

## **Governance Failure, Japa Syndrome, and the Mediterranean Migration Crisis: A Qualitative Study of Nigerian Migrants**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the interplay between governance failure in Nigeria, the "Japa Syndrome" (mass emigration), and the Mediterranean migration crisis. It critically analyses how systemic corruption, economic decline, and insecurity drive mass emigration, exposing Nigerian migrants to vulnerabilities such as human trafficking, smuggling, forced labour, arbitrary detentions, criminal violations, and fatal sea crossings. Additionally, it assesses the impact of European migration control measures and explores policy alternatives for safer migration pathways. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, this study integrates primary and secondary data to provide a holistic understanding of the structural drivers of irregular migration. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on their expertise, lived experiences, and relevance to migration governance and reintegration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 participants, including key migration governance stakeholders and returned migrants, to explore policy gaps, migrant experiences, and reintegration challenges. A comprehensive document review supplemented these findings. The results highlight that many migrants endure severe exploitation, including human trafficking, sexual abuse, and perilous sea journeys. Smuggling syndicates thrive in transit countries like Libya, where governance instability fosters a black market for human exploitation. Furthermore, restrictive European migration policies often increase risks for migrants rather than providing sustainable solutions. The study highlights the pressing need for governance reforms in Nigeria to address the underlying causes of mass emigration. It advocates for economic stabilisation, enhanced security, and international cooperation to establish safer migration pathways. Without immediate interventions, Nigerian migrants will continue to endure life-threatening dangers in their pursuit of better opportunities abroad.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Governance failure, Japa Syndrome, Irregular Migration, Mediterranean Crisis.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has long struggled with governance deficiencies, which have contributed to insecurity, economic decline, and socio-political instability (Akinlabi & Adeleke, 2021). The unabating corruption, weak governance institutions, and policy inconsistencies have further complicated poverty, unemployment, and a lack of opportunities, forcing many citizens to seek alternative routes for survival (Ogunyemi, 2020). These institutional failures have led to the mass exodus phenomenon now widely referred to as "Japa", a colloquial Nigerian phrase meaning "to flee" or "to run", which has gained

prominence in public discourse as worsening socio-economic conditions propel more Nigerians to seek better prospects abroad (Adesina, 2019).

While some Nigerians migrate through legal pathways, restrictive visa policies and limited access to legal migration options have pushed many into irregular migration, often facilitated by traffickers and smugglers (Musa & Okon, 2022). Many migrants embark on hazardous journeys through the Sahara Desert and Libya, hoping to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. However, this journey exposes them to extreme dangers, including violence, human trafficking, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and even death at sea (Ibrahim, 2017; UNHCR, 2023).

Libya has become an important transit point for many irregular migrants from Nigeria due to its geographical proximity to Europe and its porous and poorly policed borders. However, since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the country has descended into anarchy, making it a hub for migrant smuggling and human trafficking activities (Achonu, 2020). Many Nigerian migrants who pass through Libya face unlawful detention, extortion, and brutal treatment in detention centres controlled by militias and traffickers (Musa & Okon, 2022). These dangers underscore the link between Nigeria's governance failures and the vulnerabilities experienced by its migrants who attempt to escape hardship.

This research examines how governance failure triggers mass emigration and exposes migrants to violence, human trafficking, and death at sea. Through the analysis of structural deficiencies in governance and their impact on migration patterns, the study provides insights into the urgent need for policy interventions that address both the root causes of migration and the protection of Nigerian migrants in any part of the world.

### **Governance Failure in Nigeria: A Catalyst for Mass Emigration**

Governance failure in Nigeria is evident in several ways, including official corruption, economic mismanagement and sabotage, insecurity, and weak governance institutions (Ogunyemi, 2020). Decades of poor governance have led to mass unemployment, inflation, and inadequate public services, leaving many citizens with no choice but to seek greener pastures in unknown destinations (Akinlabi & Adeleke, 2021). The Japa Syndrome is thus a reaction to these structural deficiencies, as young and vibrant Nigerians, especially skilled professionals, emigrate en masse to escape economic hardship and political instability.

