



MIGRATION GOVERNANCE AND THE TRANSITION FROM IRREGULAR TO REGULAR MIGRATION PATHWAYS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Irregular migration remains central to debates on migration governance, especially in regions marked by socioeconomic inequality and strong demographic pressure. Nigeria is one of the main countries of origin for migrants moving along trans-Saharan and Mediterranean routes toward North Africa and Europe. These journeys often expose migrants to dangerous travel conditions, smuggling networks, exploitation, and serious human rights abuses during transit. In response, international policy discussions increasingly emphasize regular migration pathways as a practical way to reduce irregular movement and improve migrant protection. This study examines how Nigeria's migration governance framework shapes the transition from irregular to regular migration pathways. It adopts a qualitative design based on secondary data drawn from academic literature, government policy documents, and reports by international organizations. The analysis focuses on migration trends, the institutions responsible for migration management, and policy initiatives intended to regulate mobility. The study finds that irregular migration from Nigeria is driven by a combination of economic hardship, demographic pressure, social networks, and limited access to legal migration channels. It further argues that Nigeria's governance architecture has created an important policy foundation, but its impact remains constrained by weak institutional coordination, restrictive destination-country immigration regimes, and limited migration data. The paper concludes that expanding labour migration opportunities, strengthening bilateral agreements, and improving institutional coordination are essential if Nigeria is to shift more migrants toward safer and more regular pathways.

Keywords: Migration governance; irregular migration; regular migration pathways; labour migration; ECOWAS mobility; Transition.

1. INTRODUCTION

International migration is now a major feature of global social and economic change. Existing studies show that more than 281 million people live outside their countries of birth, accounting for about 3.6 percent of the world's population (International Organization for Migration (IOM),

2022). This growing mobility is shaped by globalization, demographic imbalance, economic inequality, political instability, and environmental stress, all of which influence movement across borders (Skeldon, 2018; Castles, Haas, & Miller, 2020). Migration contributes to labour-market expansion, economic exchange, and development. At the same time, policy debate has increasingly centred on the pressures and risks associated with irregular migration (Triandafyllidou, 2020).

Irregular migration refers to cross-border movement that takes place outside the legal and administrative rules governing entry, residence, or employment in destination countries (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Migrants who move through irregular channels often face exploitation by smugglers, detention in transit countries, forced labour, and life-threatening travel conditions (UNODC, 2020; Liempt, 2021). The humanitarian crises linked to movement across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea have drawn sustained international attention over the past decade (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2019). Thousands have died on these routes, underscoring the danger of migration through unregulated channels (IOM, 2022).

Sub-Saharan Africa has become increasingly significant in global migration dynamics. Rapid population growth, persistent inequality, and limited employment opportunities have raised migration aspirations among young people across the region (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016; de Haas, 2021). Nigeria occupies a central place in this pattern because of its large population and expanding youth cohort. With a population above 220 million, it is Africa's most populous country and one of the continent's major countries of origin for migrants (World Bank, 2023). Migration has long been part of Nigerian social and economic life through labour mobility, education, trade, family reunification, and transnational networks (Afolayan, Ikwuyatum, & Abejide, 2019).

Recent scholarship has paid growing attention to irregular migration from Nigeria to North Africa and Europe. Many Nigerian migrants travel through trans-Saharan routes, often passing through Niger before reaching Libya or other North African states, from where onward movement to Europe is attempted across the Mediterranean (Carling & Collins, 2018). These journeys are commonly facilitated by smuggling networks that organize clandestine border crossings and transport through high-risk environments (UNODC, 2020). Humanitarian reports also show that many migrants travelling through Libya face detention, forced labour, extortion, trafficking, and other forms of abuse during transit (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). These realities highlight the need for migration governance strategies that do more than tighten border control.

Conditions within Nigeria also shape migration decisions. High youth unemployment, poverty, and limited economic opportunities create strong incentives for outward migration among young Nigerians (Afolayan, Ikwuyatum, & Abejide, 2019; Nwajiuba et al., 2020). Labour statistics published by the National Bureau of Statistics point to persistent unemployment and underemployment, especially among youth, which sustains pressure to migrate in search of better livelihoods (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Social networks and diaspora communities reinforce these decisions by providing information, financial support, and social connections that lower the practical and emotional costs of migration (Carling & Collins, 2018; de Haas, 2021). Migration aspirations in Nigeria therefore emerge from the interaction of structural constraints and transnational opportunity structures.

These pressures have renewed interest in migration governance. Migration governance refers to the policies, institutions, and regulatory arrangements through which states manage migration flows and protect migrants' rights (Betts, 2018). Earlier control-oriented approaches relied heavily on border enforcement and restrictive immigration policies to deter irregular entry (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Evidence now suggests that these measures alone rarely reduce migration pressures and may instead increase migrant vulnerability (de Haas, 2021). As a result, policy debate has shifted toward governance models that combine border management with expanded legal migration options. This shift gained institutional support with the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in 2018, which called for regular pathways, stronger protection standards, action on root causes, and greater international cooperation (United Nations, 2018; IOM, 2019).

Nigeria has taken important steps to strengthen migration governance at the national level. The adoption of the National Migration Policy in 2015 marked a significant attempt to build a more coordinated framework for migration management (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015). Key institutions, including the Nigerian Immigration Service, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, and the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission, now play visible roles in border management, anti-trafficking work, and diaspora engagement (NIDCOM, 2020; NAPTIP, 2021). Even so, irregular migration remains persistent because legal migration channels are limited, institutional coordination is uneven, and socioeconomic pressures remain strong (Nwajiuba et al., 2020; de Haas, 2021).

