

*Article*

## **The Effect of Displacement and Irregular Migration on Nigeria's Development**

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**Abstract:** This article examined how displacement and irregular migration heighten insecurity in Nigeria, it also determined how displacement and irregular migration undermined the economic contributions that Nigeria would have enjoyed from its youthful population. These were with the view to ascertain the effect of displacement and irregular migration on Nigeria's development. In achieving these objectives, the article draws on materialism theory and qualitative method that were sourced through document analysis, using a desktop as a data collection instrument. The findings established that displacement and irregular migration of mainly the Nigerian youth, who constituted the majority of the country's economically active population, significantly hampered the developmental intents of Nigeria. The findings contribute to the discussion on the dimension of human displacement and irregular migration in Nigeria. The findings have implications for expanding knowledge about ways the Nigerian government can utilize good governance and citizen engagement to address irregular migration and its effects on socio-economic development. It concluded that effective government performance in terms of meeting the citizens' expectations and promoting their well-being would reduce tendencies of displacement and irregular migration in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Brain-drain; development; governance failure; human displacement; migration crisis

### **Introduction**

Despite efforts to address human displacement and irregular migration, the Nigerian government has seen little success. The country continues to face attacks by bandits and insurgents, poor governance, unemployment, terrorism, and violence, all of which fuel displacement and irregular migration. These problems persist despite interventions and have major consequences for national development (Agunyai, 2018). Displacement leads to joblessness, homelessness, and economic inactivity, making many people dependent on the state. Irregular migration, often a result of displacement, remains a major challenge for Nigeria's economically active population.

This research examines how displacement and irregular migration hinder Nigeria's development. Despite existing studies on their consequences, little research addresses their direct impact on development or the economic contributions lost from displaced and irregular migrants. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring these effects in detail. Development in most countries, including Nigeria, is commonly assessed by the level of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. In Nigeria, these indicators are significantly influenced by displacement and irregular migration (Agunyai & Phago, 2024). Displacement frequently leads to increased

poverty and unemployment, thereby exacerbating inequality. Ongoing crises, such as banditry, have compelled many Nigerians to live under persistent fear and threat (Musa, 2025). Additionally, numerous individuals have lost their lives on hazardous migration routes, often as a consequence of displacement (Mateko & Vutula, 2024). Both displacement and migration result in the loss of the active population, diminishing Nigeria's economic potential.

The persistent drive to leave the country along dangerous migratory routes, especially among the youth, has raised concerns for research to examine the impact of human displacement and irregular migration on Nigeria's socio-economic development (Agunyai & Phago, 2024). This brings to the fore the rationale for the choice of this research, which is based on the fact that, if nothing is speedily done to address factors (such as natural disasters, banditry, violence, terrorism, economic hardships, governance failure, among others) causing the displacement of people in Nigeria, the country will lose all its economically active population to developed countries (Ikuteyijo, 2018). This could affect earnings from the GDP, denying Nigeria the opportunities to tap and harness the youthful energies of the young population to economically build the country. Ordinarily, the consideration of youth contributions to economic growth and development should have been the reason why the Nigerian government should quickly address irregular migration among youth. This is because, with massive contributions from the youth, Nigeria's GDP will significantly rise. This brings to the fore the specific objectives of this research, which include:

- i. examine the role of displacement in promoting irregular migration in Nigeria.
- ii. analyse the interplay between human displacement and trafficking;
- iii. investigate how youth demographics influence irregular migration trends; and
- iv. propose strategies to address these challenges through governance reforms

## Literature Review

Displacement refers to the forced removal of individuals from their homes, typically against their will, due to coercion arising from natural or human causes. It is inherently involuntary. Displacement is caused by natural factors such as floods, erosion, famine, and climate change—and by human-induced factors like economic hardship, poverty, violence, armed conflict, terrorism, and development. Development projects may lead to direct displacement, removing people from their locations, or indirect displacement through loss of livelihoods. Displacement often results in impoverishment, and development-driven displacement carries significant social costs (Jayawardhan, 2017). In Africa, approximately 18 million people are displaced, with 12.5 million internally displaced within their countries. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within national borders but endure hardships similar to refugees (UNHCR, 2016). Africa has among the highest numbers of displaced people globally. In 2020, the Democratic Republic of the Congo had 5.3 million displaced persons, Somalia 2.9 million, and Nigeria 2.7 million, making Africa the continent with the largest population of internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2016).

