

NATURE VERSUS HUMAN CONTRIVANCE :  
ADVANCING THE CENTRALITY OF POOR  
GOVERNANCE TO IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN  
AFRICA

# AfriHeritage Research Working Papers



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# **Nature versus Human Contrivance: Advancing the Centrality of Poor Governance to Irregular Migration in Africa**

By

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## **Abstract**

One of the greatest security concerns confronting the global community in recent times is irregular migration. Not only does this trigger trans-border crimes such as terrorism, human trafficking, and the resurgence of slavery; it is also the major cause of brain-drain in Africa. The continuing debate within the security literature is whether irregular migration is a natural consequence of climate change, or human contrivance arising from the quest for greener pasture, and/or pressures from poor governance, civil wars, unemployment, and poverty. The currency and potency of climate change, unemployment and security debates increasingly blur the contributions of poor governance to the problem of irregular migration in Africa. In view of this, the study investigates the centrality of poor governance to the problem of irregular migration in Africa. The data for the study were generated from both primary and secondary sources, while constant comparative method (CCM) was applied in the data analysis. As a result of constant comparison, the study found out that poor governance is a major cause of irregular migration among young Africans. The paper therefore recommends improved and youth-inclusive governance in Africa.

**Keywords:** Irregular migration, Young Africans, Climate change, Poor governance, Human contrivance

## Introduction

Globally, there is an upsurge of migration in recent times as the world sees larger numbers of migrants than at any other time in history (African Union, 2017). According to the United Nations (2017), the number of international migrants moved from 173 million in 2000 to 258 million in 2017. Of this figure, the number from Africa reached 34 million, with nearly all of them being youths whose estimated median age was put between 27.6 in 2000 and 30.9 in 2017, and almost half of them are women (United Nations, 2017). More people have also been forcibly displaced than during, or any time since, the World War II, with figures reaching over 65 million by the end of 2015 (African Union, 2017). These trends continue to take shape even against the backdrop of the growing securitisation of migration, the externalisation of border control, and increasingly restrictive migration policies, which have largely contributed to irregular migration. In the midst of these growing trends, irregular migration has become one of the greatest security concerns confronting the global community in recent times (International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2018). Not only does this trigger trans-border crimes such as terrorism, human trafficking, and the resurgence of slavery; it is also the major cause of brain-drain in Africa.

Many observers and analysts have attributed the reasons for this increase in irregular migration to global inequality, poverty, conflict, gender discriminatory practices, terrorism, climatic change, and repressive policies on migration by advanced countries (Afifi, 2011; Kelsaite & Mach, 2015; Browne, 2015; Kelly and Tondo, 2018). Browne (2015), for instance, argued that while irregular migration is not a first choice for anyone, it is caused by the repressive policies on legal migration by more developed or developing countries; although it gains momentum not necessarily by the repressive policies of states, but by other networks and reinforcing mechanisms such as pressures from socio-economic poverty, insecurity, and poor governance in the out-migrating states.

Despite these observations, the root cause of irregular migration remains a contentious debate among scholars. While many favour irregular migration as a natural consequence of climate change (Adepoju, 1983; Afifi, 2011; Kelsaite & Mach, 2015), others blame it on human contrivance arising from poor economic conditions such as poverty and unemployment (Shimeles, 2010; UNICEF, 2014; Crush et al, 2015; de Jager & Musuva, 2016), and violent conflicts that are throwing up more internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugees across the world (Wijk, 2010; Browne, 2015; Kuschminder et al., 2015; Reitano et al., 2014). Although others have also mentioned poor governance as one of the causes of irregular migration (African Union, 2017; Akinleye, 2017), it has not been central to existing studies. Thus, this paper seeks to examine the contributions of poor governance to the problem of irregular migration among young Africans.

In addition to this brief introduction, this paper proceeds as follows: the next section looks at the concept of irregular migration, and effort was made to situate it within a context that will permit our understanding of its causes and consequences in Africa. The third section discusses the methodology adopted in carrying out the research; and the fourth offers a brief review of literature on the theoretical debates around irregular migration. This is meant to provide the necessary background for analyzing the contemporary migration trend among African youths. The findings of the paper are presented in section five which specifically looks at the centrality of poor governance to irregular migration. The final section contains the conclusion which also embodies the recommendations.