This study examines migration governance in Nigeria and asks how far the current framework can support a transition from irregular to regular migration pathways. It focuses on three issues: the drivers of irregular migration, the institutional framework for migration management, and the policy options available for expanding legal mobility. The paper argues that Nigeria has built a recognizable governance architecture, but that architecture remains more effective at describing the problem than at creating accessible regular pathways. By making that claim explicit, the study moves beyond description and offers a more interpretive account of the opportunities and limits of migration governance in Nigeria.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Migration and Mobility in the Twenty-First Century

Migration is one of the defining features of contemporary globalization. Economic integration, technological change, demographic shifts, and political instability have reshaped patterns of human mobility across the world (Castles et al., 2020). Contemporary migration is marked by growing diversity in origins, destinations, and motivations. Labour mobility, study, family reunification, and forced displacement all contribute to the complexity of present-day migration systems (Skeldon, 2018).

Global statistics reflect the scale of these changes. More than 281 million people currently live outside their countries of birth, representing about 3.6 percent of the global population (IOM, 2022). Migration is therefore closely linked to labour markets, development processes, and international relations (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Remittances remain a major financial flow to developing countries and play an important role in household welfare and poverty reduction (World Bank, 2023). At the same time, migration cannot be explained by economics alone.

Scholarship increasingly shows that migration decisions emerge from the interaction of structural conditions, social networks, cultural expectations, and transnational ties (Carling & Collins, 2018; de Haas, 2021). Migration should therefore be understood as both a socioeconomic and sociocultural process embedded in wider systems of mobility.

African migration has attracted growing scholarly attention because of the continent's demographic growth and uneven economic transformation. Rising population levels, especially among young people, have increased pressure on labour markets across many African states, while limited employment opportunities have encouraged migration aspirations (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016; de Haas, 2021). Most African migration remains internal or regional, but movement toward Europe and the Middle East has also expanded in recent decades (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016).

Nigeria occupies a strategic position within these African migration dynamics. Its large population, extensive diaspora networks, and long history of mobility have produced significant levels of both internal and international migration (Afolayan et al., 2019; Jimoh and Akinbami, 2026). Nigerian migrants are found across Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other parts of Africa. These movements are commonly driven by employment, education, business, and family connections (Nwajiuba et al., 2020). Migration is therefore an important part of Nigeria's broader socioeconomic landscape.

2.2 Irregular Migration: Definitions and Global Policy Concerns

Irregular migration has become one of the most contested issues in contemporary migration policy. The term refers to cross-border movement that takes place outside the legal rules governing entry, residence, or employment in destination countries (IOM, 2019). It may involve entry without valid travel documents, visa overstay, or unauthorized employment. Scholars generally avoid stigmatizing expressions such as "illegal migration," on the grounds that migrants themselves are not illegal even when their status is irregular (Triandafyllidou, 2020).

Humanitarian concern over irregular migration has intensified because of the dangers associated with major migration routes. Journeys across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea have produced repeated episodes of death, abuse, and serious rights violations (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2019). Smuggling networks often organize movement across multiple borders for substantial fees, exposing migrants to extortion and violence in the process (UNODC, 2020). Restrictive immigration systems can also contribute indirectly to irregular movement by narrowing access to legal migration opportunities and pushing migrants toward informal channels (de Haas, 2021). Border enforcement may then redirect migration rather than stop it, often making journeys more dangerous (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Irregular migration is therefore best understood as a product of the gap between migration aspirations and the limited availability of safe, legal pathways.

Sub-Saharan Africa now features prominently in global debates on irregular migration. Migrants from several African countries move through trans-Saharan routes toward North Africa before attempting Mediterranean crossings to Europe (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2019). These journeys usually involve multiple transit countries and layered smuggling arrangements, which increase uncertainty and exposure to harm. International organizations and humanitarian agencies have repeatedly highlighted the vulnerability of migrants travelling along these routes (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021).

Nigeria is widely identified as a major country of origin along these routes. Nigerian migrants have regularly appeared among arrivals in parts of Southern Europe through Mediterranean crossings (IOM, 2022). Their journeys often pass through Niger and Libya before onward movement to Europe is attempted. Conditions in Libya in particular have been associated with detention, trafficking, forced labour, and other forms of abuse (UNODC, 2020). These patterns reinforce the case for stronger migration governance and safer mobility options.

2.3 Regular Migration Pathways and Migration Governance

Migration governance is now a central concept in migration studies and policy analysis. It refers to the systems of policies, institutions, and rules through which governments and international actors regulate mobility and protect migrants' rights (Betts, 2018). Effective governance requires coordination across sectors and across the different states involved in origin, transit, and destination. A major feature of contemporary migration governance is the growing emphasis on regular migration pathways. These are legally recognized channels through which migrants may enter and reside in destination countries under formal procedures (IOM, 2019). Common examples include labour migration programmes, student visas, humanitarian protection schemes, and family reunification. Access to such channels can reduce dependence on irregular routes while improving protection and predictability for migrants.

