

# Economic and Risk Perceptions Motivating Illegal Migration Abroad: Port Harcourt City Youths, Nigeria

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This study contributes to the understanding of the economic and risk perceptions that motivate illegal migration among youths. Using the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Cultural Theory of Risk Perception, this study investigates the economic and risk perceptions related to the livelihood of male and female youths of Port Harcourt City about migration to Europe through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea. Qualitative research techniques were used to source data from Port Harcourt City youths on the lived experiences of irregular migrants in selected countries abroad. A thematic content analysis of the data revealed that the perception of many of the participants on opportunities for decent work abroad is informed by what they see in western films and read on social media platforms. The anticipation of a better life and the hope of earning a stable income motivate them to undertake unsafe migration journeys abroad, regardless of the risks. The study further established that the majority of the youths who embark on dangerous journeys lack in-depth knowledge of the associated risks of traveling through the desert and across the sea, including the dangers of living abroad as undocumented migrants. Based on these findings, the study recommends the need for more awareness-creation and enlightenment of the youths to fully understand the risks and negative aspects of the illegal movement. It also recommends that government agencies and stakeholders in the international community collaborate towards implementing sustainable interventions that will build the resilience capabilities of youths against illegal migration.

Keywords: trans-Saharan migration, Nigerian diaspora, African-EU mobility, resilient capabilities.

## INTRODUCTION

The Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM, 2015) notes that the terms “illegal” and “irregular” migration have been indifferently used by both state and non-state organizations depending on the context of the situation. According to Morehouse and Blomfield (2011), the term “illegal” is considered problematic by many humanitarian organizations because the adjective has a negative connotation and suggests an involvement in a crime. Thus, the European Union Parliamentary Assembly (2006) issued Resolution 1509 to address issues related to the human rights of irregular migrants. It states that the parliament prefers to use the term “irregular migrant” rather than “illegal migrant” or “migrant without papers” as this term is more neutral and does not carry, for example, the social stigma of the term “illegal”. It is also the term increasingly favored by international organizations working on migration issues. The resolution further states that “illegal” is preferred when referring to status or process, whereas “irregular” is preferred when referring to a person. Hence, this study sustains the term illegal migration abroad because it examines the process that irregular migrants choose to make their journey abroad. The objective focuses on investigating and understanding the economic and risk perceptions that motivate Port Harcourt City (PHC) youths to take the illegal route of traveling abroad through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea.

A study conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2017) shows that international migration from countries in sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and the United States has grown dramatically in the past decade. However, the study further notes that the proportion of emigrants relative to Africa's total population is one of the lowest in the world, and the numbers of African nationals arriving irregularly by sea to Italy in 2016 represented a very small share of the total migrant population in the country. Similarly, United Nations Human Development Report (2004, cited in Edwards, 2005) shows that the Middle East region recorded the world's highest share of the irregular migrant population, with Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Jordan emerging as the top ten countries.

Okunade (2018) shows in his work that the movement across the Sahara Desert endangers the life of migrants, due to the series of attacks and humiliating treatment by smugglers and pirates on these transit routes. The UNHCR (2015) and the IOM (2017) note that the movement from Africa to Europe has attracted more global attention since the outbreak of the so-called migrant crisis in 2015. In this sense, it pertains to the period in 2015 where many migrants arrived in Europe through Italy and Spain, across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, the report shows that migrants of Nigerian descent top the list of sub-Saharan African countries whose nationals reach Italy by sea, from where they move to other parts of Europe. Missing at the Borders (2020) reports that this unsafe journey often puts migrants in dire and unfortunate situations as boat mishaps in the Mediterranean Sea leaves many dead and injured, thereby creating an additional burden to the

families of these migrants who have invested so much, and also hoped that a family member crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe will positively influence the economic fortune of the family. In Nigeria, several publications have shown that environmental degradation resulting from decades of oil exploration around Port Harcourt and the Niger Delta at large has been a major cause of violence, and youth restiveness, resulting in the forced migration of many families. Akpan and Akpabio (2003), and Jike (2004) note that productive lands and rivers that families depend on for their daily livelihoods have been lost due to years of oil exploration activities and spillage in the region, resulting in rising unemployment, and violence. Hence, many youths have been forced to leave their primordial homes in search of greener pastures abroad, while some have become environmental refugees. Bates (2002) notes that a degrading environment seriously affects the quality of life and has a direct influence on human migration.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