Internally displaced people are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee, or leave, their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, and habitual violations of human rights, as well as natural or man-made disasters involving one or more of these elements, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border" (Jayawardhan, 2017). This makes them different from refugees who are under protection. IDPs are not under any recognized protection or assistance. Governments across the globe have been making efforts to protect IDPs, but these efforts have remained largely ineffective because no government in the world has a comprehensive policy on them (Agunyai & Phago, 2024).

Displacement within Nigeria is driven by inter-group conflicts, environmental disasters, and terrorism, while cross-border displacement often stems from economic hardship, unemployment, and governance failure (Agunyai, 2024). The role of bad governance—characterized by state fragility, weak government control, poor service delivery, and lack of political will—in population displacement is underexplored in existing literature. This research addresses this gap by examining the relationship between displacement and governance failure in Nigeria. Building on findings by Agunyai and Ojakorotu (2021a), which identified the lack of political will in the Buhari administration as a factor in large-scale displacement across several states, this study highlights

how indicators of bad governance—such as corruption, lack of accountability, poor service delivery, and weak rule of law can provoke insecurity and subsequent displacement. Unlike prior studies, this research focuses specifically on how governance deficits contribute to the displacement of citizens in Nigeria.

### 1. Irregular Migration Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa

Irregular migration is entering or leaving a country without valid documents approved by immigration offices. Sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigeria, makes up over 60% of global illegal migration for transactional sex. Irregular migration includes entry with fake documents, overstaying approved limits, or abusing refugee protection (Kuschminder et al., 2015). Irregular and regular migration are different, though the distinction is sometimes unclear in the literature. Few studies examine their similarities (Kuschminder et al., 2015). This research addresses the gap by providing information on irregular migration trends in Nigeria.

The distinction between regular and irregular migration remains ambiguous. For instance, many irregular migrants initially enter destination countries legally but subsequently become irregular when their visas expire, when they engage in prohibited activities, or when they work without authorization. Conversely, some individuals may enter or remain in a country illegally but later obtain legal residency through marriage, employment, or regularization processes. Irregular migration refers to entering a country, or returning to one's own, without complying with migration laws. More specifically, it involves crossing borders without valid migration documents or by violating migration regulations (Jane, 2012). This includes traveling internationally without the required documentation. Many individuals from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those migrating to Europe, undertake such journeys, frequently crossing borders illegally. A significant proportion of people residing in Europe have experienced irregular migration at some stage. In several African countries, including Nigeria, limited employment opportunities are a primary driver of irregular migration, especially among youth. This phenomenon has serious consequences for both young people and the nation. Some young Nigerians have lost their lives attempting irregular migration, while others who reach their destinations often encounter discrimination, abuse, and harassment, particularly young women. These challenges have also negatively affected Nigeria's international reputation, as citizens may face increased scrutiny and negative perceptions abroad.

Nigeria continually loses its economically active population to irregular migration due to displacement. Most extant studies have partly blamed natural disasters, violence, terrorism, and environmental degradation for irregular migration (IDMC, 2017). There is little evidence linking unemployment and governance failure to human displacement. Not many studies believe that young Nigerians are constantly being displaced by unemployment and bad governance. It is a fact that most Nigerian youths have been displaced and made to embark on illegal or irregular migration due to idleness, unemployment, and bad governance in Nigeria. Bad governance is one of the leading problems affecting the Nigerian state. Corruption, poor service delivery, breakdown of law and order, and favouritism are manifestations of bad governance that tend to displace Nigerian youths from Nigeria to overseas countries. Unemployment and bad governance are hardly classified as factors influencing human displacement. Yet, most youths move massively out of the shores of Nigeria due to their inability to get a paid job (IDMC, 2017).

