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Irregular Migration as an Inevitable Way of Life? Participant-Observation from Europe

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Abstract

In the last decades, unabated cross-Mediterranean refugee flows from Africa have geometrically expanded, despite the closure of borders and the introduction of new regulations. The number of Africans waiting in Libyan slave camps, with determination to cross the Mediterranean Sea, understandably demonstrates the depressing reality in their home countries. The state of affairs in homeland countries that compels people to expose themselves to precarious migration journeys deserves academic interrogation. This article briefly explores the contextual conditions that inspire this form of migration, mainly from Africa to Europe and draws on sociological literature about irregular migration. This article also includes accounts from formal and informal interactions with African migrants. It concludes that scrambling for greener pastures in Europe could be drastically reduced if anti-poverty policies are established in Africa.

Keywords

Migration, Europe,
Africa, Refugee,
Mediterranean Sea

Introduction

This article's inquiry into the conditions of migrants from Africa is informed by my first trip to Europe in 2010. The reasons for African migrants' choice of some European countries (notably Greece, Malta, Italy, and Spain) for greener pastures and what inspires people to take such dangerous migration journeys to reach a destination inspired this research. My initial informal interactions with some of these migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, in different locations was initially prompted by a sense of adventure and journalistic instinct, and later produced deep concern at some level. The need to fill gaps in extant literature became apparent considering that the relevance of immigration in the European context has increasingly developed over the last two decades.

Increased migration movements of people across international boundaries is a fundamental topic on policy agendas worldwide and one of the most visible manifestations of the globalization process over the last five decades, as more people seek opportunities across national borders. It has become an inevitable characteristic of all populations (Par-

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sons et al., 2007; UN, 2015) across the entire world, both in developed and developing regions. Thus, immigration, which was hitherto seen as temporary, is gradually becoming a permanent feature of the modern global system. Since 1970, the number of people living in a country other than where they were born has tripled (Edmond, 2020), and there seems to be no foreseeable decline in this trend, not in this century or in the next.

Within the context of irregular or forced migration, the fact remains is that no continent is immune to the problem of forced displacement in the 21st century. Still, the global distribution of refugees remains heavily skewed towards less wealthy regions. Today, there are an estimated 1 billion migrants in the world (WHO, 2020), compared to the early 1990s, when the number of international migrants, including economic migrants and refugees, living outside their citizenship countries was estimated at 100 million, or somewhat less than 2 percent of the world population (Castles and Miller, 1993). Today, from this number, an estimated 272 million are international migrants, making up about 3.5 percent of the global population (United Nations, 2019) with nearly two-thirds being labor migrants (IOM, 2020). Included in the current estimates, about 36 million Africans have migrated internationally, including within Africa. For instance, Africa has the fastest-growing number of immigrants in the United States. However, the general observation concerning migration movements is that as the number of international migrants increases, so too does the global scale of irregular migration (The Global Commission on International Migration, 2005). Drawing on sociological literature about irregular migration, and formal and informal interactions with African migrants, this article briefly explores the contextual conditions that inspire this form of migration, mainly from Africa to Europe.

A few weeks into the initial research, it became clear that Italy, Malta, and Greece, which traditionally were transit territories for refugees heading to Central and Northern Europe, were “increasingly becoming countries of settlement for forced migrants” (Hein, 2010). Thus, the unabated cross-Mediterranean refugee flows from Africa geometrically expanded, despite the closure of borders and the introduction of new regulations. Interestingly, the migrants’ desire to leave transit territories dwindled over time. For instance, in all the focus group discussions I later had with the migrants, nearly all participants had the notion of moving to another country when they first arrived in Malta. From their accounts, over seventy percent of those who reached the Islands in groups fifteen to twenty years ago, are still residing in the country. Many of them rhetorically asked where else they could go to start life afresh in another country.

