

Nigeria: Youth and migration dynamics

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Nigeria is Africa's economic and demographic giant with an estimated population of over 180 million in 2017. More than half of Nigeria's population is below age 35, while 35 percent are between age 15 and 30. In spite of the huge human and material resources, many Nigerians believe they were better off at independence in 1960 than they are currently. It is precisely the feeling of a dismal future that fuels the desperation of people seeking greener pastures abroad for both skilled and unskilled—men and women alike.

Nigeria is a country of a variety of migration configurations, including cross-border movements, migration of contract workers, labour migrants, migration of skilled professionals, irregular migration and human trafficking. It has also become source, transit and destination of these migrants. Emigration of Nigerians is basically intra-regional within the ECOWAS community largely facilitated by the protocol on free movement of persons. Nigeria also hosts large numbers of ECOWAS nationals and from other parts of the continent.

An emigration that started in trickles in the mid-80s became a stream as Nigerian highly skilled emigrants migrated to Europe, America, Canada, Australia and Asia. Less skilled workers emigrated as construction workers and in services of the 3D [Dirty, Dangerous and Demeaning] jobs the nationals scorn. Most of them found their way there via irregular situations without proper documentation. Since the 1990s, a significant proportion of women, single and married, emigrated independently in search of employment in the cities and increasingly in developed countries.

The major countries of destination outside Africa are USA, UK, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, France, Italy and Ireland. Within Africa, important destinations include South Africa and some West African countries, Sudan, Cameroon and Gabon. Libya was also a focal point—both as a destination and transit for migrants destined towards Europe. But with the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, many of these migrants were stranded, apprehended and deported. In 2017, about 155 people were repatriated monthly by the IOM in chartered planes to the situation they were running away from. Several were reportedly killed, maimed and robbed of their property. Many simply languish in jail, or in slave like situation. Others who attempted the dangerous trip in rickety boats capsized and died, especially during the most fatal period 2014/2015. Of the estimated 1.2 million asylum and mixed migrants about 4,000 Nigerians were reported dead during the year due to dehydration across the Sahara desert and fatalities on rickety boats across the Mediterranean. UNHCR estimates that in 2016, over 37,000 Nigerians arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean at which time they constituted about 31 percent of arrivals.

Important factors causing migration include demographic pressures, political instability, bad governance, low economic performance, and high poverty levels. Unemployment is the major

driver of migration which is profoundly concentrated among young people –boys and girls –in urban areas. Initially localised among secondary school leavers, the pool of unemployed persons has stretched gradually to graduates of tertiary institutions.

Underemployment especially in the informal sector and skills deficit amongst young job seekers also reflects the deterioration in the education sector that lacks modern training facilities, equipment and motivation amongst teachers. Strikes are frequent, closures of school rampant and the output of students has been deteriorating in quality overtime. The youth seem united in a feeling of dismal future and their perception of the future is tainted with uncertainty. The students started seeking admission to universities and higher institutions of learning in other parts of Africa and western countries, in part to enhance their employability in the labour market. After such migration these students stay on to obtain employment, thus draining Nigeria of their skills and education.

Deteriorating infrastructure especially power deficit that has led many industries to operate under very low and unsustainable capacity and with many firms especially textiles closing or transferring to neighbouring countries as they have to pay expensive input to generate their power, water and security needs. Insecurity in the north east, and Niger Delta region have scared investors and adversely constrained employment generating activities.

The internet has facilitated communication but it has also eased the flow of false and exaggerated information of living conditions abroad and many young people are under undue peer pressure based on this outlet. Youth generally rely on information from their peers but such information tends to be distorted, exaggerated and misleading and peer influence remains strong.

The limited capacity of the country's labour market to absorb productively the annual cohorts of job seekers turns youths into potential emigrants. The current unemployment rate of one-third or more among secondary school and university graduates signals a crisis of migration. Stressful economic conditions, especially the absence of sustainable livelihood opportunities, have fuelled the emigration of young educated persons in a desperate venture to enter the European Union countries

Many migrants move from rural poverty into cities, in the hopes of finding gainful employment. But most find they have moved into urban unemployment, transferring their misery and desperation to the cities – from where they sometimes undertake daredevil ventures to enter the EU countries. Often, however, rather than improving living conditions, the cost, the personal sacrifice, the risks of the journey and the uncertainty of life abroad may result in more poverty and insecurity.

As youth unemployment worsened and socio-political and economic conditions and poverty deteriorated, in desperation, many youths risk everything to fight their way hazardously to rich countries with the assistance of traffickers and bogus agencies, in search of the illusory green pastures.

The youth face four options, none of which seems to be in their favour: to acquire high level education which many of them cannot access; to go back to the rural agricultural sector which is not attractive; to learn a trade and be self-employed or to migrate. The latter option has been the choice for many youths, even as opportunities for regular migration to developed countries has been severely curtailed by strict entry and immigration rules, by economic deterioration and by adverse public opinion and xenophobia against immigrants. Many youths that take the option of irregular migration are confronted with many challenges including apprehension and deportation in inhumane circumstance, humiliation on return, life in slave-like situations and of course the highest price is death either by sea or along the Mediterranean route. For many of these unsuccessful irregular migrants, the financial cost is also enormous. Resources that could have been otherwise

invested in SMEs to generate self-employment for sustainable livelihood were used to organise the botched migration.

Trafficking in children mainly for farm labour and domestic work within and across the nation's borders is a common phenomenon, as is trafficking in women and young persons for sexual exploitation mainly outside the region. The media is awash with report of trafficking in persons of Nigerian girls to southern Europe, especially to Italy, under the guise of promise of a better life, work, marriage and education.

In spite of the efforts of the National Agency for the Protection of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) to arrest, detain and prosecute offenders of trafficking in persons in Nigeria, the scourge has continued and the destination has become more diversified. The Nigerian government formulated and endorsed the Labour Migration Policy and National Policy on Migration in 2014 and 2015 respectively to address several pertinent migration issues – emigration of professionals, female migration, irregular migration, human trafficking, return migration, migration data management and so on. The challenge ahead is nevertheless daunting.