The reality on the ground in Nigeria today is that its citizens are now engaged in what is popularly known as the 'JAPA syndrome' (literally meaning: run or leave the country to seek greener pastures overseas). This JAPA syndrome is partly perpetrated through irregular migration as an increasing number of frustrated Nigerian citizens leave the country in droves due to insecurity, poverty, natural disasters, and bad governance, among others. The pressure over irregular migration among Nigerians to Europe and other continents has led many European countries to establish border control against irregular migration (Lutterbeck, 2006; Clemence & Postel, 2018). However, despite these border control measures, irregular migration remains unabated. This desperate move of Nigerian citizens outside their country for greener pastures and safety has not only increased the number of undocumented or irregular Nigerian migrants, but it has also impeded Nigeria's socio-economic development.

Research is scarce on how Nigeria is consistently losing from the economic contributions or benefits that could have been acquired from the displaced Nigerians. This gap was bridged by the study's potential in

advancing good governance to prevent displacement and irregular migration. This next sub-section adequately provides insights into the nexus between governance and migration in Nigeria

## 2. Governance and Migration Nexus in Nigeria

Governance, which is simply the ability to deliver key indicators such as accountability, service, rule of law, transparency, ultimate performance, respect for human rights, ability to effectively control violence and corruption, strong political will, among others, is capable of determining if citizens would remain and support the government of their country (Agunyai, 2018; Agunyai & Ojatorotu, 2021a). Logically, citizens whose expectations are met may likely be motivated to give their total support or loyalty to the performing government. Similarly, countries with good governance (effective service delivery, accountability, rule of law, and others) are less likely to face the problem of unnatural displacement and irregular or illegal migration. This is because the majority of their expectations are met, thus, a reduction in incessant risky emigration.

The reverse is the case in Nigeria, where governance is characterised by corruption, weak political will, poor delivery of service, a weak accountability and transparency system, absence of the rule of law. These factors have partly been the bane of insurgency and banditry, which have invariably caused the displacement of people. Displacement is one of the fallouts of bad governance in Nigeria that often leads to irregular migration. For instance, weak political will to prosecute and decisively punish those caught in the web of armed attacks against the Nigerian state and its citizens is likely to embolden armed state actors to continue with their attacks (Musa, 2025). It is on record that unchecked and uncontrolled attacks by armed non-state actors are partly the leading cause of displacement that has forcefully pushed people into irregular migration in Nigeria (Agunyai & Phago, 2024). Recently, the inability of the Nigerian government to effectively tackle and end terrorism has provoked the United States of America to classify Nigeria as a country of particular concern, warning the Nigerian government to act or face the US's intervention.

## 3. Theoretical underpinning of human displacement and Irregular migration in Nigeria

Marxian theory of materialism is adopted to explain the link between human displacement and irregular migration. The Marxist theory of materialism, which was popularized by Karl Marx, argues that cultural institutions and human societies are collective products of economic activity. It further stipulates that material, economic, and biological forces and relationships to natural, physical, and biological worlds drive the dialectic of change (Blackledge, 2006). It holds the view that the heartbeat or engine of history relies on the internal contradictions in the system of material production, or the things we do to produce the means for survival. Every society has its own peculiar economic system or mode of production that contains internal contradictions that allow for behavioural change in humans or the way we live in society. For example, change in social and economic life is a product of inherent contradictions in society's economic system or mode of production. The theory also argues that the things that people produce end up defining them as people, and that what people own ends up, to a large extent, owning them.

