

## **The Nigerian Migration Dilemma: The Surge in Irregular Migration to Europe.**

**Fajemirokun Olufemi**

### **Abstract**

This paper delves into the notion of irregular migration of Nigerians living in Nigeria to Europe. The literature studied revealed that there are push and pull factors that contribute to increased irregular migration. These factors are economic, such as the high unemployment rate in Nigeria, economic policies such as the foreign exchange bills and others that have plunged the nation into poverty, hunger, and insecurity, with an inflation rate of over 35%. These factors align with the theoretical framework relevant in this paper, such as the theory of a failed State and Neoclassical migration theory. Other concerns about the growth of irregular migration stem from human security rights, a right that appears increasingly threatened by restrictive international migration policies. Unlike most European and Western countries, which impose restrictive border controls on countries with a high risk of insecurity, Nigeria is one of the eight countries listed by Transparency International. This paper also explored the trends of irregular migration, noting one of the trends to fall under human trafficking. Recommendations for rebuilding Nigeria's economic and social structure were also proffered. Also, the importance of collaboration with international communities and organizations on enacting less restrictive migration policies was alluded to.

**Keywords:** *Irregular Migration, Nigeria, Mediterranean Sea, IOM, Economic Issue*

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Fajemirokun Olufemi, Independent Researcher  
[femifajemirokun@yahoo.com](mailto:femifajemirokun@yahoo.com)

## Introduction

The concept of irregular migration refers to the movement of persons across country borders with improper documentation, violating immigration laws (IOM, 2019). According to a 2024 report by the International Organization of Migration (IOM), more than 12,000 Nigerians had migrated to Italy through the Mediterranean route between year 2023 and 2024 (IOM, 2024). In fact, there was an uproar in 2017 on the brutal experiences faced by Nigerian men and women who follow the Mediterranean route to Europe. Most of them have been reported to have been sold into slavery in Libya, others drowned at sea, while some others were deported back to Nigeria with little to no money. However, the issue of increased migration to Europe by Nigerians is a case of many factors rooted in the structural failures of governance in Nigeria. These failures are experienced in areas of economic hardship, including high inflation rates, high unemployment rates, and poverty, as well as factors such as political instability, the absence of social amenities and infrastructures. Insecurity, stemming from Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, herder attacks, and other factors, intensifies the desire of Nigeria, particularly the young demographic, to seek better living prospects abroad (IOM, 2019; Frontex, 2019).

The statistics of migration and the consequent deportation of Nigerians from European countries exemplify the trend of irregular migration. According to a report by (Angulu, 2023), more than 50 Nigerians had been deported from Sweden, Luxembourg, Austria, Belgium, Hungary, between May to September of 2023, while July 2023 had over 180 Nigerians deported from Germany due to their illegal forms of migration to these countries, and the nuisance caused by these Nigerians in these countries, either through drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other forms of crime.

The irregular migration of Nigerians to Europe has raised concerns, highlighting the need for the Nigerian government to develop policies that address both push and pull factors driving this migration. A report by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment claimed that the Government of Nigeria has tightened its belt through various reforms and policies addressing employment rate, high inflation, and other issues. Educational and skill training programs and initiatives are signed on paper, but little execution has been noticed in their administration and subsequent output. Economic initiatives, such as agriculture reforms, SMEs grants, and loan schemes, have often been seen to be dead on arrival. More so, law enforcement agencies tasked with the mitigation of human and sex trafficking of young Nigerians to Europe have, to an extent, been progressive, given Nigeria's diplomatic engagement with these countries, which strengthens the repatriation of trafficked persons to Europe. Bilateral agreements and partnership frameworks are still underway, as the social and economic issues that cause persons to fall victim to irregular migration persist (NIS, 2017).

This paper explores the concept of irregular migration of Nigerians to Europe, examining the factors that facilitate this movement, the challenges it presents, and potential solutions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Studies have shown fundamental internal push factors such as economic collapse, political instability or crisis, and even human insecurity, to be the primary contributors to the reason why Nigerians, especially the young demography, involve themselves in irregular migration practices (IOM, 2018; Connor & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019).

Statistics have shown that Nigeria has one of the highest irregular migrants in Europe, and one of the top African countries migrating to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea (European Migration Network, 2018), with over 37,554 immigrants to Italy through the sea between 2013 and 2016 according to (ISTAT, 2019). This figure has tripled in recent years, primarily due to certain international pull factors, including the search for better job opportunities, education, or social welfare services from European countries. The problem of restrictive international migration policies, especially those of European countries, has created avenues for traffickers to lure unwary Nigerians through the Central or Eastern Mediterranean to Europe with the guise of job prospects (Olaiya & Chukwuemeka, 2019).