Nigeria has repeatedly ranked low on global governance indices, indicating widespread corruption, lack of transparency, and weak rule of law (Transparency International, 2023). The mismanagement of national resources has worsened income inequality, with the political elite enjoying enormous wealth while a significant portion of the population struggles to afford necessities (Adewale, 2018). Youth unemployment remains a pressing issue, with over 40% of young Nigerians unable to secure stable jobs despite obtaining higher education degrees (NBS, 2023). This bleak economic reality has driven many to seek opportunities abroad, often under precarious conditions (Musa & Okon, 2022). In addition to economic hardship, insecurity has become a major driver of migration. The rise of insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram, banditry in the northwest, kidnapping across the country, and herder-farmer conflicts have created an atmosphere of fear and instability (Adesina, 2019). Many Nigerians flee their homes due to threats of violence, kidnappings, and a lack of institutional protection (Ibrahim, 2017).

The government's failure to provide adequate security has further eroded trust in state institutions, reinforcing Nigerians' decision to migrate (Ogunyemi, 2020).

Public infrastructure and social services are other major factors contributing to governance failure in Nigeria. Education and healthcare systems are in a state of quagmire, with frequent strikes by teachers and medical professionals due to unpaid salaries, allowances, and poor working conditions (Akinlabi & Adeleke, 2021). The lack of quality education and healthcare has led many skilled professionals, particularly doctors, nurses, and academics, to leave Nigeria in search of better working conditions abroad, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "brain drain" (Achonu, 2020).

Moreover, the lack of comprehensive migration policies that facilitate legal migration pathways has exacerbated irregular migration trends (Musa & Okon, 2022). The government's inability to engage in bilateral agreements that create employment opportunities abroad has left many Nigerians with no choice but to undertake perilous migration routes (UNHCR, 2023). The failure to solve these governance issues has thus perpetuated cycles of migration, vulnerability, and exploitation.

### **Japa Syndrome and the Rise of Irregular Migration**

In the Nigerian context, "japa" (a Yoruba word meaning "to run, flee, or escape") refers to the act of leaving Nigeria, often in search of better opportunities, and has become a popular term for emigration. The word "japa" is derived from the Yoruba words "ja" (meaning to break loose) and "pa" (referring to the intensity or severity of an action), which, when combined, convey the idea of fleeing or escaping. The term "Japa Syndrome" has also emerged to describe the phenomenon of Nigerians leaving the country.

While some Nigerians adopt legal pathways, many resort to irregular migration due to restrictive visa policies, limited legal options, and economic desperation (Adesina, 2019). Irregular migration often involves the use of dangerous routes, particularly through the Sahara Desert and through Libya, where migrants face physical abuse, extortion, and even death (Ibrahim, 2017). Libya's ongoing political instability has created a leadership vacuum that has enabled traffickers, smugglers, and armed groups to exploit migrants, detaining them in squalid conditions and forcing them into labour or prostitution (Musa & Okon, 2022). Additionally, Nigerian migrants who undertake these dangerous journeys are often lured by traffickers who promise them safe passage to Europe but instead subject them to forced labour, organ trafficking, and other forms of exploitation (UNODC, 2023). Women and young girls are highly vulnerable to sexual violence and forced prostitution in transit and destination countries (IOM, 2023).

Moreover, despite surviving these treacherous journeys, many migrants end up in detention centers in Libya, where they are subjected to inhumane and slave-like treatment, including starvation, overcrowding, and torture (UNHCR, 2023). For those who manage to reach the shores of the Mediterranean, the risks continue, as they often embark on overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, leading to frequent shipwrecks and fatal drownings (Achonu, 2020). European migration policies, including border militarisation and pushback operations, have further endangered the lives of Nigerian migrants attempting to cross into Europe (Musa & Okon, 2022).