Migration and Its Global Value: The African Dimension

Though the effectiveness of migration policies is contested across different regions, international migration, without necessarily underplaying its inherent problems, appears to be an integral part of national, regional, and global economic growth strategies, in both the

developing and developed countries. An understanding of the increasingly integrated and interdependent nature of the economic, social, and cultural components that have been established in the literature, should ordinarily provide leeway for an effective and credible migration governance framework.

A deep understanding of migration, based on research, and all its ramifications is an increasingly important priority, particularly considering that the Mediterranean Sea creates open access to irregular movements from Africa to Europe. It appears that refugees' and migrants' irregular status, judging from public and academic discourse, is largely determined by factors outside their control. In other words, irregular migration is an example of a complex issue that is influenced by different factors, including ongoing and protracted conflict, ecological disasters, political repression, and the search for better economic opportunities. Given this, thousands of Africans are motivated to flee the Continent. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011) observes that detailed information gathered about the patterns and trends of irregular migration is not disaggregated according to land, sea, and air routes.

As revealed in recent studies, both regular and irregular migration occurring from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb Region to Europe has increased over the last decades. A similar inflow of people born in sub-Saharan Africa is also evident in the United States. For example, "more than half (51%) of sub-Saharan African migrants living in the U.S. as of 2017 were born in just four countries: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana and Kenya" (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, one fundamental takeaway is that most Africans' cross-border movements, contrary to media coverage, occur within the Continent, reinforcing the peculiar trend of migratory patterns in Africa. An Afrobarometer survey (BBC News, 2019) reveals that 37 percent, more than one in three Africans, have considered moving abroad. Most prefer other countries within the Continent, but still others prefer Europe, Western Asia, or North America. In West Africa, for example, more than 70 percent of intra-African emigration was within the sub-region a decade ago (The World Bank, 2011).

In all, just 2.5 percent of Africans, or about 36 million people, live abroad, compared with a global average of about 3.4 percent (The Economist, 2020). In either case, push-pull factors have always been constant, necessitating people's movements as an inevitable way of life. This feeds into more general ideas conveyed by scholars and commentators that migration is "a highly diversified phenomenon that shows substantial variability across countries" (FAO, 2017) and thus, its complexities are becoming more apparent (IOM, 2020), as it has many different causes, depending on time and place.

Interestingly, despite restrictive immigration laws, international migration pressures continue to mount predominantly among citizens from economically less developed countries to more developed regions of the world, suggesting that people will only mig-

rate if they have the ambition and resources to make this happen. The UN Development Program (UNDP) report, *Scaling Fences: Voices of Irregular African Migrants to Europe*, interviewed 1,970 migrants from 39 African countries in 13 European nations, revealed that all of them “declared that they had arrived in Europe through irregular means and not for asylum or protection-related reasons” (UNDP, 2019). For some others, the motivation to capitalize on economic differences between their home and host countries or desire a more fulfilling way of life constantly precipitates their decision to migrate.

This partly lends credence to the concept of *lifestyle migration* as a form of migration in the contemporary world, suggesting that more people undertake an expensive journey for a better life and congenial environment elsewhere. Lifestyle migration according to Benson and O’Reilly (2009), indicates that there are forms of migration where considerations about lifestyle, deliberately intended in its sociological rendering, framed around consumption, and inferring existential and moral dimensions, are prioritized in migration decisions. Lifestyle in this rendering becomes a motivation and one explanation for why people want to move and what they expect from their migration. I do not foresee any break in this trend as long as there are uneven developments or wide disparities in socio-economic circumstances, personal ambitions, and aspirations. Personal aspirations play an important role in decisions to remain in one’s place of birth or move, within the country of origin or abroad, although there is often a gap between a person’s wishes and their concrete actions. As the coronavirus pandemic ravaged the world and as countries closed borders to curb its spread, migrants and people on the move paid a high price to reach their destinations. For instance, in a bid to save migrants at risk of dying at sea, a German non-governmental organization, Sea-Eye, saved 150 people from small boats in distress off the Libyan coast (Daily Sabah, 2020) with ships bringing new arrivals every day.