### **Understanding Irregular Migration**

Traditional understandings of migration and migrants have focused predominantly on the dichotomy of categorisations based on time and space, location and direction, state perspective and causes (Collyer and Haas, 2012). Time and space have to do with whether the migration is permanent or temporary, domestic or international; location and direction deal with immigration and emigration, origin and destination and/or home and host of migration. State perspective deals with whether the migration is legal or illegal and regular or irregular; and finally, causes deal with whether migration is forced, voluntary, or induced by labour, studentship, retirement, or family reunion (Collyer and Haas, 2012, p.470). It is against the state perspective that irregular migration is explained in this paper.

Irregular migration is an extremely difficult subject to deal with both in conceptual explication and in empirical analysis. This is essentially because it is not a migration trend that is officially documented (Adepoju, 1983; African Union, 2017; United Nations, 2017). As such, irregular migration has been given different interpretations; it is sometimes used synonymous with undocumented migration, illegal migration, unauthorised migration, unofficial migration, clandestine or transit migration (see Lohrmann, 1987; Collyer and Haas, 2012; IOM, 2011).

While all these interpretations satisfy the position of this article, the term ‘irregular migration’ will be used in place of other terms interchangeable with it. There is no clear or universally accepted definition of irregular migration. Its conceptions by the destination and sending countries are also different. Destination countries conceive irregular migration as entry, stay, or work in a country without the necessary authorisation or documents required under immigration regulations. The sending countries, on the other hand, see it as a process in which a person crosses an international boundary without a valid passport or travel document and which does not fulfil the administrative requirements for leaving the country (IOM, 2011).

Similarly, De Haas (2008) explained irregular migration by categorising it into two – irregular entry and irregular stay. A migrant can enter a country without documentation and thus be considered irregular, but that individual can later be regularised, and his/her stay is therefore valid. A good example is the case of the Malian migrant Mamoudou Gassama whose stay in France was regularised by the French President, Emmanuel Macron, after his legendary rescue of a four-year old French citizen who was dangling on a balcony of a high building in Paris on 27 May 2018. Gassama had not the necessary papers to take up a residency in France and had been living in temporary accommodation before this historical incident (Aljazeera, 2018). On the other hand, a migrant can enter a country with valid document, such as with a visa, but can become irregular by overstaying the visa. According to De Haas (2008: 1310), ‘the majority of irregular African migrants enter Europe legally and subsequently overstay their visas,’ thus becoming irregular migrants. Kuschminder et al. (2015) also identified three conditions under which irregular migration could be summarised. These are, entering a country without proper authority, either through clandestine entry or with fraudulent documents; entering with authorisation but overstaying that authorisation; and deliberately abusing the asylum system. While all these explanations subsist, this paper adopts IOM’s (2011) definition of irregular migration as a movement of people that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving or destination countries.

## **Methodology**

Although this study is about irregular migration among young Africans across the globe, it focused on the routes that connect Africa with Europe, particularly through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup> Africa was chosen because of the conventional wisdom that poverty, unemployment, violent conflicts, climate change, and more recently poor governance, are the root causes of irregular migration. With the popular images of extreme poverty, starvation, tribal warfare, environmental degradation, and abuse of power adorning African countries at all corners, the choice is further justified.

In West Africa, for instance, the main migration route to Europe passes through the Niger-Libya border region, which is mainly populated by two rival Saharan tribes – the Tuareg and Toubou. Although colonial borders separate these tribes, their allegiance to each other remains far closer to their tribal affiliations than the central governments of Niger or Libya (Funk et al., 2017). The neglect of the Tuareg and Toubou by the Nigerien and Libyan governments, respectively makes for alternative source of survival for the two communities which migrant smuggling through the

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<sup>1</sup> These routes – Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea – represent the two most dangerous land and sea routes that have claimed the lives of many young Africans trying to cross to Europe in recent time.

connecting routes readily provides. This could be the major factor that accounts for the high volume of irregular migration that takes place within the Niger-Libya borders.

At the receiving side, Europe was chosen because it remains the major destination point for African migrants (Adepoju et al., 2009). Meanwhile, irregular migration occurring from sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb to Europe has increasingly been defined as a security problem associated with international crime and, particularly since the terrorist attacks of 11 March 2004 and 7 July 2005 in Madrid and London, respectively (Lutterbeck, 2006; De Haas, 2008).

The data used in confirming the hypothesis that poor governance is the major cause of irregular migration among young Africans were generated through both primary and secondary sources. For the primary source, the study utilized key informant interviews (KII) of some Nigerian-Europe-bound Libyan returnees. For the secondary sources, we culled information from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), World Migration and local newspaper reports, as well as other documented evidence from the United Nations and EU commissioned papers, and other journals.