### **The Mediterranean Crisis: Nigerian Migrants at the Centre of Tragedy**

The Mediterranean Sea has become a graveyard for thousands of African migrants, including Nigerians, attempting to arrive in Europe (UNHCR, 2023). Despite efforts by international organisations and European governments to curb irregular migration, the root causes, namely, governance failure and socio-economic decline in countries of origin, remain unsolved. Migrants who survive the chilling journey often face racial discrimination, deportation, and substandard living conditions in host countries (Achonu, 2020). Moreover, European migration policies have increasingly focused on border security and deterrence rather than offering humanitarian assistance to migrants (IOM, 2023). Many Nigerian migrants who reach European shores are placed in prolonged detention centres, denied asylum, or forcibly deported, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation (UNODC, 2023). Those who are not held in detention often struggle with legal uncertainties, economic marginalisation, and social exclusion (Musa & Okon, 2022). In host countries, many face labour exploitation, racial discrimination, and limited access to healthcare and education (Ibrahim, 2017).

In addition, search-and-rescue efforts in the Mediterranean have been reduced due to political resistance from European governments, leading to more deaths at sea (UNHCR, 2023). Humanitarian organisations have criticised these policies, arguing that they violate international refugee protection frameworks (Achonu, 2020). Unless structural issues in Nigeria and international migration policies are addressed, Nigerian migrants will continue to risk their lives and even die in pursuit of better opportunities abroad.

### **Corruption, Insecurity, and Mass Emigration from Nigeria**

Nigeria's Governance failure has been identified as a significant push factor for irregular migration. Researchers argue that systemic and endemic corruption, economic mismanagement, and weak political institutions have resulted in high unemployment, poverty, and insecurity, which drive many Nigerians to seek opportunities abroad (Adepoju, 2005; Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2021). The "Japa Syndrome," or the mass exodus of Nigerians, is largely fuelled by the government's inability to provide stable economic and social conditions (Olayinka, 2022). Ibrahim (2017) highlights how the lack of basic social services and governance inefficiencies contribute to the increasing number of Nigerians seeking alternative livelihoods outside the country, even though dangerous means.

### **Case Studies of Official Corruption, Economic Mismanagement, and Governance Failure in Nigeria**

#### **1. Official Corruption: The Diezani Alison-Madueke Scandal**

Corruption in Nigeria's petroleum industry remains a significant governance challenge, with one of the most notable cases being the scandal involving the former Minister of Petroleum Resources, Diezani Alison-Madueke. During her tenure, which lasted between 2010–2015, she was accused of embezzling billions of dollars in public funds. Reports indicate that Alison-Madueke and her associates cornered an estimated \$2.5 billion from the Nigerian oil industry (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017).

Investigations by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and international law enforcement agencies revealed that the luxury properties she acquired were worth over \$144 million and a \$40 million jewellery collection with illicitly obtained funds (Premium Times, 2019). Additionally, her financial dealings were linked to a broader network of corruption within the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), where oil contracts were awarded based on patronage rather than due process (Sahara Reporters, 2020). The mismanagement of oil revenues contributed to budget deficits and reduced government capacity to fund public services. Widespread corruption in the petroleum sector deterred foreign investment and increased economic volatility. The case highlighted Nigeria's weak institutional mechanisms for preventing high-level corruption.

## **2. Economic Mismanagement: The Fuel Subsidy Crisis**

Nigeria's fuel subsidy program, designed to keep petroleum prices affordable, has long been plagued by corruption and inefficiency. Between 2006 and 2018, the Nigerian government spent over ₦11 trillion (approximately \$25 billion) on subsidies, yet much of this expenditure benefited fraudulent actors rather than the public (BudgIT, 2019). A 2012 legislative probe found that \$6.8 billion was lost to fraudulent subsidy claims, with non-existent companies receiving payments for fuel they never supplied (House of Representatives Ad Hoc Committee on Fuel Subsidy, 2012). The scandal exposed the complicity of government officials and oil marketers in diverting public funds. Despite these revelations, successive governments struggle to reform the subsidy regime due to political resistance and vested interests (African Development Bank, 2021).