International policy frameworks have strengthened this emphasis on regular pathways. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted in 2018, marked a major step in global migration cooperation (United Nations, 2018). It encourages governments to widen legal mobility options, improve labour migration arrangements, and address the structural factors that drive migration. Regular pathways are now widely treated as an important part of any strategy to reduce irregular migration while preserving development gains (Betts, 2018).

Migration governance must balance several objectives at once, including border management, labour-market demand, development concerns, and migrant protection (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Where institutional coordination is weak, policies often become fragmented and less effective. The quality of governance therefore matters not only for controlling movement but also for shaping the safety and legality of migration itself.

2.4 Empirical Review of Migration Governance in Africa

Migration governance in Africa has received increasing scholarly attention because mobility remains central to regional integration and development. African migration patterns have been shaped by colonial legacies, uneven development, regional economic ties, and social networks that sustain cross-border movement (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). Many African states now participate in regional mobility frameworks intended to facilitate legal movement within their regional blocs.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provides one of the clearest examples of regional migration governance in Africa. The 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons allows citizens of member states to travel, reside, and engage in economic activity within the region without visa restrictions, at least in principle (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). This framework has supported labour mobility, trade, and everyday cross-border exchange across West Africa.

Even so, migration governance systems across Africa continue to face familiar institutional problems. Weak policy coordination, limited data systems, uneven enforcement capacity, and inadequate administrative resources often constrain migration management (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). In many cases, migration policy still leans heavily toward border enforcement without adequately addressing unemployment, inequality, demographic pressure, and other structural drivers of mobility.

Recent policy discussion has therefore stressed the need to connect migration governance to broader development planning. Migration can generate important development gains through remittances, knowledge transfer, and diaspora investment (World Bank, 2023). Governance frameworks that support safe migration while maximizing these benefits are now treated as a key policy priority. Despite the expanding literature on African migration, fewer studies have examined how governance frameworks in Nigeria can help shift movement from irregular channels toward structured regular pathways. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on migration drivers, trafficking networks, or remittance flows. More analytical attention is needed on how institutions and policy innovations can widen legal mobility options while reducing the incentives for irregular migration. That gap is the main focus of this paper.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

2.5.1 Push–Pull Theory of Migration

Push-Pull Theory explains migration as a response to conditions that push individuals out of one place and attract them to another. In Lee's classic formulation, migration decisions arise from the interaction between negative conditions at origin and perceived opportunities at destination (Lee, 1966). Economic hardship, unemployment, insecurity, and weak access to social services commonly operate as push factors, while better wages, jobs, education, and improved living conditions act as pull factors (Castles et al., 2020). Nigerian migration patterns fit this logic, as youth unemployment, economic instability, and social mobility aspirations continue to encourage many young people to seek opportunities abroad (Afolayan et al., 2019; Nwajiuba et al., 2020).

2.5.2 Migration Systems Theory

Migration Systems Theory treats migration as part of a wider network of relationships connecting origin and destination countries through historical, political, economic, and social ties. Migration flows are sustained by interconnected systems that move people, information, capital, and expectations across borders (Castles et al., 2020). Diaspora communities, family links, labour-recruitment arrangements, and cultural ties can reduce the cost and uncertainty of migration and keep movement going over time (de Haas, 2021). Nigeria's large diaspora communities in Europe, North America, and the Middle East illustrate this process. Remittances, digital communication, and family networks continue to shape migration decisions and maintain ties between Nigeria and major destination regions (de Haas, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

2.5.3 Migration Governance Perspective

The migration governance perspective draws attention to the institutions, policy tools, and regulatory arrangements through which migration is managed. It highlights the roles of states, regional bodies, and international organizations in regulating migration while protecting

migrants' rights (Betts, 2018). In practice, this includes border management, visa systems, labour migration programmes, anti-trafficking interventions, and diaspora policies (Triandafyllidou, 2020). In Nigeria, institutions such as the Nigerian Immigration Service, NAPTIP, and the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission help implement these governance functions (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015; NIDCOM, 2020; NAPTIP, 2021). This perspective is useful because it allows the study to assess not only why people migrate, but also how institutional arrangements expand or restrict access to safer and more regular mobility.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary data analysis to examine migration governance and the transition from irregular to regular migration pathways in Nigeria. Secondary analysis is appropriate for this topic because it allows the study to examine migration trends, policy frameworks, and institutional responses through already existing documentary evidence (Johnston, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data were drawn from three categories of sources: peer-reviewed academic literature, official Nigerian policy and institutional documents, and reports published by reputable international organizations. Academic books and journal articles on migration governance, irregular migration, and African mobility were selected because they provide the conceptual and analytical basis for interpreting Nigerian migration patterns (Castles et al., 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2020; de Haas, 2021). Official documents were selected where they directly addressed migration governance in Nigeria, including the National Migration Policy and publications issued by the Nigerian Immigration Service, NAPTIP, and NIDCOM (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015; NAPTIP, 2021; NIDCOM, 2020). Reports from the IOM, UNODC, and the World Bank were used because they provide up-to-date empirical information on migration routes, trafficking risks, remittance flows, and wider governance issues affecting Nigerian migrants (IOM, 2022; UNODC, 2020; World Bank, 2023). Sources were included where they were relevant to Nigeria, migration governance, irregular migration, or regular pathways, and where they came from identifiable scholarly or institutional authorities. The materials were analysed through thematic content analysis. This involved close reading, coding recurrent issues, and grouping the evidence under four themes: drivers of irregular migration, governance institutions, policy instruments, and barriers to regular migration pathways. The study also compared findings across source types to reduce over-reliance on any single narrative. The main limitation of the method is that it depends on previously published material and does not include primary field evidence; however, triangulation across academic, governmental, and international sources improves the credibility of the analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Trends and Patterns of Irregular Migration from Nigeria