According to the theory, the "material conditions" of human life include "forces of production" and "relations of production." The primary social activity of human beings is production through labour, and such production involves relations with other humans, both in the labour itself and in the distribution of the product (Blackledge, 2006). Marx was highly critical of this tendency to treat our own creations as "magical" objects that then define and have power over us. The theory further proposes that commodities emanating from social production could lead to widespread alienation. Marx argues that if we are locked into a system where someone else owns the commodities we produce and we lust after those commodities as if they had nothing to do with our own labour, then we have become alienated from our sense of our own species-being.

This theory aptly explains the subject's core issues of displacement and irregular migration in Nigeria. According to this theory, internal or domestic contradictions determine the things we do or the decisions we make. Applying this principle to the Nigerian case, internal contradictions such as insecurity, insurgency, activities of armed non-state actors (Herder-Farmer crisis, kidnapping, banditry, terrorism, gun-men escapades, among others), human rights abuses, economic hardships, inflation, unemployment, and climate change are all potential sources of displacement and factors that often push people into irregular migration in

Nigeria. For instance, the sudden and unplanned removal of crude oil subsidy, which deepens the rate of poverty among Nigerians, is a good example of an internal contradiction that has consistently stimulated irregular migration among the Nigerian youths, the majority of whom follow irregular migratory routes. In the same vein, the continued and unabated cases of insurgency, kidnapping for ransom, insecurity, electoral violence, political killings before, during, and after election, abuse of human rights, lack of respect for, or poor implementation of court orders or judgment are also part of the internal contradictions, displacing people from their homes and away from Nigeria (Odorige 2016; IOM, 2010; Osezua, 2016). The movement of idle Nigerian youths overseas, through irregular migration, is strongly provoked by displacement or harsh economic conditions and governance crisis. This has severe implications for Nigeria's development.

For Marx, exploitation and alienation are unavoidable in relationships between senders of remittances and idle youths attempting to leave the country without valid documentation. Just like Marx predicted, most of the youths who finally leave the country as irregular migrants, as Osezua (2016) would describe them, ended up being exploited and alienated. Evidence such as IOM (2010) and Flahaux and De Haas (2016) reveals that, apart from the fact that these unsuspecting youth from rural communities are being trafficked, they end up working for trafficking merchants or smugglers while they receive nothing in return (Osezua, 2016). It is a fact that most international sex-hawkers or prostitutes work for certain years for their madams before they can regain their freedom to work and receive proceeds from their labour (prostitution or drug peddling) (Osezua, 2016). The foregoing scenario looks similar to exploitative relations between the classes of the bourgeois and the proletariat. To end this exploitation and alienation, victims (in this case, young proletariats) must sometimes resist, demonstrate, and reject the oppression. For example, several trafficked youths, in a bid to free themselves from the exploitation of their traffickers, have devised means of reporting to relevant authorities either in their home or host countries (Osezua, 2016; Odorige, 2016; Kumolu, 2015). To this end, it can be inferred from the theory that internal contradictions, which cause displacement and irregular migration, undermine Nigeria's quest for rapid socio-economic development.

## Methodology

This research draws on a qualitative research design that was sourced through document analysis. The reason for the choice of this approach is based on its ability to arrive at an inductive conclusion from specific observations or analysis of documents. Documents selected for this research were those in internationally accredited journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The inclusion criteria of these documents include recency, specific subject area covered, and university-based documents. With these criteria, documents not older than 1990 were selected, and those that cover issues relating to governance, displacement, migration, irregular migration, and consequences of migration in Nigeria were selected. Importantly, documents published by the faculty of social sciences of internationally recognized universities, which cover the subject of discussion, were also selected. The selected documents were content-analysed thematically in line with the specific objectives of the research.

## The Findings

This section provides a concise and precise description of the results of the research. For the qualitative research, data were analysed using themes.