The fuel subsidy scheme diverted funds away from critical sectors such as healthcare and education. Nigeria continues to import refined petroleum, as the country's refineries remain inoperable due to poor management. Attempts to remove subsidies sparked public protests and economic instability, exemplified by the 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement (BBC, 2012).

## **3. Governance Failure: The Boko Haram Insurgency and Military Corruption**

The Nigerian government's failure to effectively combat Boko Haram, a jihadist group that emerged in 2009, underscores broader governance and security failures. Despite allocating significant resources to defence, Nigerian soldiers are often poorly equipped, a situation that is further exacerbated by corruption in military procurement. One of the most notorious cases was the \$2.1 billion arms procurement scandal involving a former National Security Adviser, Sambo Dasuki, who allegedly diverted funds meant for purchasing military equipment to political allies (Transparency International, 2016). As a result, Nigerian troops frequently faced Boko Haram militants without adequate weapons and other military supplies, leading to battlefield casualties and mass displacements (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The government's slow response to significant incidents, such as the 2014 Chibok girls' mass abduction, further illustrated its inability to address security threats efficiently (Amnesty International, 2015). As of 2024, the insurgency had killed over 40,000 people and displaced more than 2 million (UNHCR, 2024). Increased insecurity and humanitarian crises, particularly in the Northeast. Loss of public confidence in the military and government institutions. The

insurgency strengthened, leading to the rise of ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) as a major threat to the Nation's security.

These few case studies illustrate how corruption, economic mismanagement, and governance failures have deepened Nigeria's socio-economic challenges. The resulting instability has fuelled mass emigration, "Japa", as many Nigerians seek opportunities abroad to escape economic hardship and insecurity. A focus on addressing these governance issues is critical to reversing the trend of irregular migration, promoting inclusive governance, and ensuring national development.

### **Empirical Evidence on Migrant Vulnerabilities along Transit Routes**

Nigeria is recognised as a major source country for irregular migration, with key routes passing through the Sahel, the Sahara Desert, and transit countries like Niger, Libya, and Mali, before arriving in the Mediterranean (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). The journey featured severe human rights violations and criminal exploitations, including human trafficking, forced labour, sexual abuse, and arbitrary detention (Micallef, 2019; IOM, 2020). Studies highlight that women and unaccompanied migrant children (UMCs) are particularly vulnerable to abuse by smugglers and armed groups (Amnesty International, 2020).

Through field research and migrant testimonies, several studies have documented abuses along migration routes. The Mixed Migration Centre (2021) conducted interviews with Nigerian migrants who traveled through Libya and found that 78% of them experienced some form of violence, including beatings, extortion, and sexual exploitation. Another study by Micallef (2019) analyzed data from migration monitoring groups and reported that 80% of migrants in Libya's detention centers were subjected to forced labour or ransom demands and payments.

A 2017 IOM report documented cases of human trafficking among Nigerian migrants, highlighting that over 60% of female migrants travelling through Libya had been victims of sexual exploitation. Amnesty International (2020) also provided extensive documentation on the abuses suffered by migrants in Libyan detention facilities, reporting that detention centres were often controlled by armed militias with no government oversight.

### **The Role of Smuggling Networks and the Libyan Crisis**

Libya is a key transit country for irregular migration due to its geographical proximity to Europe and its fragile political state (Reitano & Shaw, 2018). The collapse of governance in Libya has led to a thriving human smuggling economy, with migrants facing forced labour, kidnapping, and criminal extortion in detention centres (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019). Studies indicate that militias, criminal gangs, and corrupt officials profit from the trafficking and detention of migrants across Libya (IOM, 2017; UNHCR, 2022).

### **Empirical Studies on European Migration Policies and Their Consequences**

European migration policies have increasingly focused on border externalisation and deterrence rather than humanitarian protection (Andersson, 2014; Zanker, 2021). The European Union (EU) has signed agreements with Libya and other transit nations to end irregular migration, resulting in more restrictive asylum policies and difficult conditions for migrants

(Triandafyllidou, 2019). These policies have been criticized for expanding migrant vulnerabilities, as many are returned to detention centers where they face abuse (Amnesty International, 2020).

