

The JAPA Problem: Comprehensive Strategies for Addressing the Irregular Migration Crisis

Chibuzor Ephraim ONYEMA

President/Chief Executive Officer, Blacks Ancestral Native Communities (BANC) Foundation –
Conveners of the Anti-Illegal Migration Summit.
PhD Candidate, Department of Counselling Psychology, College of Specialized and Professional Education,
Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Irregular migration is a complex global challenge with multifaceted impacts on countries of origin, transit, and destination. In the last decade, the mass exodus of Nigerians to Europe, North America, and Asia has been unprecedented, creating an ominous vacuum at home. Several factors are responsible for this *japa* craze, but the most significant is economic hardship which is the lot of more than half of the population. The urgency to address this trend is the humanitarian crisis it threatens in Nigeria and the huge dent in the integrity of immigration systems worldwide. This paper explores workable strategies to mitigate the drivers of irregular migration among Nigerians. It proposes actionable solutions that balance humanitarian concerns with sovereign responsibilities.

BACKGROUND

Migration is as old as human existence. The history of human migration dates back to the movement of *Homo erectus* out of Africa and across Eurasia about 1.75 million years ago (Patrick Manning, 2015). *Homo sapiens*, our species, were the predominant occupants of Africa up to about 150,000 years ago until they started moving out 70,000 years ago (Patrick Manning, 2015), paving the way for colonisation and the unequal distribution of human and natural resources we have today. Whether now or years before, relocation has always followed a pattern with similar pull and push factors (Okunade and Awosusi, 2023; ICIR, 2023). Nigeria has experienced several waves of emigration in the last few decades, but none is as widespread and potent as the current phenomenon codenamed *Japa*. According to Professor Toyin Falola, *Japa* is a Yoruba word that means “to flee, escape, or break loose” from a system or someone perceived as oppressive, inadequate, or counterproductive (Premium Times, 2022). It is unclear when this word gained prominence in the Nigerian lexicon. However, its adoption as the description for every relocation plan (regular or irregular) among Nigerians is under no question.

Nigeria's net migration rate as of 2024 is -0.267 per 1000 population (Macrotrends, 2024). This figure represents a 2.2% decline from 2023's data, signifying that as the years roll by, the quest to flee the shores of Nigeria continues to gain momentum. Based on Afrobarometer's recent survey, young and educated Nigerians, especially those below 35 years and who live in cities, are the most prone to relocating abroad. Also, the same survey reveals that highly skilled individuals in the health, education, and finance sectors are among the leading professionals constantly charting a course to *japa* from the country (Afrobarometer, 2018). More worrisome is the recent upsurge in the number of high-net-worth Nigerians projected to leave the country in 2024. The Henley Private Wealth Migration Report cited by *The Guardian* newspapers says that at least 300 Nigerian millionaires will leave for another

country in 2024 (The Guardian, 2024). As such, the Nigerian *japa* syndrome is not only limited to the lower or middle class alone; it is an all-sector, all-class phenomenon. However, while the upper and some middle-class citizens can pay their way through the often expensive emigration processes, desperate Nigerians without the means have resorted to irregular means to travel abroad.

The National Migration Policy (2015) defines irregular migration as relocation efforts that involve “sophisticated, high-risk, daring, and evasive methods to enter Europe clandestinely.” Of course, Europe is not the only destination for fleeing Nigerians. Almost every corner of the earth perceived as a “saner clime,” is a desired destination. According to Olaoluwa et al. (2019), some irregular means employed by Nigerians to relocate abroad include unofficial border crossing, trafficking, smuggling, document fraud, and overstaying visas. Some more desperate citizens even consider travelling on foot and as stowaways on ships across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea to achieve their vision of a better life. In 2023 alone, an ICIR report puts the number of Nigerians that died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea and Sahara Desert at 1200.

Irregular migration is a complex global challenge with multifaceted impacts on countries of origin, transit, and destination. In Nigeria, the factors driving this dangerous adventure range from economic disparity and conflict to environmental changes and broad-day human rights violations (Olaoluwa et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the humanitarian imperatives and the need to strengthen the integrity of the world’s immigration system underscore the urgency of addressing this issue. This paper explores workable strategies to mitigate the drivers of irregular migration with a view to protecting migrants and fostering international cooperation. The solutions proffered balance humanitarian concerns with sovereign responsibilities.