### 1. Drivers of Displacement

Findings show that bad governance, unresolved conflicts, insurgency, violence, herder-farmer crisis, climate change, crime, kidnapping, erosion, harsh economic policies, human rights abuses, weak political will, and failing social institutions drive displacement and irregular migration. Nigeria's surge in displacement stems from immediate and structural pressures on households, prompting many to leave their homes irregularly. Protracted conflicts, such as the Boko Haram insurgency, contribute to this trend and affect neighbouring countries (Musa, 2025). Displacement, often caused by internal contradictions, is closely linked to irregular migration, supporting the Marxian theory that internal discord strongly influences migration decisions. In

Nigeria, most irregular migration cases result from these issues. Displaced people seek safety elsewhere, often without proper documentation, which is why they are classified as irregular migrants.

## 2. Irregular Migration Pathways

Irregular migration in Nigeria often involves illegal entry, visa overstays, or inadequate documentation. These actions expose migrants to deportation, as seen when Nigerians are returned for violating immigration laws. Such deportations can foster human trafficking, where individuals are moved across borders for profit, often in large groups. Human smuggling and trafficking are closely linked and are sometimes driven by displacement caused by various factors. The consequences of human trafficking are wide-ranging, impacting victims, destination countries, source countries, and global security. Victims may die, source countries may face stigma, destination countries can suffer reputational harm, and overall international security may be threatened (Ikuteyijo, 2020).

The widespread conscription of young Nigerians as foot soldiers for bandits and Boko-Haram leaders represents a significant crisis arising from human displacement and irregular migration in Nigeria (Mateko & Vutula, 2024). Nigeria is increasingly at risk of state failure, as Boko-Haram insurgents and bandits recruit from the growing population of displaced youth. Displacement caused by natural disasters such as erosion and flooding, as well as economic hardship and poor governance, often results in idleness and increased susceptibility to criminal activity. These conditions frequently lead to illegal or irregular migration, heightening vulnerability to smuggling (Ikuteyijo, 2020). Insecurity and the premature deaths of migrants along hazardous migratory routes constitute another major crisis associated with displacement and irregular migration (Agunyai & Ojakorotu, 2021b). Land routes, commonly used by irregular migrants from West Africa, are particularly perilous. Numerous young people have lost their lives or disappeared along these routes in recent years. Reports also document brutal killings, imprisonment, sexual abuse, rape, forced labour, and forced marriage among those traveling these paths (Clemens & Postel, 2018). These developments have grave implications for human security, as many Nigerian youths have been enslaved, imprisoned, or killed during prolonged and dangerous migration journeys (Ojeme, 2016).

Brain drain crisis is another consequence of human displacement and irregular migration. Nigeria is a source country for irregular migration caused by economic hardships, poverty, and unemployment. The greater the number of people who are displaced from Nigeria as a result of no job opportunities, the higher the risk of the brain drain problem. This might have led Ikuteyijo (2020) to conclude that low socio-economic status, poverty, instability, and climate change could trigger displacement, necessitating irregular migration along dangerous routes. Today, the poor socio-economic status of some Nigerians, especially professionals such as doctors, nurses, and caregivers, has made them leave the country for safer and promising countries. It denies Nigeria the opportunity to retain its best brains, who could have positively contributed to the development of Nigeria.

Although many of the extant studies are quick to blame the reason why Nigerians leave the shores of their country as being in search of greener pastures and economic opportunities overseas, this article argues that bad governance has partly caused Nigerians to leave the country (Roelofs, 2023; Agunyai & Olawoyin, 2019; Agunyai & Ojakorotu, 2021a). It is a fact that when the government fails to perform its statutory duties in terms of service delivery, optimal performance in improving citizens' well-being, human security, and entrenching the rule of law, the citizens are likely to suffer from internal unpleasant pressures that may force them to leave the country. It is clear and well-documented that nations with high levels of corruption suffer from massive emigration of their citizens overseas.

## 3. Governance and Policy Implications

Governance built on the mandate and power of the people is likely to improve citizens' welfare, thereby reducing the tendency toward irregular migration. It is on record that one of the reasons why people, especially the youth, leave Nigeria is because of poor means of livelihood (Ikenga & Chima, 2021). One of the key indicators of governance is the ability to identify and harmonize the raw talents or potentials of Nigerian youths into meaningful development enterprises that can facilitate economic growth (Agunyai, 2018). This

can be achieved by way of empowering the youth through skills acquisition programmes. Meaningful engagement of youths in a scheme that empowers and facilitates their access to decent and productive work is likely to help reduce irregular migration among this group of Nigerians.