Research has examined the effectiveness of European migration policies in controlling irregular migration. Andersson (2014) analyzed data on EU border security expenditures and found that despite billions of euros spent on border policing, irregular migration through the Mediterranean has persisted, with increased deaths due to the use of riskier routes. Zanker (2021) assessed the impact of the EU-Libya agreement and found that while sea arrivals to Europe decreased, this came at the cost of worsening human rights abuses and continued deaths among migrants in Libya. Similarly, Triandafyllidou (2019) reviewed case studies of European migration governance and argued that restrictive policies have not only failed to end migration but have also contributed to greater migrant vulnerabilities and human rights violations.

### **Empirical Studies on Governance Failure and Migration in Nigeria**

Several scholars advocate for governance reforms in Nigeria to address the root causes of migration. Okunade & Ogunnubi (2021) emphasise the need for economic resuscitation, job creation, and improved security measures. Additionally, international collaboration is necessary to create safer migration pathways and prevent human rights abuses along migration routes (Olayinka, 2022; Kleist, 2018).

Research on Nigeria's governance challenges and their impact on migration is extensive. A survey conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2020) found that 71% of Nigerian returnees cited economic hardship and insecurity as their primary reasons for migration. Similarly, a study by Olayinka (2022) examining Nigerian migration trends from 2015 to 2021 found a strong correlation between increased migration and moments of economic recession, insecurity, and public policy failures.

In a study of Nigerian returnees, Ibrahim (2017) documented the personal narratives of individuals who cited unemployment, police brutality, and political instability as key reasons for their migration decisions. Okunade & Ogunnubi (2021) analyzed migration governance in Nigeria and found that corruption in government agencies responsible for migration management often triggers the problem rather than mitigating it.

Nigeria is experiencing a significant wave of mass emigration, popularly termed "Japa," driven by governance failure, economic instability, and persistent insecurity. Despite numerous policy efforts, the structural deficiencies in Nigeria's governance system continue to push citizens toward irregular migration in search of better opportunities. This has led to a crisis along the Mediterranean Sea, where thousands of Nigerian migrants face extreme dangers, including human trafficking, forced labour, sexual violence, and death during sea crossings. A critical gap exists in understanding the direct link between Nigeria's governance failure and the increasing vulnerability of its migrants along the Mediterranean route. While existing studies highlight migration drivers and the role of smuggling networks, there is insufficient focus on how systemic corruption, weak institutions, and inadequate policy responses in Nigeria fuel these dangerous migration patterns. Furthermore, restrictive European migration policies have worsened the crisis rather than providing viable solutions, leaving Nigerian migrants trapped in exploitative transit conditions, particularly in Libya.

This study addresses these gaps by qualitatively analyzing the lived experiences of Nigerian irregular migrants and the perspectives of NGOs working on reintegration programs. It seeks to investigate how governance failure shapes migration decisions, the role of transit country dynamics in worsening migrant vulnerabilities, and the unintended consequences of European migration deterrence and restrictive strategies. Without urgent governance reforms and sustainable migration policies, the Mediterranean crisis will persist, placing countless Nigerian migrants at risk of exploitation and death.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study critically investigates the connection between governance failure in Nigeria, the increasing trend of "Japa" (mass emigration), and the wider Mediterranean migration crisis. It examines how structural governance deficiencies, such as corruption, insecurity, weak institutions, and economic decline, push Nigerians into irregular migration (Akinrinade & Ogen, 2011; Ibrahim, 2017; de Haas, 2021). By employing qualitative methods, including interviews with returnees, NGOs, and analysis of secondary sources, the study highlights the lived experiences of migrants and the dangers they face, ranging from human trafficking to arbitrary detention and risky Mediterranean crossings (Micallef, 2019; UNHCR, 2022).