Drivers of Irregular Migration in Nigeria

Most Nigerians who embark on irregular migration know beforehand the challenges involved (Ayuba, 2018). Some small percentages are deceived, but more than 50% do not expect the journey or outcome to be rosy initially. However, despite this knowledge, young Nigerians leave the country in their thousands yearly in an irregular manner for the following reasons.

- **Economic Hardship**

Nigeria has pervasive poverty. For the first time in 2018, it overtook India as the world's poverty headquarters (CNN, 2018). The economic misfortune, which condemns over 80 million Nigerians to less than \$2 per day, has remained the same six years later despite a change in government and the renewed hope it promised. In a 2022 report, the World Bank asserts that labour market weaknesses, sluggish growth, and low human capital are reasons efforts to reduce Nigeria’s poverty remain largely unsuccessful. The unemployment rate remains high, and active employees feel highly dissatisfied, claiming their take-homes (wages/salaries) cannot take them home.

In all these, an average Nigerian youth or professional feels uncertain about the future, even when working and earning a reasonable wage. The inflation rate is at an all-time high, forcing many families to streamline their budgets and lifestyles. With this reality, many people are okay with using any means available to *japa* out of the country in search of better living conditions.

- **Insecurity**

Insecurity comes to many Nigerians in different forms. For some, it is the constant harassment by *unknown* gunmen, bandits, and kidnappers. To others, it is the uncertainty about the future of their dependents or jobs (Okunade and Awosusi, 2023). For over two decades, the Boko Haram menace has remained unresolved, with spillovers wreaking havoc on farmlands and settlements across the northern states. Recently, there has been an increase in the rate of kidnapping, with victims made to pay a huge ransom for their release. The most devastating effect of the declining security status of Nigeria is the sacking of farmers from their farmlands by herdsmen, leading to a critical food shortage. All of these contribute to a sense of vulnerability by even an average Nigerian, and it's a major reason people *japa* at any cost (Okay Africa, 2022).

- **Over Glamourization of Life Abroad**

Many Nigerians underestimate the opportunities in the country and always think that elsewhere is better. It is common to find youths who believe the country is not a favourable place for success. Olaoluwa et al. (2019) call this mindset a dystopia mentality, in which everything at home is viewed as imperfect or less desired, while abroad is where life is. Thanks to social media and diasporans' inaccurate portrayals of life abroad, people at home yearn almost interminably to taste such a paradise life. The immediate consequence of this false perception of life abroad is the desperation often displayed in *japaing* out of the country.

- **Social Pressure**

Although irregular migration is ultimately the choice of the individuals involved, there is no denying that many are pressured into it by family and friends. This pressure starts brewing when a person notices that out of ten secondary school or university colleagues, eight have already found their way out of the country and are allegedly doing well. In most cases, the one at home feels left behind and will not mind doing anything to join his colleagues abroad. In other cases, family members push those they consider to be the brightest minds to seek a vocation abroad so they can lift others. Considering the social construct that abroad is a better place to succeed than home, many youths and professionals succumb to this pressure to measure up with their friends already “doing exploits” overseas.

- **The Pull From Destination Countries**

Employers from destination countries of Nigeria *japa-ists* seem to benefit from the influx of irregular migrants. In the United States, for instance, undocumented immigrants are paid 42% less than their documented counterparts or natives with similar education and experience (EconoFact, 2019). Because of the potential huge savings in workers' wages that hiring irregular migrants portends, some notorious employers prefer this set of people. Unfortunately, this is a significant pull factor because it gives the impression of being desired or needed in these countries, although exploitative. Although the pay gap is wide, many *japa-ists* jump at it because it is significantly higher than what is offered at home, even under perfect conditions.