An international migrant is defined by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 1998) as a person who stays outside their country of usual residence for at least a year. Guided by the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Cultural Theory of Risk Perception, this study investigates the economic and risk perceptions that motivate youths to leave their country of origin and move illegally abroad through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea.

Although migration intention is a very debatable concept in migration studies, the Theory of Reasoned Action, according to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1985; 2005) aims to explain the nexus between attitudes and behaviors within human action. The theory suggests that an individual's intention and decision to engage in a particular behavior is based on the outcome the individual expects will come as a result of engaging in such behavior. Thus, in relation to migration across borders, the perception that a particular behavior will lead to the intended outcome is the driving force behind a migrant's decision to engage in irregular movement abroad through unsafe routes. Similarly, in explaining the Cultural Theory of Risk Perception, Douglas (1978), Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), and Thompson et al. (1990) argue that risk perception is largely determined by how people perceive and act upon the world around them. Hence, despite the risks involved, individuals could be motivated to engage in unsafe migration abroad if such a person anticipates better economic opportunities for income maximization in the destination country. Regarding Nigeria, recent publications and reports have also indicated a growing population, unemployment, followed by rising poverty among Port Harcourt youths, and Nigerian youths in general as the main drivers of illegal migration of youths abroad. The Brookings Institute (2014) notes that the high population of Nigeria has resulted in a state of unemployment, especially for the youths. Punch (2019a) highlights that the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) has described the rate at which Port Harcourt youths in particular, and Nigerian youths, in general, leave the country to

other parts of the world in search of better jobs and increased income, as worrisome. Similarly, The Cable (2017), Punch (2019b), and World Population Review (2020) all note that rising unemployment, poverty, and the increasing population in Port Harcourt City, have been major causes of illegal migration among the youths. Thus, given the above conditions in Port Harcourt City, the interaction of these theories combine to facilitate the understanding of the behaviors that inform the decision-making processes of male and female youths to embark on these unsafe journeys abroad.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Illegal migration*

Baldwin (2008), characterizes illegal migration as an undocumented or irregular movement of individuals from one location to live and work in another area. In his work, Papademetriou (2005), identifies four common forms of illegal migration, namely, unauthorized entry, fraudulent entry (i.e., with false documents), visa overstays, and violation of the terms and conditions of a visa. Papademetriou further describes unauthorized entrants, as citizens of different countries who enter another state illicitly, many of whom cross the land and sea boundaries, very often in a desperate attempt to reach their destination. This characterization of unauthorized entrants closely defines the condition of many migrants who engage in illegal movement through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. It is important to recognize in this research that throughout history people have often engaged in different kinds of movement, both legal and illegal migration, in search of a better life. Thus, Baada et al. (2019) state that migration has been established as an important avenue for livelihood improvement, as evidenced by its inclusion in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). SDG 10 identifies migration as one way of reducing inequalities between and within countries. Similarly, Deotti and Estruch (2016) argue that migration is a complex phenomenon, but a key component of livelihood strategies in rural households, which focus on minimizing risks and diversifying household income. As a livelihood strategy, many people globally have increasingly engaged in rapid migration to escape hardship. In this sense, Port Harcourt City, and Nigerian youths at large thus engage in this irregular movement through these unsafe routes to escape the loss of livelihood opportunities resulting from environmental degradation, violence, and unemployment. Consequently, the IOM (2018), cited in Afrobarometer (2018) states that Nigerians made up the largest migrant population entering Italy and Greece. Nigerians have also been identified as the largest cohort of migrants trapped in Libya in the protracted Mediterranean migrant crisis. The IOM (2018) reported that between May 2017 and January 2018, more than 6,700 Nigerian migrants were returned home from Libya through the efforts of Nigerian and international agencies.