The research further explores the role of smuggling networks and collapsed governance in transit states like Libya, where migrants face exploitation, detention, and modern slavery (Baldwin-Edwards, Lutterbeck, & Pastore, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020). It also interrogates the unintended consequences of European border externalization policies, which often increase migrants' vulnerabilities by forcing them onto more dangerous routes (Andersson, 2014; Zanker, 2021).

The study therefore, aims at contributing evidence-based recommendations for governance reforms in Nigeria, emphasizing security, economic stabilization, job creation, and institutional strengthening, while also promoting international cooperation for safer, rights-based migration governance (Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2019).

Specifically, the research sought to:

1. To examine the role of governance failure, including systemic corruption, economic decline, and insecurity, in driving mass emigration from Nigeria.
2. To analyse the vulnerabilities of Nigerian migrants along the Mediterranean route, with a focus on human trafficking, forced labour, and fatal sea crossings.
3. To assess the impacts of European migration control measures on Nigerian migrants and explore possible policy alternatives for safer migration pathways.

The researcher formulated the research questions to align with the specific purposes outlined above:

- How does governance failure in Nigeria contribute to the mass emigration (Japa Syndrome) of its citizens?
- What are the vulnerabilities faced by Nigerian migrants along the Mediterranean route, particularly in transit countries like Libya?
- How do European migration policies impact the safety and migration outcomes of Nigerian migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs a multi-theoretical approach to understand the relationship between governance failure in Nigeria, the increasing trend of "Japa", and the ongoing migration crisis along the Mediterranean Sea. The theoretical foundation is drawn from four key perspectives: the Push-Pull Theory of Migration, the Structural Violence Theory, the Governance Theory, and the Migration Systems Theory.

### **Push-Pull Theory of Migration**

The Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966) is one of the most used frameworks for explaining migration dynamics. According to this theory, migration is influenced by factors that either push individuals out of their home country or pull them toward their destination.

- Push Factors: In the context of Nigeria, governance failure, economic decline, widespread insecurity, and lack of opportunities account for the major push factors (Adepoju, 2005; Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2021). Widespread corruption, youth unemployment, police brutality, and political instability make migration an attractive alternative (Olayinka, 2022).
- Pull Factors: The perception of better economic opportunities, safety, and social welfare systems in Europe acts as a strong pull factor. Many Nigerians view migration to escape socio-political challenges and to secure a better future (IOM, 2020).

However, it is important to point out that this theory does not fully account for the dangers and vulnerabilities migrants face in transit, particularly the role of smuggling syndicates and state violence, which necessitates an additional theoretical lens.

### **Structural Violence Theory**

The Structural Violence Theory (Galtung, 1969) explores how systemic inequalities and governance failures create conditions that indirectly harm individuals by limiting their access to basic needs and opportunities.

- Application to Nigeria: Poor governance, economic mismanagement, and corruption create a thriving environment where citizens lack viable options for survival, forcing them into irregular migration (Ibrahim, 2017).
- Transit Countries and Structural Violence: Migrants travelling through Libya face systemic violence in the form of human trafficking, forced labour, and abuse in detention centers (Micallef, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020). These conditions are sustained by governance failures in transit countries.
- European Migration Policies: Restrictive immigration policies that criminalise migration rather than providing safe pathways also contribute to structural violence by increasing migrant vulnerabilities (Zanker, 2021).

This theory helps explain how governance failures not only push migrants out of Nigeria but also expose them to systemic abuse throughout their journey.

## **Research Method**

This research adopts both secondary and primary data collection methods. This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the intersection between governance failure in

Nigeria, the "Japa Syndrome" (mass emigration), and the Mediterranean migration crisis. The research focused on understanding the structural dynamics that drive irregular migration and the lived experiences of Nigerian migrants. It combines primary and secondary data sources to provide a holistic and in-depth analysis of the subject matter.

To obtain the secondary data, the researcher reviewed a wide range of sources, including textbooks, official documents, academic journals, and daily media publications. The selection of documents was based on relevance, credibility, and date of publication.