- **Poor Infrastructure**

The infrastructural deficit in Nigeria is alarming, especially in the rural areas. According to Andersen (2022), it will take an investment of between \$100 and \$150 billion annually for the next ten years to close the infrastructural gap in Nigeria. Most roads have become death traps, and many people cannot access clean water and electricity. Most communities' transport

systems are unreliable, and many who have their cars experience what has now become a vicious cycle of fuel scarcity. Consequently, some Nigerians feel unfulfilled, unproductive, and unable to meet their goals. It gets worse when *japa-ists* find out from their friends or colleagues abroad that the things they struggle to have at home are basic abroad. It, therefore, seems very reasonable to do anything and everything it takes to get into those countries where life seems to be better.

Challenges and Implications of Irregular Migration

The implications and challenges associated with irregular migration are far-reaching, extending to the migrants, their country of origin, and their destinations. As such, tackling this multifaceted menace requires tremendous cooperation among the affected stakeholders.

On the Migrants

Irregular travellers are often at the mercy of harsh climatic elements like scorching heat, cold, and torrential rainfall. Since many of them go through unconventional routes like crossing the Mediterranean Sea on boats, journeying on foot across the Sahara Deserts, smuggling themselves through porous borders of some countries, and several other dangerous journeys, they are at risk of sustaining physical injuries and even death. Quoting data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) says that 1,200 citizens died in 2023 alone while trying to get to Europe and North America through the Sahara desert and Mediterranean Sea (ICIRN 2023).

Besides the threats to life that have almost become the lot of every undocumented traveller, financial and sexual exploitations are also rampant. Since trafficking is one of the irregular means utilised to *japa* from the country, the people involved are often victims of sexual exploitation. As already mentioned, able and qualified men get paid far below their worth because their employers feel they are doing them a favour since they are undocumented. Not minding the irregular nature of their relocation, desperate *japa-ists* also part with significant sums such as agent fees, school fees, and other financial commitments to achieve their goal. Many of these payments end up as scams because they are often inflated and unnecessary.

Many *japa-ists'* greatest challenges will be social exclusion and the inability to access quality medical care (Okunade and Awosusi, 2023). It is expected to find immigrants, regular or irregular, experiencing social exclusion, discrimination, and inability to adapt or integrate into their new community quickly. However, that is not as severe as being unable to access quality medical care in moments of ill health for fear of being fished out.

On the Country of Origin (Nigeria)

The implications of irregular migration on Nigeria are positive and negative. The positive aspect is the significant foreign remittances that come into the country through Nigerians in the diaspora. From 2019 to 2023, the total remittances from Nigerians abroad are \$19.48bn, \$20.13bn, and \$20.50bn, respectively (Statista, 2024). These amounts represent a significant proportion of the country's GDP, and it will be felt if they are to be removed. Also, the irregular exodus of Nigerians abroad creates opportunities for those at home to fill the vacancies left behind, thereby reducing unemployment. Of course, one can argue that some positions are difficult to replace because of the required expertise. Nevertheless, if the number of people who have left remains and the job situation does not change, the pressure on the labour market would have been much higher than it is currently.

On the negative end, the brain drain that Nigeria is currently witnessing is capable of grounding it if nothing is done quickly. Almost all sectors are already feeling the heat of the mass exodus of human resources from the country every year. The movement has spared no sector, from university dons to medical doctors, financial gurus, and tech experts. Since it takes human capital to rejig an economy in comatose, the excuses that the *japa-ists* hinged their relocation on may never find a quick solution if the brain drain continues.

On the Destination Country

First-world countries battling labour shortages may benefit from irregular migration. In the UK, for instance, undocumented migrants take up most of the hard-to-fill positions in low-skilled jobs like caregiving, restaurant attendants, chefs, and the like (Chapel et al., 2011). However, the security it portends to its citizens and the strain on public facilities are genuine concerns. Irregular migrants compete for housing, food, electricity, and other amenities with citizens of their destination countries. Most of the time, some countries experience shortages of these things because of the high influx of undocumented entrants. On the fiscal end, getting this population set to pay their fair share of direct taxes that help governments maintain public utilities and services is always difficult. Many have also complained that *japa-ists* from Nigeria and other countries harm the wage structures of their economy since they agree to lower pay (Chapel et al., 2011).

In the area of security, it is always unsafe to have a large population of excluded, struggling individuals in a community. With time, they may become really discontented, constituting themselves into a serious security threat.

