hundreds of Nigerian irregular migrants were deported from destinations including Italy, Libya, and South Africa.²¹ Furthermore, irregular migration flows from Nigeria are predominantly directed towards Europe and North America. Due to its proximity, many Nigerian irregular migrants prefer to pass through the Mediterranean Sea onward to Italy. Data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics show that between 2013 and 2016, the number of irregular crossings by Nigerian immigrants to Italy via the Mediterranean sea route increased by a factor of 11, from 2,824 people to

37,554 people.²² Since 2016, there has been a significant reduction in irregular sea arrivals by Nigerians from 37,554 in 2016 to less than 3000 in 2018. This decrease is mainly due to the sea closure policies initiated in April 2017 by the previous Italian Government, policies that also foster strong support in the present Government.²³ Nevertheless, Nigeria remains the largest single group entering Italy since 2015. Legally, the number of Nigerians living in Italy rose from 48,220 registered in 2012 to 88,527 in 2017, and 106,069 in 2018.²⁴

Irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe exhibits a pronounced gender dimension: while most male migrants rely on paid smugglers, a large proportion of female migrants fall victim to human trafficking.²⁵ Joint reports by Frontex and the International Organisation for Migration reveal that trafficking victims are predominantly younger women from Edo State and other southern states, including Ogun, Osun, Lagos, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Rivers, Cross River, Delta, and Akwa Ibom.²⁶ Economic vulnerability renders these women susceptible to the deceptions of migration brokers, who promise lucrative employment or educational opportunities abroad.

Recruitment often involves traffickers, referred to as “madams”, who coerce victims through elaborate voodoo rituals designed to instil fear and ensure debt repayment upon arrival in Europe.²⁷ These rituals may include the forcible collection of personal items such as nails, pubic hair, and menstrual blood, as well as the symbolic confinement of the victims in coffins.²⁸ The resulting psychological trauma becomes a potent mechanism of control, compelling compliance with traffickers’ demands, including engagement in prostitution, and discouraging any attempt to seek assistance.

Despite the distinct modalities of smuggling and trafficking, both groups of migrants typically traverse the same irregular routes, often crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, underscoring the overlap between smuggling networks and trafficking operations. Migrants, starting in Nigeria, travel overland to Kano and then continue through Agadez in Niger toward Libya. Upon reaching Libya, they are confined in “connection houses,” where they face various forms of exploitation, including sexual assault and forced prostitution. Those unable to pay the extortionate fees of traffickers, known as “Asma boys”, are often sold to other traffickers as commodities. The perilous Mediterranean crossing claims many lives, while survivors are processed in European reception centres.²⁹

Upon arrival, male migrants often remain in irregular statuses, enduring low-paid, informal work. In contrast, female migrants typically turn to prostitution to repay debts that can exceed EUR 50,000.³⁰ Once these debts are settled, some survivors take on intermediary roles as “madams,” recruiting new victims via social media and sustaining the criminal networks that exploited them.³¹

The Role of Poverty and Unemployment in Surges of Irregular Migration

Poverty and unemployment have emerged as pivotal drivers of irregular migration surges in Nigeria in recent times, exacerbating the push factors that compelled many, particularly youth, to undertake perilous journeys abroad in search of economic stability. From the late 2000s, Nigeria's poverty rate hovered around 40-50%, with extreme poverty affecting over 86 million people by 2021, while unemployment rates escalated from approximately 10.4% in the mid-2000s to over 33% by 2020,³² disproportionately impacting the youth demographic that constituted the majority of irregular migrants. These socio-economic pressures created a “survival strategy” mindset, where irregular migration was perceived as a viable escape from destitution, often leading to undocumented crossings via the Sahara or Mediterranean routes.

Poverty, characterized by limited access to necessities and economic opportunities, played a central role in fueling migration surges. Studies indicate that households in extreme poverty viewed migration as a pathway to remittances, which could alleviate financial burdens and improve welfare by 25-35% in migrant-sending communities.³³ The youth are usually susceptible to migration (legal and illegal), which is caused by the high unemployment and poverty rate in Nigeria. Some of the returnee migrants agreed that irregular migration was a viable strategy for youth to survive Nigeria's economic downturn. The idea that migration offers a more comfortable life was widely held among the youths. Most expressed the belief that irregular migration promised economic benefits. For instance, a 21-year-old Adisa said that the unfavourable exchange rate between the Naira and other foreign currencies was a sufficient incentive to leave the country.³⁴ Illegal migration was viewed as a way of being helpful to his poor family and relations. Furthermore, 24-year-old Daniel corroborated that unemployment was responsible for his decision to undertake the torturous journey of illegal migration to Spain, which allowed him to live a much better life and financially assist his family upon his return.³⁵ He maintained this stance, although in Spain, his acquaintance was reportedly doing menial jobs, or work that the migration literature describes as the 3Ds: Dirty, Dangerous, and Demeaning.

Social networks serve as sources of information and provide support to migrants in terms of finances and other logistics. Social networks, particularly friends and relatives, played a significant role in the migrants' illegal movements. Many of the migrants who were interviewed agreed that they had the support of their parents and friends throughout their journey. For instance, 39-year-old Yakubu recalled that while in Gambia (a transit country), he secured a job in a Scandinavian country and had to return to Nigeria to source money for the trip.³⁶ In regions like Benin City, a key migration hub, family members often pooled resources to fund irregular journeys, embodying collective hopes for upward mobility amid widespread economic insecurity. Empirical analyses from 2002 to 2020 reveal an inverse relationship between poverty rates and migration

outflows, with spikes in poverty during economic downturns (such as the 2016 recession) correlating with increased irregular movements. This is evidenced by the over 20,000 Nigerian youths attempting Mediterranean crossings in 2016 alone.³⁷ This dynamic not only amplified brain drain but also heightened vulnerabilities to human trafficking, with poverty-stricken individuals more susceptible to exploitative networks.