### **Primary Data Collection**

The study conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 participants, using a purposive sampling method to select participants based on their expertise, lived experiences, and relevance to migration governance and reintegration. Participants were divided into two key categories:

#### **Key Stakeholders in Migration Governance (25 participants)**

Research participants from the:

- National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI)
- Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS)
- Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM)
- National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)

These interviews provided critical insights into migration policies, governance gaps, law enforcement challenges, and reintegration efforts for returned Nigerian migrants.

#### **Returned Migrants (25 participants)**

The interviews explored personal migration journeys, experiences of abuse and exploitation, challenges in transit nations (especially Libya), and reintegration struggles upon return to Nigeria.

### **Secondary Data Collection**

To gather the secondary data, the researcher reviewed a wide range of sources, including textbooks, government documents, academic journals, and daily media publications. The selection of documents was based on relevance, credibility, and date of publication. Sources included:

- **Academic Journals and Textbooks** – To examine existing literature on governance failure, migration trends, and structural violence.
- **Government Documents** – Migration policy frameworks, reports from NCFRMI, NIS, and NAPTIP.
- **National Dailies (Newspapers)** – Reports on irregular migration, human trafficking, and policy responses.
- **International Organisations' Reports** – Publications from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and Amnesty International provided critical insights into global migration governance and migrant vulnerabilities.

## **Perspectives from Returned Migrants and Migration Governance Stakeholders**

### **Experiences of Libyan Returnees: A Qualitative Perspective**

The 25 Nigerian returnees interviewed for this study provided harrowing firsthand accounts of their experiences during their attempted migration to Europe. Many of them faced extreme dangers, including boat mishaps, exploitation by smugglers and traffickers, and the traumatic loss of fellow migrants who drowned at sea. Their narratives highlight the desperation that drives many Nigerians to embark on these precarious journeys despite the well-documented risks.

#### **Themes Emerging from Returnee Narratives:**

- **Trauma and Survival:** Many returnees described how their boats capsized, leaving them struggling in the sea until they were rescued, sometimes by humanitarian organisations, sometimes by European coast guards, and at times by Libyan forces that returned them to detention camps. “Right in my presence, I saw people drowning, but I was helpless; nothing I could do. There were too many people on the boat, and when the waves hit us, the boat just broke apart and everyone started drowning.” – Male returnee, 27 years old. “We paid a smuggler who promised us a safe trip. Instead, we were abandoned in the middle of the sea with no fuel.” – Female, 25 years old.
- **Human Smuggling and Trafficking Exploitation:** 19 of the 25 returnees reported being deceived and extorted by smugglers who promised safe passage to Europe. “They told us we would be in Europe in a few hours. But we spent three days at sea with no food or water before we were rescued and returned to Tripoli in Libya.” – Male, 32 years old. “Women were sold to traffickers who forced them into prostitution when they couldn’t pay for the next part of the journey, it was a terrible experience.” – Female, 22 years old.
- **Detention and Forced Labour in Libya:** Those who were intercepted by Libyan authorities or smugglers often ended up in detention centers where they faced inhumane conditions. “Libyan prison was worse than death. They beat us, starved us, and called our families to demand ransom.” – Male, 30 years old.

## **Perspectives of Migration Stakeholders**

Interviews with 25 migration stakeholders, including officials from the Nigerian Immigration Service, NAPTIP, the Nigerian Diaspora Commission, and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons, corroborated the accounts given by the returnees. They emphasized the scale of the Mediterranean crisis and the urgent need for policy interventions to address irregular migration.

#### **Key Themes from Stakeholder Perspectives:**

- **Countless Nigerian Deaths at Sea:** Government officials confirmed that thousands of Nigerians have drowned in the Mediterranean over the years, with many cases going undocumented. “We receive distress calls almost every month about Nigerians who drown at sea. Many never return, and their families never hear from them again,” –

Nigerian Diaspora Commission official. “The real number of Nigerians who die in the Mediterranean is likely much higher than reported. Many boats sink without a trace.” – Personnel of the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons.