Comprehensive Strategies to Combat Irregular Migration

The strategies that will prove effective in combating the drivers of irregular migration will involve synergy between the originating and destination countries. Of course, reducing the menace to zero, as some countries are aiming to do, may be next to impossible. However, by adopting the strategies highlighted below, there is a huge potential to drastically reduce the occurrence of the Japa syndrome in Nigeria.

1. Make Home Comfortable

From arguments already established, it is clear that most Nigerians *japa* for economic reasons. If the living conditions at home are close to or at par with the ones abroad, many people will think twice before *japaing* irregularly. As such, this fundamental cause must be the first thing to be addressed if Nigeria must witness a decline in this ugly trend. Irregular migration is merely a symptom of a failing nation, and unless something is done to revive the country, the trend will continue.

However, one must admit that a complete turnaround of the Nigerian economic woes is not a day job. It would take a consistent and sincere effort of many years to turn the country to the dreams of its citizens. Nevertheless, the government can embark on short-term actions to raise citizens' confidence about its commitment to make things work. Such short-term efforts that can boost citizens' confidence in the sincerity of the leadership include:

- **Dealing squarely with corruption.** Nigeria has not demonstrated enough willingness to tackle corruption over the years. This fact is not hidden from the majority of the citizens, and everyone believes it is the major reason behind the country's economic and political woes. Massive anti-corruption awareness, leadership by example, disincentivising

corruption, and unbiased punitive measures for culprits are practical ways the government can demonstrate its commitment in this regard.

- **Upholding the rule of law and due process.** The constitution of Nigeria should indeed be supreme and upheld by everyone who has vowed to do so. Nobody should be treated as a sacred cow, and government agencies and parastatals should respect court decisions without exception. In the same vein, appointments and rewards must not only be transparent but also follow laid-down rules.
- **Cutting down on the cost of governance and wastages.** Although most Nigerians live in extreme poverty, Nigerian politicians are among the most paid globally. This fact alone creates resentment and forces frustrated citizens to flee the country. Nigeria must consider downsizing its federal and state executive councils to save costs. Also, instead of a bicameral legislature, it should consider a unicameral one and allow politicians' remuneration to reflect the nation's economic realities.
- **Restoring confidence in the electoral system.** Citizens must feel that their votes count. Fairness, transparency, and due process must be ensured in the conduct of state and local elections so that citizens feel that they are indeed the ones hiring and firing their leaders.
- **Reviving local refineries and building new ones.** Functional refineries have numerous multiplier effects. Besides removing fuel scarcity and lowering its price, they are a source of high-paying direct and indirect jobs for citizens.
- **Operating a government of national unity.** Nigeria must give every section of the federation a sense of belonging. The belief that certain tribes or ethnic groups are born to rule while some are bound to serve must be jettisoned. Citizens, regardless of their tribes, must feel that the country cares for their well-being and spare no means to ensure it. Winners of elections must be magnanimous in victory and extend an olive branch to their challengers.
- **Tackling insecurity with all the seriousness it demands.** The government should revisit local policing and rejig the existing security architecture to apprehend miscreants and bring them to book. But beyond that, it needs to be proactive by investing in technology to nip crime in the bud. Also, the government must not show itself complicit in the nation's security failures by treating warmongers with kids' gloves.

Although these seven action plans will not solve all the problems responsible for pushing Nigerians abroad, it will immediately restore confidence and rekindle hope in a brighter future. Consequently, many who out of hopelessness resort to irregular migration will feel no need for it, since staying back now comes with a lot of potential.

2. Stricter Border Control

Preventing the clandestine entry of irregular migrants into destination countries is a plausible way to curb this trend. One way to achieve this is to increase border patrols and build walls to ward off undocumented entrants. If border patrols become more intense and people without the appropriate documents are immediately returned to their originating countries, it will discourage others from pursuing the same course. Transit countries also have a role to play here. Most times, irregular migrants traverse several countries before reaching their final destination. With international cooperation and policies, transit countries can be empowered to arrest these migrants and halt their mission.