Though the focus of my study in Europe was on irregular migrants (*irregularity does not refer to the individuals but their migratory status at a certain point in time*), particularly on the Maltese Islands, it should be noted that most Africans migrate out of the continent in possession of valid passports, visas, and other travel documentation. The reality, however, for many Africans is that travel and migration to such countries as those in Europe or Northern America are hampered by “a pricey and opaque visa application process that offers little guarantee of success” (Thomas-Johnson, 2020) and have limited options in terms of the number of countries they can access.

Migrants’ Motivations: No Region is Left Out

As a surge of migrants is experienced by nations worldwide, many population relocation questions are critical. The factors that motivate mostly youthful Africans to leave for Europe, the choice of location for migration as pre-determined destination or choice

based on circumstances, and the reason migrants resort to smugglers and embark on the costliest and dangerous journey, risking death at sea or forced return on arrival are relevant areas for academic research. The opportunities, challenges, and experiences faced on arrival in Europe, and the ways that host-state economic realities and refugee security interact with the wider dynamics of irregular migration emphasize the need for a multi-dimensional approach for understanding this phenomenon.

Underlying some of the most prominent theories and models of international migration (Massey et al., 1993) is the *push-pull model*. Lee's (1966) push-pull model is one of the most widely known migration theories. In this model, different push and pull factors dictate the act of migration. Factors associated with the area of origin push the migrant, whereas factors related to the destination country pull the migrant and intervening events, and personal characteristics interfere with these gravities (p. 49-50). Consequently, most sociologists and scholars of transnational migration have attributed the surge in transnational migration to push and pull factors. Although this model was developed with economic migration in mind and has its limitations, it offers important insights for forced migration research. Among the push factors that drive migrants away from their origin countries are socio-economic issues such as unemployment, overpopulation, war, and other human-made and natural disasters. Similarly, some of the pull factors that attract migrants into the receiving countries include the availability of job opportunities, higher wages, the higher standards of living, and social security, as well as other factors (Nwalutu, 2016).

It suffices to say that people's movement across cultural and national boundaries is usually motivated by a search for better social and economic conditions, peace, and freedom. For Africa over the years, armed conflict, insecurity, environmental degradation, and deteriorating political, socio-economic, and environmental conditions have been significant root causes of mass migration (African Union, 2018). Refugees or migrants do not travel aimlessly, nor are they satisfied with merely arriving at the European Union's safe borders. According to Katz et al. (2016), refugee networks and family migration are influential factors within migration, because they allow information on countries of transit and arrival, and their rules regarding asylum and welfare to be shared. Family members abroad also act as trusted sources of information. Needless to say, that information travels fast through online news, social media, and mobile communications. The trends and characteristics of irregular migration vary, mainly in terms of the individuals concerned and their irregular entry and residence patterns.

Some other known pull factors include family and community ties, histories of colonial relations between sending and host country, and general imagining of a host country being safe, peaceful, and the rule of law upheld, irrespective of actual policies (Mayblin, 2019). Millions of sub-Saharan Africans are commonly believed to be waiting in North

Africa to cross into Europe. These migrants, according to Yassine (2006), “are commonly seen as economic migrants although perhaps masquerading as refugees.” Many of my respondents, about 61 percent, revealed that they were very satisfied with their present jobs in Malta compared to their countries of origin and were not considering any form of return. The difference between voluntary and involuntary population movements is that the latter is caused by push factors, while the former is due to pull factors.

Europe has always been a continent of immigration and emigration, having poverty, persecution, wars, industrialization, and economic growth as push and pull factors. In other words, this migration phenomenon is mainly triggered either by a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership in a particular social group, or because of some natural disaster. Many others leave their homes because of indiscriminate violence, climate change, or food insecurity. For many of the boat-migrants arriving in Europe, these factors have always been indicated in their decision to leave countries of origin, even when an investigation reveals otherwise. Overall, as succinctly captured by Yayboke (2020), “irregular migration exists because there are not enough opportunities for safety and prosperity at home and too few regular means through which to remedy that lack of opportunities.” Push-pull factors give insight in to what draws people to take such a dangerous migration journey to reach a destination.