*Economic perceptions of Port Harcourt City (PHC) youths about migration to Europe*

Harris and Todaro (1970) argue that the motivation to migrate is heavily influenced by job opportunities available to the migrant at the initial stage and expected income difference in the destination country. Highlighting the illusions of achieving economic emancipation abroad, Etika et al. (2018) argue that the public perception of economic freedom in Europe has increased the quest for migration to countries such as Spain and Italy, and this feeble perception has resulted in the death of many Nigerian youths who embarked on this deadly journey through these unsafe routes; little did they know, they will not get to their destination. In a recent report, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2019) revealed that in the context of global inequality, the prospect of being able to transform the economic situation of family members left at home through remittances, is, of course, a huge factor shaping motivations and drivers of migration from Africa to Europe. Reflecting on the circumstances that influence irregular migration abroad among PHC youths, Bayar and Aral (2019) note that some movement of migrants may not have been motivated by the need to pursue better job opportunities abroad but is the result of forced migration due to threats to life and livelihood, natural or man-made causes such as movements of persons displaced by conflicts, as well as people displaced by chemical or environmental disasters.

*Risk perceptions and decision-making processes of youths to embark on illegal migration*

Perceptions of risk play a vital role in the decisions that individuals make to either stay back or undertake the unsafe journey to Europe. Jaeger et al (2007) note that an individual's attitude towards risk perception has a direct effect on their tendency to engage in cross-border migration. Townsend and Oomen (2015) assert that understanding how migrants perceive risk and what attitude motivates them to undertake perilous journeys, are incomplete without paying detailed attention to both their pre- and post-departure decision-making processes. In this regard, Kuschminder et al. (2015) reveal that depending on the situation, illegal migrants of African descent take different routes to reach Europe with no prior knowledge of the risks involved. In terms of risk exposure along the traveling routes, the UNHCR (2019) reports that the journey across the desert to Libya involves multiple horrific experiences of violence. The report highlights how both male and female migrants have been severely tortured, raped, and kidnapped for ransom by different networks of smugglers operating along these routes. Thus, by the time that migrants step onto a boat en route to Europe, many would have died. Similarly, the UNHCR's Central Mediterranean Risk Mitigation Strategy (2017) shows that the increasing influx of migrants from Nigeria and other West Africans through the desert to Libya has resulted in the rapid proliferation of illegal detention, human warehouses, and connection houses run by smugglers and traffickers. Thus, had migrants been aware of the grave hazards involved in crossing the desert, many of them would not have

made the dangerous journey to Libya. Frouws et al. (2016) argue that although the rise in the use of online communication media such as Twitter and Facebook has improved the way migrants share delicate information on safe routes related to their journey across the desert and the sea, it has also helped smugglers and traffickers to adopt new strategies to lure unsuspecting members of the public into making these dreadful journeys.

Williams and Baláz (2012) shows that migrant movements are usually associated with exposure to risk and uncertainty from the beginning of the journey, along the traveling routes, the destination, and the life abroad. Thus, irregular migrants' predictability about the future involves some level of uncertainty given that the probabilities of a particular outcome cannot be known for certain and in some cases, these uncertainties expose them to dangerous situations. To further highlight the dangers that irregular migrants face abroad, Nos Nieuws (2020) notes the rising incidence of the disappearance of Nigerian irregular migrants and asylum seekers to unknown destinations. The report further notes that the Netherland Central Agency for Reception Asylum Seekers (COA) confirmed that between 2014 and 2019 about 1,231 irregular migrants who received asylum qualification disappeared to an unknown destination. In January 2020, another 128 irregular migrants disappeared. These incidents have been linked to activities of criminal trafficking organizations such as the Black Ax, and the Vikings mafia groups who threaten these irregular migrants and force them into drug peddling and prostitution. Minaye and Zeleke (2017) note that in order to understand the decision of migrants, it is crucial to comprehend the attitude that informs their choices and decision-making. Hence, if the attitude and spiritual belief of migrating youths are such that God has predetermined their fate, they may not bother about the risky or safety implication of the decision they make concerning unsafe migration. Also, personal factors such as age, gender, and religion; social factors such as media, and family influence further shape the attitudes, beliefs, and decisions of youths to embark on illegal migration abroad. Highlighting the influence of family on a migrant's decision to move abroad, Massey et al. (1993) and Stahl (1995), argue that, unlike individuals, households are in a position to control risks to their economic well-being by diversifying the allocation of household resources such as labor. While some family members can be assigned economic activities in the local market, others may be sent to work abroad where wages and employment conditions are relatively better. Hence, if the local economic conditions deteriorate and activities fail to bring insufficient income, the household can rely on migrant remittances for support.