4.1.1 Nigeria as a Major Migration Origin Country

Nigeria is one of the most important countries of origin in African migration flows and has become increasingly visible in wider global migration debates Figure 1. With a population above 220 million, it has the largest population in Africa and a rapidly expanding youth cohort that adds to migration pressure (World Bank, 2023). Migration has long formed part of the country's socioeconomic life through labour mobility, education, trade, and family ties that extend across regional and international borders (Afolayan & Ikwuyatun, 2019). Nigerian migrants are now

found across Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other African countries, reflecting the breadth of the country's diaspora networks.

Irregular migration from Nigeria has received growing international attention. Monitoring data indicate that Nigerian nationals have regularly featured among migrants arriving in parts of Southern Europe through Mediterranean crossings (IOM, 2022). These flows usually involve movement through several transit countries, which reflects the wider migration systems linking West Africa, North Africa, and Europe (Carling & Collins, 2018). Population growth, economic uncertainty, and strong migration aspirations among young Nigerians continue to sustain these flows.

Research on African migration shows that migration from Nigeria cannot be reduced to simple economic explanation. Decisions to migrate are shaped not only by material hardship but also by social expectations, diaspora ties, and the visibility of migration success within local communities (de Haas, 2021). Established migration networks often provide information, financial assistance, and logistical support to prospective migrants, helping to reproduce migration patterns even under restrictive immigration regimes. This helps explain why migration remains attractive even when the risks are widely known.

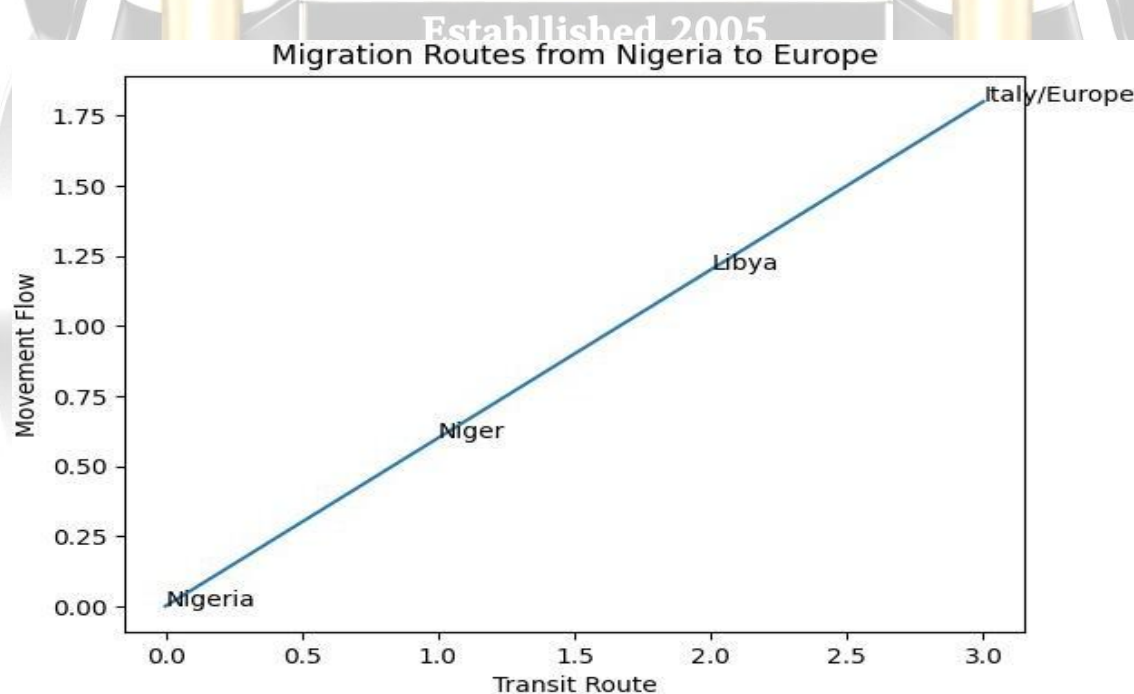


Figure 1: Trans-Saharan and Mediterranean Migration Route from Nigeria

Table 1: Major Irregular Migration Routes from Nigeria to Europe

Route	Transit Countries	Destination	Characteristics	Major Risks
Central Mediterranean Route	Nigeria → Niger → Libya	Italy / Malta	Most common West African route	Sea deaths, detention, trafficking
Western Mediterranean Route	Nigeria → Mali → Morocco	Spain	Alternative route	Border violence, desert crossing risks
Eastern Mediterranean Route	Nigeria → Sudan → Egypt → Turkey	Greece	Less common but emerging route	Long distance travel, smuggling networks
Visa Overstay Route	Nigeria → Europe (legal entry)	EU countries	Entry with visa then overstay	Irregular status, deportation

4.1.2 Trans-Saharan and Mediterranean Migration Routes

Irregular migration from Nigeria commonly takes place along trans-Saharan routes linking West Africa to North Africa and Europe Table 1. Many journeys begin in Nigeria and continue through neighbouring states such as Niger before crossing the Sahara toward Libya or Algeria (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2019). These routes expose migrants to severe environmental risks, including extreme heat, dehydration, and the dangers of long desert travel. Libya has for years been a major transit country for migrants attempting to reach Europe through the central Mediterranean route. Migrants who arrive there often try to cross to Italy or Malta in overcrowded boats arranged by smuggling networks (IOM, 2022). The central Mediterranean has become one of the deadliest migration corridors in the world, with repeated reports of deaths, detention, and abuse (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021).