- Organised Smuggling and Human Trafficking Networks: Stakeholders identified organised smuggling and trafficking rings operating from Nigeria to Libya, swindling migrants with false promises of safe passage to Europe. “These smugglers are running a huge illegal industry. They don’t care about the lives lost, only the money they make” – NAPTIP Official. “We’ve seen cases where parents unknowingly pay traffickers, thinking they are helping their children secure a better future.” – National Commission for Refugees Representative.
- Challenges in Addressing the Crisis: Stakeholders highlighted the difficulties in combating irregular migration due to systemic governance failures and economic hardship in Nigeria. “We can’t stop people from leaving if they have no jobs, no security, and no future here” – Nigerian Immigration Service Official. “The government needs to do more than just rescue migrants; we must address the root causes that push them into these deadly journeys.” – NAPTIP Official.

The qualitative insights from both Nigerian returnees and migration stakeholders paint a horrible picture of the realities of irregular migration. While returnees recount their harrowing experiences of exploitation, loss, and survival, stakeholders stress the scale of the crisis and the need for urgent interventions. Tackling governance failures, economic hardship, and human trafficking networks remains crucial in curbing irregular migration and preventing further tragedies on the Mediterranean Sea.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria’s governance failure is a primary driver of ‘Japa,’ which contributes significantly to the ensuing Mediterranean migration crisis. Systemic corruption, economic instability, insecurity, unemployment, and weak institutional frameworks have created conditions that push many Nigerians to seek opportunities abroad, often through irregular and dangerous migration routes. Dismantling these governance deficiencies is a critical pathway to mitigating irregular migration and protecting the lives of Nigerian migrants. Sustainable solutions require a multi-sectoral and collaborative approach, combining national governance reforms with international migration policies that provide safer and legal migration pathways. The Nigerian government must implement robust economic policies, anti-corruption measures, and job creation initiatives to reduce migration pressures at the source. Strengthening regional and international cooperation with neighbouring or transit countries, as well as European destination countries, is essential in tackling human trafficking, migrant smuggling, abuse, and exploitation.

Furthermore, migration policies at the global level should shift from a restrictive and deterrent-based approach to one that prioritises migrant protection and human rights. Punitive border control measures alone cannot address the root causes of migration; rather, a balanced approach that includes legal migration frameworks and reintegration support for returnees is necessary. With economic stability, security, and good governance, Nigeria can create an

environment where its citizens no longer feel compelled to embark on harmful migration journeys. A well-governed Nigeria will not only reduce irregular migration but also foster sustainable national development, ensuring that migration becomes a choice rather than a necessity.

## **Recommendations**

To effectively mitigate these challenges and create sustainable solutions, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Enhance Governance and Economic Stability:** Implement good governance reforms that will improve transparency, accountability, and public trust. Prioritize economic reforms and large-scale job creation programs to reduce the economic pressures that drive irregular migration, and invest in social services such as healthcare, education, and housing to improve living conditions and reduce migration pressures.
- **Strengthen Security and Anti-Corruption Measures:** The government should expand anti-corruption initiatives to tackle financial mismanagement and ensure equitable resource distribution. Improve border security and law enforcement strategies to curb human trafficking and migrant smuggling operations along the Mediterranean migration corridor.
- **Invest in Education and Skills Development:** Expand vocational and technical skills training and entrepreneurship programs to equip youth with employable skills. Increase funding for education and scholarships to create opportunities within Nigeria, reducing reliance on migration.
- **Enhance Regional and International Cooperation:** Strengthen collaboration with neighbouring countries and international organizations to combat trafficking and smuggling networks. Negotiate with destination countries for safer legal migration pathways, reducing reliance on dangerous routes.

**Promote Humane Migration Policies at the International Level:** Advocate for migrant protection-focused policies rather than punitive measures that increase migrant vulnerabilities. Collaborate with the African Union, European Union, and international organisations to establish sustainable migration governance frameworks.

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