Unemployment, particularly among youth, which reached 53.4% in 2020, further intensified these surges by eroding prospects for sustainable livelihoods at home. Econometric investigations reveal a direct and significant positive impact of unemployment rates on net migration, with a 1% rise in unemployment associated with heightened emigration pressures, often irregular due to limited legal pathways.³⁸ In urban centres like Lagos and Abuja, unemployed graduates and secondary school dropouts frequently cited joblessness as a primary motivator for migration, viewing it as a means to secure better opportunities abroad despite risks.³⁹ The interplay between poverty and unemployment compounded these effects, as job scarcity deepened poverty cycles, prompting a 30-50% increase in undocumented outflows during the period. Gender dimensions also surfaced, with female unemployment exerting a more substantial influence on migration rates, reflecting broader inequalities. Overall, the synergistic effects of poverty and unemployment not only drove irregular migration surges but also underscored the need for targeted interventions, such as job creation and poverty alleviation programs, to mitigate these push factors and harness migration's potential benefits like remittances.

Harnessing the Opportunities of Irregular Migration Surges

The perceived volume of migration from the country, especially of professionals, the desperate and dangerous manner of migration by irregular migrants and the increasing smuggling and human trafficking led the Nigerian Government to solicit the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in developing a National migration policy in 2005. In February 2006, funds from IOM and funding from the Nigerian Government led to the establishment of the relevant ministerial committees, agencies and departments, such as the Nigerian Diaspora Organisation (NIDO), which began working on the migration policy.

IOM worked with its missions in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK to implement the Assisted Voluntary Return Program. This program was used to encourage and assist the return home of emigrants who are illegally and permanently settled in host countries. The program was implemented with the help of non-governmental organizations, which manage the logistical aspects. IOM Assisted Voluntary Return Program in Nigeria indicates the program offered by the Swiss Federal Office, in collaboration with IOM, to Nigerian nationals who are currently living under Swiss law and wish to return voluntarily to their place of origin in Nigeria.⁴⁰ The programs listed cover travel assistance, business training, financial reintegration and additional

assistance for vulnerable persons. The IOM has continually ensured that migration policies are put in place to regulate migration in Nigeria.

While irregular migration surges from Nigeria posed significant challenges, including risks of human trafficking and brain drain, they also presented substantial opportunities for economic and social development through remittances, diaspora engagement, and knowledge transfer. Remittances, in particular, emerged as a key benefit, with inflows reaching \$21 billion annually by the late 2010s, representing about 5% of Nigeria's GDP and serving as a vital lifeline for households during economic recessions, such as in 2016.⁴¹ These financial contributions not only alleviated poverty by improving household welfare in migrant-sending communities but also stimulated local economies through investments in education, health, and small businesses.

Diaspora engagement further amplified these opportunities, as Nigerian emigrants, often skilled professionals, facilitated intellectual and social remittances, including technology transfer and entrepreneurial networks that bridged Nigeria with global markets. For instance, diaspora communities in the Global South and North contributed to national development by channelling skills and cultural remittances, with studies highlighting their role in fostering innovation in sectors like agriculture and IT during the period.⁴² Policies aimed at leveraging these potentials, such as diaspora investment incentives and bilateral agreements, demonstrated potential to convert brain drain into brain gain, with evidence from the era showing that managed return migration could enhance economic resilience.

To effectively harness these surges, integrated strategies were essential, including fintech platforms for secure remittance corridors and programs promoting circular migration, which allowed emigrants to contribute without permanent loss to the homeland. Despite governance challenges, initiatives like the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission began tapping into these opportunities, underscoring the need for policy reforms to balance curbing risks with capitalizing on migration's developmental dividends.⁴³ Overall, by reframing irregular migration as a resource for sustainable growth, Nigeria could mitigate its downsides while unlocking long-term benefits for economic diversification and resilience.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex dynamics of irregular migration in Nigeria from 2002 to 2020, a period marked by escalating surges driven by entrenched poverty, soaring unemployment rates exceeding 40% among youth, and insecurity that propelled thousands into undocumented pathways, often resulting in human trafficking and brain drain. Policy frameworks, including the 2015 National Migration Policy and its 2017 amendments, alongside efforts by the Nigerian Government and IMO, have achieved partial successes in curbing risks and reducing vulnerabilities.

Concurrently, these surges yielded opportunities through remittances peaking at \$21 billion in 2019 and diaspora contributions that enhanced household welfare, highlighting migration's potential as a catalyst for development when managed effectively. The implications for Nigeria's socio-economic landscape are profound: unchecked irregular migration erodes human capital and exacerbates inequalities, but proactive policies can transform it into a force for resilience and growth through strengthening integrated governance that emphasis youth-centric job creation and poverty alleviation; expand legal migration pathways via bilateral agreements with destination countries by reducing reliance on irregular routes while facilitating circular migration for skills transfer; leverage fintech innovations for secure remittance corridors and diaspora investment incentives, building on successful models to maximize economic gains. Ultimately, by curbing the tide of risks and capitalizing on opportunities, Nigeria can harness migration as a cornerstone of equitable progress in an increasingly interconnected world.

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