Travel across the Sahara is typically organized through informal transport systems and smuggling networks operating across several states. Migrants often depend on guides, drivers, and brokers who coordinate movement through remote desert terrain and insecure border areas (UNODC, 2020). The persistence of these routes, despite growing enforcement efforts, reflects the depth of migration pressure in West Africa and the continued demand for mobility among people seeking better opportunities abroad.

4.1.3 Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Networks

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are major features of irregular migration from Nigeria. Smuggling networks often arrange transport, forged documents, and border crossings for migrants seeking to move without official authorization (UNODC, 2020). These networks usually operate across several transit countries and rely on intermediaries involved in recruitment, movement, and accommodation.

Trafficking is an especially serious concern along routes connecting Nigeria with North Africa and Europe. Vulnerable migrants may be subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, debt

bondage, or other forms of coercion during transit or after arrival (NAPTIP, 2021). Nigerian women and girls are particularly exposed to trafficking for sexual exploitation in parts of Europe and North Africa. Recruitment often begins with false promises of employment or education and later turns into coercion and abuse. International organizations have documented widespread violations against migrants travelling through transit countries such as Libya, including detention, extortion, forced labour, and physical violence (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). These abuses show that irregular migration is not simply an issue of unauthorized movement; it is also a serious protection crisis.

Efforts to address trafficking and smuggling have intensified over the past decade. Nigerian authorities, international organizations, and civil society groups have worked to strengthen anti-trafficking measures and expand protection for victims. The creation and continued operation of NAPTIP has been central to Nigeria's institutional response to trafficking offences (NAPTIP, 2021). Even so, enforcement remains difficult because trafficking networks are transnational and continue to draw strength from the socioeconomic conditions that sustain irregular migration.

4.1.4 Socioeconomic and Demographic Drivers of Migration

Socioeconomic conditions in Nigeria strongly influence migration aspirations and migration decisions. Economic inequality, high unemployment, and limited access to stable work continue to push many young people toward outward migration (Nwajiuba et al., 2020). National labour statistics show that unemployment and underemployment remain persistent features of the labour market (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). For many people, migration is viewed as a route to livelihood improvement and upward social mobility. Population growth intensifies this pressure. Nigeria has one of the world's largest youth populations, and millions enter the labour market each year without a corresponding expansion in employment opportunities (World Bank, 2023). Demographic growth and economic constraint therefore work together to sustain migration pressure.

Social factors also shape migration decisions. Stories of success circulated through diaspora communities and social networks often strengthen migration aspirations among young people (Carling & Collins, 2018). Information shared by relatives, friends, and community members can create strong expectations about life abroad, even where those expectations are only partly realistic. In addition, insecurity and conflict in some parts of Nigeria can disrupt local livelihoods and encourage people to seek safer or more stable environments elsewhere. Migration decisions therefore emerge from the combined effect of economic pressure, demographic change, social networks, and security concerns.

4.2 Migration Governance Framework in Nigeria

4.2.1 Institutional Actors in Nigerian Migration Management

Migration governance in Nigeria involves a network of public institutions charged with regulating mobility, protecting migrants, and implementing national migration policy. As a concept, migration governance refers to the legal, policy, and institutional arrangements through which migration is managed at national and international levels (Betts, 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2020). In practice, effective governance depends on coordination among agencies responsible for border control, labour migration, diplomacy, anti-trafficking work, and diaspora affairs.

The Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) occupies a central place in this system (Table 2). It is responsible for border control, passport issuance, monitoring of entry and exit points, and enforcement of immigration law (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015). Its role is especially important in efforts to address irregular migration, strengthen border governance, and support cooperation on cross-border crime. The NIS also participates in regional and international initiatives intended to improve migration management.

The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) is another key actor in Nigeria's migration governance framework. It was established to combat trafficking, migrant exploitation, and related crimes affecting vulnerable populations (NAPTIP, 2021). In addition to investigation and prosecution, the agency provides victim protection and rehabilitation services. Its work with international organizations has strengthened the response to trafficking networks operating along routes linking Nigeria with North Africa and Europe.

The Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM) was created to strengthen state engagement with Nigerian citizens abroad. It promotes diaspora participation in national development through investment, skills transfer, and policy dialogue (NIDCOM, 2020) (Table 2). This reflects wider recognition that migration can produce positive development outcomes through remittances, networks, and knowledge exchange (World Bank, 2023). Other institutions also matter. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment is involved in labour migration policy and bilateral labour arrangements, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs handles diplomatic engagement on migration issues. Together, these institutions form the backbone of Nigeria's migration governance architecture, even though coordination among them remains uneven.