Glaser's (1965) Constant comparative method (CCM) was applied in the data analysis. This method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (not provisionally testing) many properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon which may be causes, conditions, consequences, dimensions, types and processes that result in an integrated theory (Glaser, 1965). In CCM, no attempt is made to ascertain either the universality or the proof of suggested causes or other properties. Since no proof is involved, the CCM does not require consideration of all available data, nor is the data restricted to one kind of clearly defined case. As such, CCM increases the battery of alternative approaches useful to researchers particularly in the areas that raise problems of secrecy, sensitivity, taboo topics, stigma, and legality, and where people are usually adept at covering the facts when necessary (Glaser, 1965: 436). Glaser's CCM can be described in four stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory.

Applying Glaser's four stages to our study, we theoretically compared all the categories that explain the cause of irregular migration and integrated them into three perspectives. We then moved to delimit the centrality of poor governance and to sieve out a theoretical explanation that it is the major cause of irregular migration among young Africans. Because of the so many indicators of poor governance, and the improbability of convincingly relating all the indicators to irregular migration in this paper, the article utilised the following: 1) lack of responsiveness; 2) lack of transparency, accountability and inclusiveness; and 3) lack of development initiatives, as three indicators of poor governance. These areas were chosen because they represent the three factors that are mostly abused

in the political system of most countries in Africa. Many African states run unresponsive, unaccountable and exclusionary governance that is bereft of development initiatives. Besides, the indicators chosen for this study are central to poverty, insecurity, and lack of climate change mitigation that combine to drive irregular migration in the continent. The next section examines the theoretical debates on the root causes of irregular migration in Africa.

### **Theoretical explanations of the causes of irregular migration**

There have been several perspectives to the explanation of the major causes of irregular migration across the globe. According to Gubhaju and Jong (2009, p.32), ‘while each one of these perspectives has established their own niches within the set of available theories that attempt to explain migration behaviour, the question as to which is the more valid explanation for migration behaviour remains unresolved.’ Some of the existing theories, including the push-pull theory (see Schoorl et al. 2000; Eurostat and NIDI, 2000; Wijk, 2010; Browne, 2015; African Union, 2017), have tried to explain the major causes of irregular migration. In particular, African Union (2017) has used the push-pull theory to summarise the root causes of irregular migration in Africa. The push factors include lack of socio-economic opportunities and the rule of law, poor governance, patronage and corruption, political instability, conflict, terrorism, and civil strife. The pull factors include real or perceived opportunities for a better life abroad, higher income, improved security, and superior education and health care in countries of destination. The traditional push-pull theory stresses that people are pushed to migrate from a place with poor social, political or economic conditions, and pulled to a destination with better living conditions (Wijk, 2010). The basic assumption of this theory is that the more disadvantaged a place is, the more likely it will produce out-migration, including irregular migration (Eurostat and NIDI, 2000).

Outside the traditional push-pull narrative, lower costs of migration, improved communication, especially social media and the internet, greater information availability, and the need to join relatives, families and friends, are some other factors that warrant decision to embark on irregular migration (African Union, 2017). This latter position explains the social network theory of migration. This theory emphasizes the role of family and friends in the process of migration (Boyd, 1989; Mullan, 1989; Massey et al., 1993; Wijk, 2010). According to the theory, social networks of family and friends influence the decision-making process of migrants especially regarding where to migrate and how to facilitate their travels (Boyd, 1989; Massey et al., 1993). Mullan (1989), argued that migration is rarely undertaken as a completely independent event; rather it is often a decision made easier by being accompanied or received by, friends and relatives among whom a first or second-hand knowledge and information essential to facilitating the migration process is shared.

Against the backdrop of this situation, human traffickers often influence irregular migration behaviours (Wikj, 2010).