### *Study area, research strategy and methodology*

Port Harcourt City (PHC) is in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria and is the capital of Rivers State. It covers an area of 109 square kilometers. Port Harcourt City has a population of 3,171,076 (World Population Review, 2021) and it is the largest city in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

Figure 1: Map of Port Harcourt City



Source: ETSI ArcGis online by SIHMA

This is a cross-sectional qualitative study involving different categories of participants, among whom were youths in Port Harcourt City, policymakers, a diplomat, a banker, regular and irregular migrants abroad who were from Port Harcourt City, and from other parts of Nigeria. To gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of migrants trying to cross the desert and the sea, as well as the realities of living abroad as irregular migrants, the study also considered the views of other irregular migrants of African descent who had the same historical experience with Nigerian irregular migrants abroad. The snowball sampling technique was used through the referrals from the key informants to recruit other participants from both Port Harcourt City and abroad, for this study. Given that the research took place during the global coronavirus health pandemic, the fieldwork interviews with participants in Port Harcourt City were conducted through remote methodologies like using social media, WhatsApp, Google meet, local research moderators, and an online survey. Also, considering the sensitivity of the topic, the interviews with irregular migrants in different asylum-seeking centers in Europe took place online using WhatsApp, while keeping an eye on the sensitivity of the topic and hesitance of respondents to share experiences.

Given the complex nature of illegal migration through the Sahara Desert



and across the Mediterranean Sea, a well-designed semi-structured interview guide was developed. It explored issues like the current conditions of youths in Port Harcourt City, perceptions of livelihood opportunities in both Port Harcourt City and abroad, knowledge of risks involved in traveling along the desert and across the sea, lived experiences that irregular migrants encounter while living without proper documents abroad, access to networks, as well as the influence of family members on the decision to embark on this unsafe journey. For a profile of all the participants in this study, see Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

The study objectives, possible risks, and exposures were explained to potential participants. Hence, participation in this study was voluntary and participants had the right to either consent or decline to participate in the research without suffering any prejudice to their basic human rights. Given that the study included tragic and dehumanizing lived experiences of some irregular migrants, pseudonyms were used in the excerpts from the interview transcripts. In doing this, all participants were assigned codes in order to protect their identity in any report or publication from these findings. There were no payments for participation in the research. However, during the focus group discussions (FGDs), participants were provided with some refreshments at the end of the meetings. Also, interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the respondents (Nigerian pidgin, and English). Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim into English and edited for analysis. All transcribed and edited interviews were saved and accessible only to the researcher and were deleted from the laptop device after the research supervisors approved the study. This was done to ensure no identity of the respondents can be traced through their voices. Overall, the study had a population size of 95 participants, 31 of whom were in-depth interview respondents drawn from both Port Harcourt City and abroad.