Table 2: Institutional Framework of Migration Governance in Nigeria

Institution		Mandate	Functions
Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) NAPTIP NIDCOM	Immigration	Border management	Passport issuance, border control
		Combat trafficking	Investigation and victim protection
		Diaspora engagement	Diaspora investment and policy coordination
Federal Ministry of Labour		Labour migration policy	Bilateral labour agreements
Ministry of Foreign Affairs		Migration diplomacy	International migration negotiations
ECOWAS Institutions		Regional migration governance	Free movement protocol implementation

4.2.2 Nigeria's National Migration Policy

Nigeria's National Migration Policy, adopted in 2015, is the country's most comprehensive framework for migration management. It emerged from the recognition that migration governance had been fragmented across several institutions and therefore required a more coherent policy response (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2015).

The policy provides guidance on labour migration, border management, diaspora engagement, migrant protection, and related issues. It emphasizes the need to integrate migration into national development planning and to promote safer migration practices among Nigerian citizens (IOM,

2019). A central strength of the policy is that it treats migration as both a development opportunity and a governance challenge.

The policy also identifies key implementation priorities. These include stronger coordination among migration-related institutions, better protection of migrants' rights, and more effective prevention of trafficking and exploitation. This emphasis is important because irregular migration continues to expose Nigerians to abuse and serious human rights risks during transit and at destination (NAPTIP, 2021).

Implementation of the National Migration Policy has been supported by international organizations and development partners. Technical support from the IOM, in particular, has helped strengthen institutional capacity and migration data systems (IOM, 2022). Even so, implementation remains uneven, and the gap between policy ambition and practical institutional delivery is still a major challenge for migration governance in Nigeria.

4.2.3 Anti-Trafficking Frameworks and Border Governance

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling remain central concerns within Nigeria's migration governance framework. In response, Nigeria has adopted legal and institutional measures aimed at preventing trafficking, prosecuting offenders, and protecting vulnerable migrants. The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act remains the main legislative instrument in this area (NAPTIP, 2021).

Enforcement depends on collaboration among law-enforcement agencies, migration authorities, and international partners. NAPTIP investigations often require cross-border cooperation because trafficking networks operate across multiple jurisdictions (UNODC, 2020). Public awareness campaigns have also become part of the response, especially those aimed at informing communities about the risks of irregular migration and deceptive recruitment.

Border governance is another core part of migration management in Nigeria. It involves regulating cross-border movement in order to reduce irregular migration, trafficking, and smuggling (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Nigeria shares long land borders with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, and these borderlands have historically supported both legal and irregular mobility within West Africa.

Efforts to improve border governance have included investment in border-control systems, travel-document security, and regional cooperation. Even so, effective control remains difficult because of the sheer length of Nigeria's land borders, the intensity of informal trade, and the long history of routine cross-border movement in the region. These conditions limit the effectiveness of enforcement-only strategies.

4.2.4 Regional Migration Governance within ECOWAS

Regional cooperation remains central to migration governance in West Africa. ECOWAS has developed one of the continent's most important mobility frameworks. The 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons allows citizens of member states to travel, reside, and undertake economic activity across the region without visa restrictions, at least in formal terms (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016).

This framework has supported trade, seasonal labour migration, and family-based mobility across West Africa. Nigeria occupies a central place in this system because of its population size and economic weight. It receives migrants from neighbouring states and also sends large numbers of its own citizens across the region. ECOWAS policies also encourage cooperation against trafficking and smuggling through information sharing, institutional support, and improved migration data. Regional frameworks therefore complement Nigeria's domestic migration policies, even though implementation gaps remain.

4.3 Transition Toward Regular Migration Pathways

The growing dangers associated with irregular migration have pushed migration policy toward the expansion of regular pathways. Current debates increasingly stress that legal migration opportunities can reduce dependence on dangerous routes while improving migrant protection (IOM, 2019; Triandafyllidou, 2020). Regular migration pathways include labour migration schemes, educational mobility, humanitarian protection mechanisms, and bilateral migration arrangements (Betts, 2018). Expanding these channels has therefore become a central element of contemporary migration governance.

Nigeria has gradually begun to reflect this shift in its policy thinking. There is increasing recognition that restrictive controls alone cannot resolve irregular migration pressures. Expanding access to legal migration can provide safer alternatives while also supporting development through remittances, skills circulation, and labour mobility (de Haas, 2021). The challenge, however, is that these pathways remain limited in scale, unevenly coordinated, and often inaccessible to the categories of migrants most likely to consider irregular movement.

4.3.1 Labour Migration Programs

Labour migration programmes are one of the clearest ways to expand regular migration pathways. They allow workers to move legally to destination countries facing labour shortages in particular sectors (Castles et al., 2020). These schemes are often temporary or seasonal, enabling migrants to work abroad while retaining ties to their countries of origin.

Labour mobility can generate benefits for both origin and destination countries. Migrants may earn higher incomes and send remittances that support household welfare and national development (World Bank, 2023). Destination countries also gain access to workers in sectors where labour supply is limited. These potential gains explain why labour migration is increasingly seen as a practical governance tool rather than only a control issue.

Nigeria has shown interest in expanding labour migration opportunities for its citizens. Relevant agencies have explored partnerships with destination countries seeking skilled and semi-skilled workers. Properly designed labour schemes can provide structured alternatives to irregular migration, improve oversight of recruitment, and strengthen protection for migrants abroad. Their current limitation is that they remain relatively narrow compared with the scale of migration demand.

4.3.2 Bilateral Migration Agreements

Bilateral migration agreements provide another route for building regular pathways. These agreements are formal arrangements between two states to regulate movement for work, training, education, or related purposes (Betts, 2018). They commonly set out recruitment procedures, labour standards, protection measures, and the responsibilities of sending and receiving states.