A 2017 report by the NIS (2017) revealed over 20,000 Nigerian migrants through the aforementioned routes in 2016. Some of the migrants die on their way due to the hazardous experience of this form of migration; others are made to become sex slaves or used as pregnancy machines in Libya. Others are often sent back to Nigeria due to their debts (UNHCR, 2018). Due to the continuous existence of issues such as political crisis, insecurity, and most of all, human insecurity, those either repatriated from Europe from human trafficking or those sent back from Libya, would often find ways to illegally re-migrate to Europe (Plambech, 2018). Based on these existing factors, this paper seeks to understand the trends of irregular migration to Europe amidst these factors. Some migrant's narratives are even studied and presented in this paper to have a complete comprehension of the endemic called 'irregular migration'.

### **Review of Literature**

Irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe has been on the rise over the past two decades (Ikuteyijo 2020), primarily through illegal routes such as the Mediterranean, Sahara, and many others.

The phenomenon of irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe has witnessed a significant increase over the last twenty years, as highlighted in the study by (Ikuteyijo 2020). This trend is particularly prominent in the utilization of illegal routes, including but not limited to the perilous journeys through the Mediterranean and Sahara regions. For instance, many Nigerian migrants embark on treacherous voyages across the Mediterranean Sea in overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, risking their lives in pursuit of better opportunities in Europe. Similarly, the Sahara

desert presents a formidable obstacle for migrants, with harsh conditions and limited access to necessities posing serious threats along the way.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Neoclassical Migration Theory, which propagates that migration is an economic decision (Todaro, 1969), was one of the theories adopted for this study. Most Nigerians who seek to migrate to Europe, albeit illegally, believe that the hardships and challenges of irregular migration far outweigh the benefits they will gain in Europe. However, this is often a miscalculation based on the misinformation about the European life they dream of.

Furthermore, the best point of departure for the concept of irregular migration of Nigerians is the theory of a failed state. Nigeria suffers from systemic inequality, as evidenced by high rates of unemployment, breakdowns in law and order, and a high risk of human insecurity, political corruption, poverty, a large number of out-of-school children, economic instability, and many others (Kaplan, 1996). The inability of the State, in this case Nigeria, to deliver on education, security, employment, healthcare, and other basic services creates loopholes that force individuals to look for these services in another country. This theory posits that the State is a primary actor in the international migration system.

The lack of basic services that results in a failed state, a system where insecurity, such as terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and ethnic conflicts, pummels, creates an economic loop or hardship, which is also exacerbated by bad governance (Ake, 1981). This affects both regional stability and global stability, leading to the creation of strict international migration policies that deter citizens from Nigeria, for instance, from easily migrating to Europe through legal means; hence, the need for irregular migration routes (Adibe et al., 2023).

### **Concept Framework**

#### ***Nature of Irregular Migration from Nigeria to Europe***

Primary research conducted by Kingsley (2019) presented results that proved that the level of irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe is closely tied to the political and economic climate of Nigeria. This had prompted the EU to tighten its migration policies, leading millions of Nigerians to seek illegal means to migrate out of the country. Adibe et al. (2023) argue that the freedom of movement, a fundamental human right, is stifled by EU migration policies. This argument is accurate; however, the issue of irregular migration, exacerbated by strict border controls, can only be effectively addressed through bilateral agreements or a collaborative framework for border control that takes into account specific neo-vector factors, particularly the need for the Nigerian government to address its under-development and growth issues.

Countries violating migration laws often overlook the concept of human rights, particularly in relation to freedom of movement. The fear stems from the migrants' propensity to disrupt their stable economy and dwindle their food security, among other concerns. The irregular nature of this archetype of migration has been evident for some years. The regulation of persons to move from their country of citizenship to another is one that is guided by the political discourses of different nation-states (Duvell, 2008). Religious orientation, especially as it regards Muslim extremism, is one factor that forms discourses on the creation of stricter migration laws. The 9/11 terrorist attack in the city of New York, United States of America, was one vital event that informed specific frameworks that created a dichotomy between immigrants from one country and their preferred country of immigration.