For those who were trafficked or smuggled into Europe, the stories are often very disturbing. My research in Italy’s Sicily Island in April 2019 revealed much of this. For instance, “more Nigerian migrants arrive in Italy than from any other country, usually recruited from rural, poorly educated and impoverished segments of Nigerian society” (Omilusi, 2019, p. 113). Women often casually engage in sex work as they roam the countryside and surrounding highways to earn money, and risk physical abuse and disease in the process. Other migrants and refugees, especially men with limited work opportunities, are often engaged as agricultural workers and are paid as little as €15 for a 12 to 18-hour day for hard labor in very poor conditions (Agius, 2015).

Interestingly, for trafficked women and girls who want to escape life on the streets, the Italian government once tripled its funding from 8 million euros in 2015 to 22.5 million in 2017 to help them (Associated Press, 2018). Also, Italian law provides for immediate protection—and a permit to live in the country—for any sex trafficking victim who presses charges against members of the criminal organization. But for Bridget (a pseudonym), who I met at the Palermo train station, relocating to another region of the country may be an alternative. Like several others, she was duped into believing she would find good jobs in Europe. For three years, nothing meaningful came out of their existence as they got confined in private homes owned by the Nigerian madams and gangsters in Palermo. At 23, that is, six years after she left Nigeria, and less than three years she arrived in Palermo,

it is obvious that her vulnerability to the traffickers' lies and blackmail could be partly premised on age.

The number of Africans waiting in Libyan slave camps with a determination to cross the Mediterranean Sea demonstrates the depressing reality in their home countries. In many of the refugee camps, arrival centers, and post-camp communities I visited, apart from conflict-driven nationals of Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Nigerians were always seen in large numbers, and claimed to have fled the Boko Haram ravaged north-eastern region of the country. Curiously, one could hardly identify an indigenous/typical Hausa-Fulani man or woman from the northern region among them, suggesting that many are in search of an end to unfulfilled dreams, rather than fleeing from terrorism (Omilusi, 2019). Many of them initially did not see any purpose for my research from far away Nigeria and I doubt if they eventually did anyway. In fact, they wondered why "our brother" was wasting his precious time. They were obviously not interested in which academic concept of asylum seekers, refugees or economic migrants best described their status. Obviously, there were other pressing issues, more worrisome than conceptualization.

Migration has been a constant and influential feature of human history and has never been a one-way process, as return migration to countries of origin, though very limited, also takes place. While some migrants come with specific plans for a temporary stay, some migrate to settle definitively, and others return to their countries of origin after period of time when their plans and dreams are not realized or after a stay abroad for a fairly long period of time.

Changes in migration policy typically facilitate the entry of particular origin groups and simultaneously restrict the entry of other groups. Migratory movements also occur from developed countries to other regions, either to economically less developed or equally developed, as there are different motives behind every cross-border movement. For instance, workers across Europe and Central Asia have capitalized on employment opportunities across borders during the past few decades, a situation facilitated by regional economic integration (World Bank, 2019). Like the United Kingdom, some countries are both immigration and emigration countries. In 2015, the UK had 8.4 million immigrants and 4.7 million emigrants (Pison, 2019). While irregular migration is far more prevalent in parts of the Americas and Africa, many migrants move on the basis of temporary labor contracts in Asia. Africa hosts about 2.3 million temporary or permanent immigrants from outside Africa, mostly from Asia and Europe (European Union, 2018). It goes without saying that movement from developing to developed countries has been the fastest-growing type of migration, having almost two-thirds of the world's international migrants in this category.

A Blessing in Disguise?