There are therefore existing schools of thought that attempt to explain the root causes of irregular migration using either the push-pull or the social network theories. The first school of thought has used the push factor caused by climate change to explain irregular migration (Afifi, 2011; Kelpsaitte & Mach, 2015; Emoche, 2018; Udeh, 2018). Using Niger as a study focus, Afifi (2011) robustly traced how the push factor inherent in the vicious cycle of environmental degradation results in income reduction, poverty, and unemployment; thus, leading to migration among the Nigeriens. The implication is that climate change remains a natural push factor that significantly influences irregular migration of Nigeriens both within and outside Africa. In Afifi's (2011) empirical analysis, draught, soil degradation, shrinking of the Lake Chad, deforestation, and sand intrusion, are responsible for increased migration of Nigeriens to Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, Benin, Togo, France, Italy, Germany, and the United States. In Nigeria, analysts have also used the natural push factors to explain the southward migration that is largely fuelling the problem of herdsman-farmers conflict particularly within the Middle Belt that serves as the transit point between the north and the south (Emoche, 2018; Onumah, 2018; Udeh, 2018). If the climate change argument should be taken to constitute the major cause of irregular migration, then Europe and North America should not have been the highest destination regions for irregular migrants. This is because the climate conditions of these regions are not the best in the world compared to those in many Asian and African countries, including Nigeria. Often, we hear of all kinds of natural disasters, including hurricane, cyclone, wild fire, ocean surge, earthquakes, landslide and many others in these regions more than we do in Africa, but migrants prefer to go and face these challenges than stay back in their continent that records fewer occurrences of these natural disasters.

The second school of thought prefers to explain the root causes of irregular migration based on human-contrived push factors, including poor economic conditions such as poverty and unemployment (Shimeles, 2010; UNICEF, 2014; Crush et al, 2015; de Jager & Musuva, 2016; Food and Agricultural Organisation [FAO], 2016a; 2016b; Crush & Tawodzera, 2017). For instance, Crush et al (2015) and de Jager & Musuva (2016) had earlier argued that prolonged economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe led to a major exodus of migrants to neighbouring South Africa. Crush & Tawodzera (2017) used food insecurity to explain the cause of both international and irregular migrations of Zimbabweans to South Africa and other parts of the world. Similarly, UNICEF (2014) observed that unemployment and underemployment mostly in rural areas are among the principal drivers of youth migration. According to Shimeles (2010: 4), 'irregular migration is driven by motives to improve livelihoods with notable evidence on changes in labor market status.' This

explains the import of the term ‘economic migrants’ in irregular migration discourse which refers to those migrants whose aim was to better their livelihood in the destination countries given the poor economic conditions such as poverty and unemployment at their home countries. This school provides the most enduring narrative of the major causes of irregular migration. According to a Libyan returnee, the economic situation of Nigeria made her to fall victim of irregular migration. While narrating her ordeal to the researcher, it was obvious that the interviewee fell prey to human traffickers who promised her a better life in Italy but was stuck in Libya where she was treated like a slave; surviving on one meal per every three days, and sometimes per week (Anonymous, 2018a).

The third school of thought implicated irregular migration on prolonged violent conflicts such as wars, insurgency, terrorism, militancy, and many others (Wijk, 2010; Browne, 2015; Kuschminder et al., 2015; Reitano et al., 2014). Using Angola as an example, Wijk (2010) argued that prolonged wars account for irregular migration of Angolans to Netherlands. Similarly, Browne (2015) and Kuschminder et al. (2015) observed that irregular migrants passing through the North African region tend to be from countries which are experiencing conflict and thus producing refugees and asylum-seekers. The region also plays host to increased number of Syrians, Somalians and Eritreans (Reitano et al., 2014; Browne, 2015).

Given the challenges posed to the internal dynamics of migrant-receiving states by this migration trend, countries are tightening their migration policies. Meanwhile, as countries continue to tighten their legal pathways for migration, migrants are falling prey to smugglers and human traffickers, and majority of them end their lives while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Sahara Desert (African Union, 2017; Browne, 2015). Migrants who lost their lives at sea in the course of transiting from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, to Europe, Australia and North America between 2009 and 2017 have been estimated at 25,832 on board 218 boats (Williams and Mountz, 2018). Between 2016 and 2017 alone, more than 5,000 migrants lost their lives while trying to cross these dangerous terrains via an unsafe transport system; and more others ended up as slaves in Libya, sex workers in Italy, criminals across the globe, and domestic servants in other parts of the world (Williams and Mountz, 2018; Raghavan, 2018).

Although all these factors appear highly convincing and indispensable, they are insufficient in explaining the cause of irregular migration in Africa. There is still the need to more specifically relate the push or pull factors in Africa to poor governance. The next section examines the centrality of poor governance in the whole debate about irregular migration by young Africans.