Many countries now use bilateral labour agreements as part of wider migration governance strategies. Such agreements can help governments manage migration more predictably while improving legal protection and working conditions for migrants (Triandafyllidou, 2020). They can also support data sharing, improve recruitment oversight, and strengthen cooperation against abuse and irregular movement.

Nigeria has engaged in bilateral discussions with several destination countries on labour migration opportunities, especially in sectors such as healthcare, construction, and information technology. Structured partnerships of this kind can shift some migration into legal channels, reduce dependence on smugglers, and allow governments to monitor recruitment more effectively. Their long-term value, however, depends on scale, enforcement, and accessibility.

4.3.3 Skills Mobility Partnerships

Skills mobility partnerships have emerged as an important policy tool for linking migration management to development. These partnerships usually involve cooperation between origin and destination countries to support legal mobility through training, education, and employment pathways (IOM, 2019). They aim to meet labour shortages in destination countries while building the human capital of migrants.

A major strength of skills partnerships is that they connect migration with learning and professional development. Training and exchange programmes can help migrants acquire skills that remain valuable whether they stay abroad or return home (de Haas, 2021). This makes skills mobility attractive as both a migration and development strategy.

Nigeria has strong potential to benefit from such initiatives because of its large population of educated youth and professionals. Expanded access to skilled migration can provide a legal alternative to irregular movement while increasing Nigeria's participation in global labour markets. For this potential to be realized, however, training systems, recruitment standards, and bilateral cooperation need to be better aligned.

4.3.4 Diaspora Engagement and Development Policies

Diaspora engagement has become a significant part of migration governance in many countries of origin. Diaspora communities contribute through remittances, investment, entrepreneurship, and knowledge transfer (World Bank, 2023). Governments increasingly view these ties as a way to connect migration with national development.

Nigeria has established institutional mechanisms to support this agenda, most notably through the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM, 2020). Programmes linked to diaspora engagement encourage investment, business collaboration, and skills transfer that can support development at home.

Remittances from Nigerians abroad are a major economic resource. Nigeria remains one of the largest remittance recipients in Africa, receiving billions of dollars each year from its diaspora (World Bank, 2023). These flows support household consumption, education, health spending, and small-scale investment.

Diaspora engagement complements broader efforts to expand regular migration pathways. Stronger ties between migrants and the home country can increase the developmental returns of migration and help reframe migration as a regulated and potentially productive process. In this sense, diaspora policy is not a substitute for regular pathways, but it strengthens the wider governance environment within which those pathways operate.

4.4 Challenges to Expanding Regular Migration Pathways

Efforts to expand regular migration pathways remain constrained by structural, institutional, and policy barriers. In many developing countries, migration governance is limited by administrative weakness, poor coordination, and restricted access to legal migration channels (Betts, 2018). Nigeria faces these same pressures, which continue to shape both policy outcomes and migrant choices.

4.4.1 Institutional Capacity Constraints

Institutional capacity is a major factor in the effectiveness of migration governance. Successful implementation of migration policy requires agencies that can regulate mobility, enforce legal standards, and protect migrants' rights in a coordinated way (Triandafyllidou, 2020; Akinbami, Ibrahim, Abdul-Azeez, & Adeleke, 2026). In Nigeria, migration governance is spread across several institutions dealing with border management, labour migration, anti-trafficking work, diaspora engagement, and diplomacy. Where coordination is weak, implementation suffers.

Administrative limitations remain a recurring problem. Limited funding, uneven staff training, fragmented responsibilities, and operational constraints reduce the capacity of state institutions to manage migration effectively (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). These problems are especially visible in border governance, where extensive land borders require substantial logistical and technological support that is not always available.

Policy coordination is equally important. Migration intersects with labour, security, foreign affairs, social protection, and development planning. Without sustained information sharing and clear institutional roles, migration policy becomes fragmented and less effective. This weakens the ability of the state to move from broad policy statements to practical governance outcomes.

4.4.2 Restrictive Immigration Policies in Destination Countries

Immigration policy in destination countries strongly shapes the legal opportunities available to migrants from countries such as Nigeria. Many developed states maintain restrictive entry

regimes that limit regular migration options for low- and middle-skilled workers (de Haas, 2021). Strict visa requirements, complex documentation rules, and limited labour quotas can make legal migration inaccessible to large numbers of prospective migrants.

These restrictions may unintentionally encourage irregular migration. When legal options are narrow but migration aspirations remain strong, migrants often turn to informal networks and unauthorized routes (Triandafyllidou, 2020). Research has repeatedly shown that enforcement alone rarely eliminates migration pressure; it often reroutes it instead, sometimes into more dangerous channels.

For this reason, recent migration debates stress the need for wider legal migration opportunities through bilateral labour agreements and skills partnerships. Yet such opportunities remain limited, especially for people with lower levels of education or fewer formal qualifications (Betts, 2018). Expanding regular channels therefore depends on real cooperation between origin and destination countries, not only on domestic reform in Nigeria.

4.4.3 Socioeconomic Pressures and Migration Aspirations

Socioeconomic pressure remains one of the strongest drivers of migration aspiration. High unemployment, poverty, and inequality continue to push many people to seek opportunities abroad (Castles et al., 2020). In Nigeria, difficult labour-market conditions have sustained strong migration aspirations, particularly among youth.

Youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge in the Nigerian economy. National Bureau of Statistics data show that many young Nigerians continue to face serious difficulty in securing stable employment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In that context, migration is often seen as a practical route to better living standards and social mobility.

Social networks and diaspora ties reinforce these aspirations. Stories of successful migration shared by relatives, friends, or community members often shape expectations about life abroad (Carling & Collins, 2018). These expectations can persist even where legal migration pathways remain narrow or uncertain.

Population growth deepens the pressure. Nigeria has one of the world's largest youth populations, and millions of young people enter the labour market each year (World Bank, 2023). Because job creation has not matched this demographic expansion, outward migration remains attractive to many.

4.4.4 Weak Migration Data Systems

Reliable migration data is essential for effective migration governance. Good data allow policymakers to track migration trends, assess policy outcomes, and design interventions grounded in evidence (IOM, 2019). In many developing countries, however, migration data systems remain weak because of limited institutional capacity, fragmented collection practices, and inadequate technology.

Nigeria faces the same challenge. Migration data are often spread across institutions responsible for border control, labour migration, diaspora affairs, and anti-trafficking enforcement. The

absence of an integrated data system makes it difficult to build a comprehensive picture of migration flows, migrant characteristics, and policy outcomes.

5. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The analysis points to a clear policy lesson: Nigeria's migration governance framework needs to move beyond broad institutional presence toward coordinated implementation that expands safe and legal mobility. Irregular migration from Nigeria is sustained by economic pressure, demographic growth, migration networks, and weak access to lawful migration channels. A credible response therefore requires institutional reform, international cooperation, and domestic development measures operating together (Castles et al., 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2020).

A first priority is stronger institutional coordination. Migration governance in Nigeria is spread across agencies responsible for border management, labour migration, anti-trafficking enforcement, diplomacy, and diaspora engagement. Clearer coordination platforms, shared data protocols, and regular inter-agency planning would reduce fragmentation and improve implementation (Betts, 2018).

A second priority is the expansion of legal migration pathways. Research consistently shows that accessible legal options can reduce reliance on irregular routes and improve migrant protection (de Haas, 2021). Labour migration programmes, temporary work schemes, educational mobility, and regulated recruitment systems can create practical alternatives to dangerous journeys. Structured labour agreements with destination countries would be especially useful if they are transparent, enforceable, and open to a meaningful number of workers.

International cooperation is equally important because migration is inherently transnational. Bilateral and multilateral partnerships can improve recruitment systems, strengthen labour mobility arrangements, support anti-trafficking work, and protect migrant workers' rights (IOM, 2019). Without this external cooperation, domestic reforms in Nigeria will have limited effect on access to regular pathways.

At the same time, migration governance cannot be separated from development policy. Job creation, youth entrepreneurship, vocational training, and broader economic opportunity are essential to reducing the structural pressures that sustain outward migration (Nwajiuba et al., 2020). Education and skills development can also improve the ability of Nigerians to access formal labour markets at home and abroad.

Improved migration data systems are another priority. Better data collection, stronger interoperability between institutions, and more systematic collaboration with international partners would improve evidence-based policymaking and policy evaluation (IOM, 2019). Without reliable data, migration governance remains reactive and fragmented.

Diaspora engagement should also remain part of the policy mix. Nigerian diaspora communities contribute significantly through remittances, investment, and knowledge transfer (World Bank, 2023). Policies that deepen these ties can improve domestic opportunities while reinforcing the developmental benefits of migration.

Taken together, these measures would support a more balanced migration governance system, one that addresses the drivers of irregular migration while widening access to safer and more regular forms of mobility. The central task is not simply to stop migration, but to govern it more effectively.

6. CONCLUSION

Migration continues to shape social, economic, and demographic change across the world. Rising levels of irregular migration have drawn sustained policy attention because of the dangers linked to unsafe routes, migrant exploitation, and repeated humanitarian crises along major transit corridors. Nigeria forms part of the wider migration system connecting West Africa with North Africa and Europe, and many of its migrants continue to move through dangerous trans-Saharan and Mediterranean routes. This study shows that irregular migration from Nigeria is driven by a combination of structural and social forces. Economic inequality, youth unemployment, demographic pressure, insecurity, and transnational migration networks all help sustain strong migration aspirations. These realities place migration governance under pressure to do two things at once: address the conditions that drive migration and create institutions capable of regulating movement more safely.

Nigeria has made visible progress through the National Migration Policy and through the establishment of institutions concerned with migration management, anti-trafficking enforcement, and diaspora engagement. Regional cooperation under ECOWAS has also provided an important framework for legal mobility within West Africa. However, the evidence suggests that Nigeria's migration governance architecture remains stronger in formal design than in practical delivery. Institutional coordination gaps, weak data systems, and limited access to legal migration channels continue to restrict its effectiveness. The paper therefore concludes that regular migration pathways must become a more substantive part of migration governance in Nigeria. Labour mobility programmes, bilateral migration agreements, and skills partnerships offer realistic alternatives to irregular migration, but only if they are backed by institutional coordination, credible implementation, and sustained international cooperation.

More broadly, migration governance in Nigeria will be more effective when it is linked to development policy. Expanding employment opportunities, strengthening skills systems, and supporting diaspora engagement can reduce the pressures that feed irregular migration while promoting safer, more orderly, and more regular mobility.

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