Of course, human rights violations may ensue because genuine asylum seekers may also be turned back by the patrol officials or prevented by the physical barrier in place. Transit countries may become overzealous and forget the humanitarian side of their functions. However, each government can put plans in place to cater to genuine asylum seekers in other ways other than leaving its borders porous. Destination countries can have an assigned place of arrival for asylum seekers, where they will investigate the authenticity of claims.

3. Massive Orientation to Manage Expectations

Nigeria and the many destination countries of its citizens owe it a duty to sensitise travellers to the economic realities of migrants in those places. Most importantly, the destination countries must be open to letting prospective japa-ists from Nigeria know that their streets are not paved with gold, nor are they paradises where all problems can be solved. In print and other media outlets, they must spell out the difficulties that non-natives will likely face if they choose to make their country their new home. If migrants themselves hear these realities from the horses' mouths, many will drop their plans to emigrate and stay back in their countries.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian *japa* syndrome is largely caused by economic hardship and inadequate opportunities for young and vibrant professionals to thrive. The unfortunate trend will, however, continue unless Nigeria, in cooperation with the destination countries, works to make the *japa* craze unattractive. Stricter border control and massive sensitisation about the reality of the not-too-rosy life abroad will help reduce the syndrome, but they are not as significant as Nigeria, which makes its space comfortable for its citizens. If the government embarks on actions that show it is committed to making things work, even those who have *japa-ed* will find their way back home.

References

- 1) Afrobarometer (2018). One in three Nigerians have considered emigration, most to find economic opportunity. Dispatch no. 231
- 2) Andersen (May 17, 2022). Bridging Nigeria's infrastructure deficit through Infracorp: prospect, challenges and future outlook. <https://ng.andersen.com/bridging-nigerias-infrastructure-deficit-through-infracorp-prospect-challenges-and-future-outlook/>
- 3) Ayuba, Muhammad Ribadu (2019). Trends, drivers, and implications of irregular migration in Nigeria. *ResearchGate*
- 4) Chapel, L., Glennie, A., Latorre, M., and Mulley, S (2011). The impacts of irregular migration. *IPPR*. 20(8-12).
- 5) Patric Manning (2015). Migration in human history." *Cambridge University Press* 12 (1-12). Accessed online via <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-world-history/migration-in-human-history/09ED8D5958CC8587467A88A7E9EC1B9B> on June 20, 2024
- 6) CNN (June 26, 2018). Nigeria overtakes India in extreme poverty ranking. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/26/africa/nigeria-overtakes-india-extreme-poverty-intl/index.html>

- 7) EconoFact (July 24, 2019). What explains the wages of undocumented workers? <https://econofact.org/what-explains-the-wages-of-undocumented-workers>
- 8) Federal Republic of Nigeria (2015). National Migration Policy. International Organization for Migration in Nigeria
- 9) ICIR (July 28, 2023). 1,200 Nigerians die crossing Sahara Desert, Mediterranean Sea in 2023. <https://www.icirnigeria.org/japa-1200-nigerians-die-crossing-sahara-desert-mediterranean-sea-in-2023>
- 10) Macrotrends (2024). Nigeria net migration rate 1950 - 2024. Accessed online via <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/NGA/nigeria/net-migration> on April 30, 2024
- 11) Okay Africa (August 18, 2022). How “Japa” became the Nigerian buzzword for emigration. <https://www.okayafrika.com/emigration-in-nigeria-japa/>
- 12) Okunade, S.K., and Awosusi, O.E (2023). The japa syndrome and the migration of Nigerians to the United Kingdom: an empirical analysis. *CMS 11* (27)
- 13) Olaoluwa, S., Adeniyi, O., Tade, O., Eshalomi, H., Ijimakinwa, F., and Anyah, R.O. (2019). Irregular migration from Nigeria: causes, risks, and policy implications. UNESCO
- 14) Premium Times (2022). Japa!, By Toyin Falola. Accessed online via <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/551986-japa-by-toyin-falola.html> on June 27, 2024
- 15) The Guardian (June 18, 2024). Japa: 300 millionaires to leave Nigeria in 2024, says report. https://guardian.ng/japa-300-millionaires-to-leave-nigeria-in-2024-says-report/#google_vignette