Governance rooted in strong institutions and integrity fosters fairness, equity, and national unity, as seen in developed nations like the US, UK, and France (Fukuyama, 2013; Agunyai, & Phago, 2024). In these countries, citizens rarely emigrate because essential services and well-being are secured. In contrast, citizens in Nigeria face insecurity, poor services, and inequality, prompting their emigration (Agunyai, 2018; Agunyai, 2024). Nigeria can improve by empowering institutions rather than elites and by ensuring that laws apply equally to all. This strengthens public trust, reduces armed conflict, and curbs displacement and irregular migration (Mateko & Vutula, 2024).

Transparent and accountable governance improves service delivery and meets citizens' needs (Asaduzzaman & Virtanen, 2016). Openness fosters trust, while secrecy and lack of accountability breed suspicion, unrest, and even violence (Agunyai & Olawoyin, 2019). Nigeria's protests against bad governance show how secrecy and underperformance can spark nationwide uprisings. To address displacement and irregular migration, Nigeria must ensure transparency, accountability, and openness to public criticism without state coercion (Agunyai & Ojatorotu, 2018).

## Discussion

Displacement and irregular migration in Nigeria share similar drivers, including natural disasters (climate change, flooding, erosion) and human factors (violence, insurgency, economic hardship, weak governance) (Adeniran, 2020; Mateko & Vutula, 2024). These causes often push citizens to migrate irregularly, such as entering countries illegally or overstaying visas (Mateko & Vutula, 2024). Displacement frequently stimulates irregular migration, as domestic pressures force people to leave (Asaduzzaman & Virtanen, 2016). Both (displacement and irregular migration) contribute to low economic output and brain drain, undermining national development (Agunyai & Phago, 2024; Agunyai, 2024). Good governance, through proper enforcement of key indicators, is crucial to addressing these issues (Adeniran, 2020; Agunyai & Ojatorotu, 2021a). The Nigerian government should develop policies that improve social services, welfare, poverty alleviation, and job creation. Further research should examine how public policy can address irregular migration and displacement, focusing on mitigating factors.

## Conclusion

In this research, an attempt was made to examine the effect of human displacement on irregular migration. To achieve this aim, the research hypothesizes that the displacement of Nigerians, which is often caused by natural and unnatural factors, often denies Nigeria the opportunity to benefit from the contributions of its economically active population, mainly dominated by youths. The test of this hypothesis was effectively done through a review of the literature that discussed the link between displacement and irregular migration in Nigeria. In addition, this review was done through qualitative document analysis of empirical studies on the subject matter of drivers and consequences of displacement and irregular migration. Findings of this research revealed that displacement has a significant effect on irregular migration, as typified by the way the displaced Nigerians leave their country due to insecurity, bad governance, unemployment, poverty, poor policy implementation, among others. It was also established that displacement and irregular migration by some Nigerian youths not only endanger the lives of those involved but also provoke the brain-drain problem, as Nigeria is losing more of its economically active population to developed countries. This, according to this study, has severe implications for Nigeria's sustainable development. In practice, this study adequately provides the expected valid information to the government on how to design public policies that can effectively address provoking factors of displacement and irregular migration.

The Nigerian government can leverage the findings of this study by promoting people-oriented good governance built on effective service delivery, which, in turn, improves citizens' welfare. It was found that countries with improved citizens' welfare experience fewer irregular migration problems than those with poor citizens' welfare. Practically, this study's findings show that the government's ability to meet people's needs

and expectations could go a long way toward addressing the factors driving irregular migration in Nigeria. Furthermore, the study adequately contributed to the general body of knowledge in migration studies and migration governance.

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