## **Centrality of Poor Governance in the Irregular Migration Debate**

Poor governance, like irregular migration, is fraught with semantic confusion that makes its definition highly improbable. For this reason, we decided to limit our discussion of the centrality of poor governance in irregular migration to three critical areas that link it with climate change, poor economic conditions and violent conflicts – the three major drivers of irregular migration identified in literature. In his article titled ‘Voting with their feet? Why young Africans are choosing migration over the ballot box’, Akinleye (2017) argued that wherever poor governance exists, the most vulnerable to discrimination, whether official or unofficial, tend to migrate in search of a better living condition. Therefore, to limit the push and pull factors that cause irregular migration among young Africans to poor economic conditions, violent conflicts and climate change alone, is to overlook the sufficient condition while addressing only the necessary conditions. This illogical move in research results in faulty policy outcomes and breed a situation where the more solutions that are applied, the more the problems escalate.

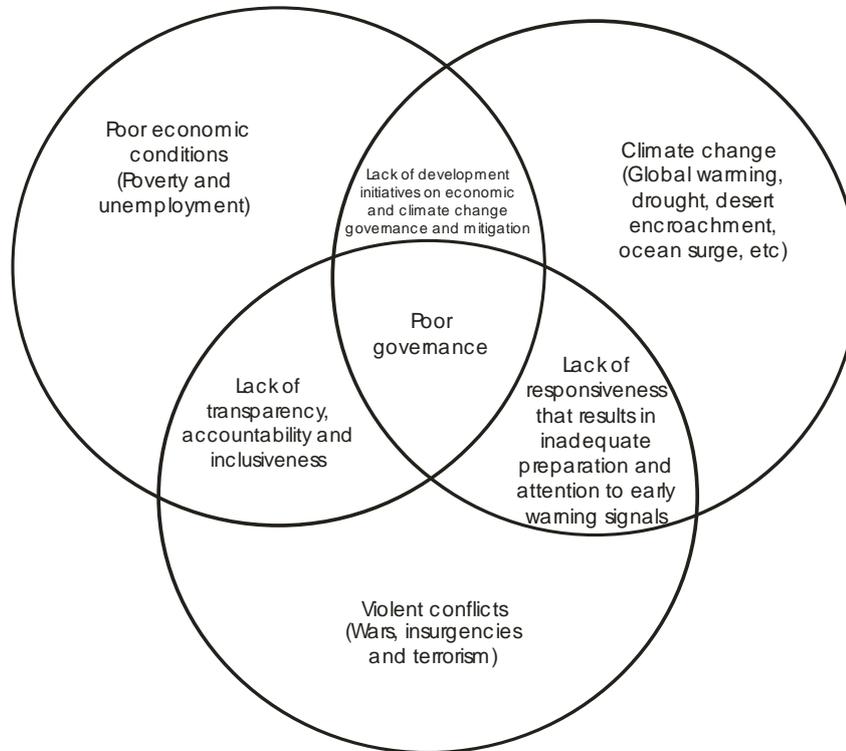
The most commonly cited reasons for young people’s migration from Africa to Europe and other parts of the world are often weaved around the search for economic opportunities (Adepoju, 2002; Shimeles, 2010; UNICEF, 2014; Crush et al, 2015; de Jager & Musuva, 2016; FAO, 2016a; 2016b; Crush & Tawodzera, 2017). However, there is an increasing realisation that migration involves a mixture of motivations. Thus, the term “economic migrant” does an injustice to the individual, who may have taken to the road because of a number of different factors, including the absence of a level playing field in their home countries (Akinleye, 2017). As such, the nepotism that limits the opportunities of the youths from gaining meaningful employment at their home countries is part of the broader problem of poor governance. This results in a sharp drop in economic opportunities and other social services, low investment in the educational sector, and government’s preference for elephant projects that only enrich a few while leaving the majority in penury.

Highlighting the centrality of poor governance to irregular migration, Funk et al. (2017) argued that no development could eradicate obvious push factors of irregular migration except if such development is aimed at promoting good governance. According to them, ‘if development aid is to be targeted at decreasing irregular migration then it is most effective if transmitted through the medium of governance aid’ (Funk et al., 2017: 8).

Poor governance through corruption-induced discrimination, repression and under-representation, has largely contributed not only in laying the foundation for irregular migration among young Africans but also in nurturing it to maturation. This can be explained in two folds: first as a push factor from which perspective poor governance is seen as laying the foundations for climate change problems, poor economic conditions, and violent conflicts (see figure 1); and second, as a

pull factor from which perspective good governance in one environment can attract migrants from other environments.