Though much has been written about the effects of *brain drain* such migration inflows from Africa, for instance, can have on countries of origin, but “technological progress has made it easier for migrants to stay in touch with the country they left behind and to contribute to its social and economic development” ([The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2011](#)). Brain drain is considered a loss of skilled workers through emigration and has long been the subject of policy debate and development research, and it has received significant attention in the media ([Minter, 2011](#)). The migration of health workers is particularly visible, with large numbers of foreign doctors and nurses working in developed countries, while health crises grip African and other developing countries. If well-governed, migration can have immense mutual benefits because it is part of countries’ development. Indeed, it is a fundamental component of structural transformation in developing countries. Given the fact that some countries are better placed than others to establish dynamic and competitive economies due to different factors, such as history, natural resources, social traditions and geographical location, it presupposes that some countries do not have the same potential for development. As such, migration might be tilted more towards some countries than others.

Notwithstanding these factors, both destination countries and countries of origin have derivable benefits. It can be in form of remittances¹ to countries of origin or as often the case, migrants’ contributions to prosperity in destination countries, as they continually deliver economic benefits. For instance, “overwhelmingly, evidence shows that African immigrants make a significant, positive economic contribution to the U.S. economy, contributing more than \$10.1 billion in federal taxes, \$4.7 billion in state and local taxes, and most importantly, having significant economic clout to the point of \$40.3 billion in spending power” ([Simmons, 2018](#)).

In 2017, according to figures from the African Institute for Remittances, Africans in the diaspora transferred more than \$65 billion in funds to their countries of origin, more than double the official development assistance received by the continent in the same year, which amounted to \$29 billion. With nearly \$24.3 billion received in 2018, Nigeria ranks first among African countries that receive the most funding from their Diasporas ([Diallo, 2019](#)). Generally, the recipients are among the poorest members of society and thus, remittances are linked with even greater increases in life satisfaction. According to the World Bank ([2019](#)), the constant increase in remittances received by sub-Saharan Africa since 2016, “can be explained by the solid economic conditions in high-income countries where many migrants from the region work.” Above all, migrants take new

¹ Remittances are financial or in-kind transfers made by migrants directly to families or communities in their countries of origin. Since the mid-1990s, remittances have greatly surpassed official development assistance levels (See World Bank, 2019), defined as government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries.

skills, experiences and contacts with them when they go back to their own country, whether on a temporary or long-term basis. These are unarguably vital assets in a global economy that is increasingly knowledge-based. Though more development might translate to more migration in poor countries, Africa cannot afford to lag behind in development indices that shape global relations.


Conclusion: Managing Migratory Movements

When migrants have affirmed the inevitability of migration from one continent to another, they need assistance with integration in their destination countries. This includes awareness of their rights and responsibilities, which cannot be taken for granted. Recognizing migrants' true value and building their sense of belonging in host countries is central to holistic integration. While states actively cooperate in stemming irregular migration, they should also ensure that their efforts do not jeopardize human rights, including refugees' right to seek asylum. Support for voluntary return and sustainable reintegration of returning migrants includes circular migration schemes, informing migrants abroad of the labor market situation in their home countries and their return possibilities, returning migrant worker training programs, social security benefits transfers, and encouraging entrepreneurship.

This research finds that the number of refugees coming to Europe may be more likely to go down if focus is placed on creating socio-economic anchors in origin countries, rather than deterrence and building walls (Betts, 2018). For African governments, this includes developing effective mechanisms and concrete initiatives to prevent and combat irregular migration and human trafficking, including actions to raise public awareness (European Commission, 2015). Kwemo (2017) suggests that African governments need to scale up policies that spur democracy, creating the enabling environment to build prosperity in Africa through concrete priorities, such as job creation, regional integration, and economic engagement.

More people are on the move now than ever before, and migration flows will likely increase substantially over the next few decades. As migrants continue to move across the world's borders, it should be emphasized that only 10 percent of the world's international migrants are refugees and asylum seekers, an indication that the other 90 percent, who are often economic migrants, move across borders voluntarily. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the powerful demographic, economic, cultural, and socio-political forces that continually drive international migration flows require further interrogation and mutual understanding among states and other stakeholders. Today, there is a growing acceptance that migration is no longer seen as negative for development. This is an indication that more favorable policy decisions at national and regional levels may be implemented, and it reduces negative perceptions that could dominate future discourse on the subject.

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