Notably, the nature of irregular migration in Nigeria, which is based on searching for greener pastures, has individuals, especially the young demography, fall victim to cases of trafficking or other forms of organised crimes as they are smuggled across borders illegally (Florence et al., 2021). The trafficking nature of irregular migration is usually gendered, as the majority of the victims, if not all, are females (Carling, 2006). Due to poverty, lack of education and awareness, the offer of a well-paid job in Europe seems glamorous. However, unbeknownst to them, they are speaking with human traffickers and sex traffickers. Study shows that States such as Edo, Cross Rivers, Ogun, Osun, Anambra, Enugu, Delta, and Akwa Ibom have the largest victims of human trafficking irregularly migrated to Europe (IOM, 2017).

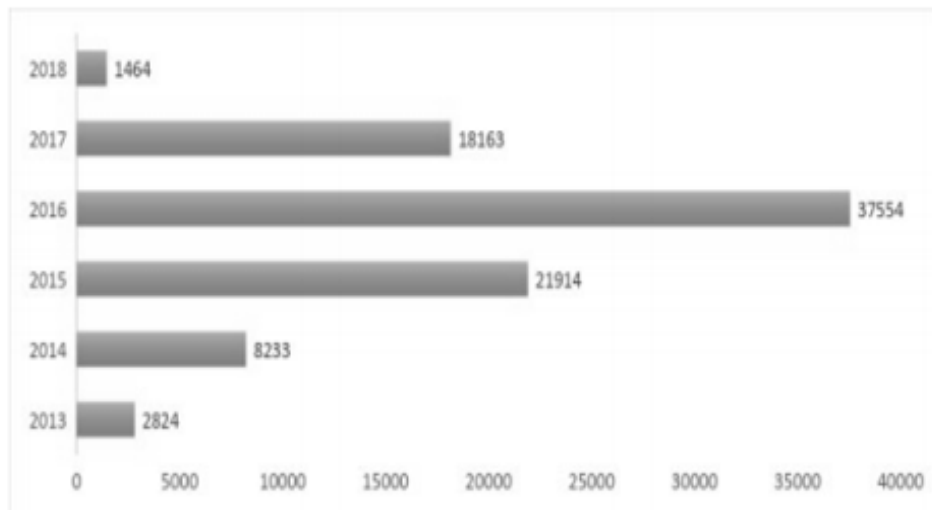
### **Trends of Irregular Migration from Nigeria to Europe**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Nigeria falls under one of the nine countries that irregularly migrate to Europe according to the European Migration Network (2018), through the Mediterranean Sea, especially to Italy. Between 2013 and 2016, the ISTAT (2019) report showed that persons of Nigerian origin who migrated from the Mediterranean to Italy were approximately 40,000. However, due to the sea closure policies enacted in 2017, the number of migrants has reduced by 3000 as recorded in the year 2018, according to Scour (2018) and ISTAT (2019). However, there are other illegal routes that Nigerians are currently utilizing in their migration journey.

It is noteworthy to note that the rate of irregular migration through the sea from Nigeria to Europe peaked between 2016 and 2017, with 181,436 and 119,369 persons, respectively. For those who were entering Spain through the same route, their number was 26,168 in 2019, which was a decline from the 58,523 number in the previous year (ISTAT, 2019). However, studies revealed that most Nigerians go through the Western Mediterranean Sea, which is more preferable than the Central Mediterranean (IOM, 2019). One of the interviews conducted with an irregular migrant by Adibe et al. (2023) revealed that the majority of the migrants are arbitrarily detained in prisons or camps within African borders, especially in Libya. Others are captured and sold into slavery,

and they do not make it to Europe. At the same time, most women are turned to baby factories in places like Morocco or Libya for those using those routes to Spain or other European countries. Another respondent in the interview conducted by Adibe et al. (2019) stated that these treatments do not deter millions of irregular migrants, as there are no jobs in Nigeria to feed themselves and their large family unit.

The figure below shows the trend of sea arrivals of Nigerians to Italy from 2013 to 2018



*Figure 1: Trend of Irregular Migrants through the Sea from Nigeria to Italy (2013-2018)*

*Source: (ISTAT, 2019)*

## **Driving Factors of Irregular Migration in Nigeria**

### ***Socio-Economic Factors***

This is one of the push factors for irregular migration. The Failed State theory highlights the factors contributing to irregular migration, including poor governance characterised by a lack of basic services like employment, education, and healthcare, resulting in high poverty rates. Most importantly, the low engagement of the human capital in Nigeria is the resultant effect of irregular migration (NBS, 2024). The standard of living in Nigeria is currently high due to the high inflation rate of 35%, which has risen from a hike in food prices, unfavourable economic policies, and reforms (Patrick et al., 2014; NBS, 2024). The current socio-economic state of Nigeria is not unfamiliar to international communities, which would further restrict movements at their borders for Nigerians looking to migrate.