**Figure 1: Centrality of poor governance to irregular migration**



Source: Author's development

On the push side, the implication of figure 1 is that poor governance is reflected in lack of: (a) responsiveness; (b) transparency, accountability and inclusiveness, and (c) development initiatives. Lack of responsiveness to governance results in inadequate preparation for and attention to early warning signals of climate change- and violent conflict-related issues that could induce irregular migration. In the same vein, lack of transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness, is mostly demonstrated in the marginalisation of people in the distribution of commonwealth. This is the major cause of poverty and unemployment as well as violent conflicts which drive irregular migration. Using the irregular route that connects Niger to Libya, Funk et al. (2017) argued that the marginalisation of the Toubou tribe by both the Muammar Gaddafi regime and the deeply divided post-Gaddafi political leadership had sown a climate of political distrust, weak government institutions, and limited economic opportunities within the region, thus, fuelling irregular migration through the Niger-Libya borders. Across the Nigerien side, similar conditions of the Tuareg result in making irregular migration a lucrative business due to high economic dependency on migrant smuggling that could sustain entire communities. Meanwhile, the Niger-Libya border which passes through the Sahara Desert remains the most notorious irregular migration route connecting Europe

with West Africa, and Libya usually serves as the transit country where migrants are sometimes treated as slaves.<sup>2</sup> Example, a Malta-bound musician from Nigeria who was returned from Libya maintained that he had never seen any suffering in life that equaled his experience in Libya (Anonymous, 2018b).

These suggest that poor governance is at the centre of irregular migration even when the visible signs are implicated on climate change, poor economic conditions, and violent conflicts. Essentially, these three factors that are constantly mentioned in literature are plausible necessary conditions for irregular migration among young Africans<sup>3</sup>, but they do not constitute the sufficient condition. Indeed, without poor governance, the impact of climate change would not be felt because there would be proper attention to early warning signs. The same applies to poverty and unemployment. A poorly governed state lacks development initiatives that could galvanise all the sectors of the society towards wealth creation and other desired ends. Violent conflicts that result in monumental destruction such as extremism, terrorism, militancy, wars, *etcetera*, are also implicated in a lack of responsiveness on the part of political leaders.

On the pull side, if poor governance is a factor that could push people away from their societies, then good governance is a pull factor that attracts migrants to environment where it obtains. This explains why Africa is confronted with the problem of emigration, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), comprising mostly of European countries, is faced with the problem of immigration. Countries that were once migrant-receiving could metamorphose into migrant-sending countries when the political leadership ceases from being responsive and accountable. According to Adepaju (2008), since the late 1980s, traditional labour-importing countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Zambia, and attractive destinations for migrants such as Nigeria, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, have experienced endemic corruption, and political and economic crises, which also spur out-migration of their nationals. Between 1975 and 1986, Nigeria used to be a major migrant-destination country due to its robust economic opportunities. However, for close to two decades, Nigeria has greatly suffered irregular migration from its teeming youths due to increasing poor governance in the country. This is typical of how a migrant-receiving country can become a migrant-sending country.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

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<sup>2</sup> Several commentaries and interviews with Nigerian returnees from Libya confirm this proposition. Many of the returnees affirmed how they were locked in a room for days without food or water and which resulted in the death of many, including women.

<sup>3</sup> The major victims of lack of responsive, accountable, transparent, inclusive and development-oriented governance.

The study identified three perspectives in literature that explain the major causes of irregular migration. These are: climate change, poor economic conditions, and violent conflicts. This paper takes the position that there is a logical sequence that relates poor governance with these factors which combine to push young Africans into irregular migration. The study theoretically assumes that poor governance is the major cause of irregular migration, which explains why poor governing countries of Africa are the most affected in irregular migration trend. While climate change, poor economic conditions, and violent conflicts are the necessary conditions for irregular migration, poor governance constitutes the sufficient condition for irregular migration.

Given the difficulty in obtaining accurate data on irregular migration, the study theoretically connected poor governance with mostly the push factors identified in literature which combine to escalate the challenge of irregular migration among young Africans. The three identified schools also laid the foundation for understanding the contributions of poor governance to irregular migration in Africa. Thus, among all the integrated theories that explain the cause of irregular migration, poor governance is a major contributor. To curtail the problem of irregular migration in Africa, the paper makes the following recommendations:

- Civil society and other non-governmental organisations should intensify their pressures on governments across African states to initiate policies, programmes, and legislations aimed at constructively engaging the youths in governance.
- Development partners and other donor agencies should channel their development grants to Africa to CSOs and NGOs that are involved in youth empowerment at the rural areas instead of giving to government agencies and institutions that are perceived as complicit in irregular migration problems, including poverty and youth unemployment.

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