### ***Political Factors***

Corruption, political unrest and instability fuel organised crime and other forms of crime, such as cultism, killings and others. This promotes the level of insecurity in a nation-state. In fact, in Nigeria, the issue of Boko

Haram, resulting in over 3.2 million displaced persons, banditry and their almost 5,000 killings in 2023, Fulani herders' killing poses a significant threat to the safety of lives and properties, and contributes highly to the practice of irregular migration of Nigerians to Europe (UNHCR, 2024; Hussein, 2014). In fact, the Nigerian Immigration Services (NIS, 2017) has attributed the rise in irregular migration to the pull factor of insecurity in Nigeria.

Beyond this form of insecurity, the insecurity at the exit gates of Nigerian borders, according to the NIS, also facilitates the business of irregular migration. This is why the rate of human trafficking is high, as the NIS is tasked with the responsibility of safeguarding the borders to prevent criminals who pose threats to Nigeria’s image from exiting the borders. Thus, most international borders are wary of allowing Nigerians into their country. After all, a 2017 United Nations Report indicated that Nigeria ranks highest among the eight risk countries identified with organized crime in drug smuggling, human trafficking, or sex trafficking (UN, 2017).

The representation of these factors and their indicator figures is presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1: Key Economic Indicators Facilitating Irregular Migration**

Indicators	Indicator Figure	Source
Youth Unemployment Rate	55%	NBS (2023)
Inflation Rate	35%	CBN (2023)

**Table 2: Insecurity and Its Migration Links**

Conflict Zone	Displaced Persons	Migration Hotspots
Northeast (Boko Haram)	2.1million	Libya route
Northwest (Banditry)	800,000	Niger desert
Middle Belt (Fulani Herdsmen)	300,000	Mediterranean route

*Source (IOM, 2024)*

**Recommendations to Curb Irregular Migration from Nigeria to Europe**

***Enactment of Workable Policies and Programs***

The Nigerian government should establish policies and programs with practical implementation and sanctions, which are crucial for addressing the root causes of irregular migration and subsequently prohibiting illegal migration. However, currently, there are many actions geared towards border control and security, with international organizations such as the IOM collaborating with several Federal security agencies and other relevant agencies such as the Police, the DSS, NSCDC, NAPTIP, and the NIS in developing programs and frameworks that strengthen Nigeria's border security as well as human security (IOM, 2022).

Similarly, these international organizations, including NACTAL and FIAPP in conjunction with NAPTIP, have created many human trafficking policy frameworks and laws that limit trafficking networks and strengthen NAPTIP's enforcement of these laws and policies. However, the implementation of these tools is still underway due to issues with funding, human capital, and other relevant resources, which the Nigerian government must address to significantly reduce the rate of irregular migration to Europe by Nigerians.

Additionally, the Nigerian government should re-enact security laws addressing banditry, Fulani Herdsmen insurgency, security, and other security concerns, ensuring they are implementable and carry severe sanctions for non-compliance. Bilateral agreements can be enhanced between Nigeria and the international community on human rights security at the illegal routes, whereby migrants can impose sanctions on Libyan militias to combat smuggling and other risky experiences at these routes.

#### ***Job Creation and Economic Empowerment***

The implementation of programs and initiatives, such as the National Social Investment Program (NISIP), aimed at reducing the unemployment rate, has not been entirely effective in curbing irregular migration. However, more entrepreneurship and vocational training must become part of the institutional framework of organisations in Nigeria, both private and public enterprises. This will help create an enormous implementation of initiatives that will help build the economic as well as the social state of Nigeria. This is a good remedy for curbing irregular migration,

Meanwhile, returnees' or repatriates' stories can become a teachable moment in schools, mosques, churches, and communities, especially with a high rate of human trafficking. The dangers of irregular migration must be emphasised in educating citizens to avoid falling victim.

#### **Conclusion**

The study of trends in irregular migration and the exploration of push and pull factors contributing to high irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe reveal a serious loophole within the Nigerian Immigration Service, particularly concerning border porosity. This needs to be tackled by the NIS through a combined effort with all security agencies and other relevant agencies within the country. The need for an expansive international partnership and collaborations on bilateral agreements, trade laws, and migration policies must be ensured, where Nigerians can easily travel legally without the need to follow irregular routes due to restrictive migration policies. Moreover, the case of underdevelopment in Nigeria, which is experienced through poverty, unemployment, insecurity, political instability, and others, should be curbed to allow citizens to feel secure within their spaces and be able to provide for themselves and their

families. This will discourage, to a large extent, the need for irregular migration.

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