Thematic analysis based on the research sub-questions formed the basis of the analysis. This helped the researcher to carefully identify commonalities and differences across the dataset while interpreting the data from the perspective of the respondents in the study. The analysis commenced while the fieldwork was ongoing, starting with listening to electronic recordings at the end of each interview to transcribe and code the responses in line with the themes drawn from the study sub-questions. This helped the researcher to gain a comprehensive picture of perceptions, lived experiences, and motivations of male and female youths in Port Harcourt City on migration abroad. These results were presented using a narrative tool supported by quotes from respondents, to provide some evidence without sounding too poignant and exaggerative. To improve the quality of the study report, the researcher further used in-depth triangulation of the main findings from the key informants, and individual interviews to compare other existing literature works reviewed in this study.



## PROFILE OF ALL THE PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY

Table 1: Profile of key informant respondents

Code	Respondent	Organization	Portfolio	Gender	
				Male	Female
KI1 Bank	Banker	GTBank	Credit and Loan Service		1
KI2 YLDPHC	Youth Leader	Abuloma Village	P.R. O	1	
KI3 YLGPHC	Youth Leader	Eledenwo	Speaker Democracy Africa Parliament	1	
KI4 YLCPHC	Youth Leader	Elekahia	Entrepreneur	1	
KI5 YMJPHC	Irregular Migrant	PHC Resident	Irregular Migrant in Libya	1	
KI6 YMEGBR	Irregular Migrant	Nigerian	Irregular Migrant in Germany	1	
KI7 YMLBE	Irregular Migrant	Nigerian	Irregular Migrant in Belgium	1	
KI8 PHALGAS	Government Official	Port Harcourt Local Government Council	Council Secretary	1	
KI9 DA-NLD	Policymaker	African Diaspora Policy Centre	Director	1	
KI10 AMB-ON	Diplomat	Nigerian Embassy, the Netherlands	Head of Delegation	1	
KI11 DNLD-NLD	Regular Migrant resident in the Netherlands	United Nigeria Platform, the Netherlands	Chairman	1	

Table 2: Profile of individual interview respondents in PHC

Code	Respondent	Status	Portfolio	Gender	
				Male	Female
I11 SNGR	PHC Resident	Today FM	Journalist	1	
I12 ALANGR	PHC Resident	Entrepreneur	Small-scale Telecom Business	1	
I13 AMYNGR	PHC Resident	University Graduate	Freelance Writer		1
I14 AKNGR	PHC Resident	University Graduate	Unemployed Youth	1	
I15 GPNGR	PHC Resident	University Graduate	Unemployed Youth	1	
I16 DSPNGR	PHC Resident	University Graduate	Unemployed Youth	1	
I17-EVANGR	PHC Resident	Entrepreneur	Small-scale Farmer	1	
I18-VICNGR	PHC Resident	University Graduate	Freelance Content Developer		1
I19-VICNGR	PHC Resident	University Graduate	Data Analyst	1	
I110-LAWNGR	PHC Resident	Medical Doctor	Freelancing and Volunteering	1	

Table 3: Profile of individual respondents abroad

Code	Respondent	Status	Portfolio	Gender	
				Male	Female
I11-SNGR	Nigerian Immigrant in the UK	Accountant	Working	1	
I12-EZYNLD	Nigerian Migrant in the Netherlands	Water Engineer	Working	1	
I13-JACNLD	Ugandan Migrant the Netherlands	University Graduate	Working		1
I14-JAMNLD	Congolese Refugee in the Netherlands	Resident	Working	1	
I15-KLAGBR	Nigerian Migrant in Germany	University Graduate	Working	1	
I16-MRACA	Nigerian Migrant in Canada	University Graduate	Working	1	
I17-NNAGBR	Nigerian Migrant in Germany	Freelance IT Engineer	Working	1	
I18-SIU.USA	Nigerian migrant in the United States	PR Specialist	Working	1	
I19-SoloITA	Ghanaian Refugee in Italy	In the Asylum Centre, Arnhem	Seeking Asylum	1	
I110-PATNLD	Nigerian Refugee in the Netherlands	In the Asylum Centre, Arnhem	Seeking Asylum		1

Table 4: Profile of FGD 1 participants in Okuru-Ama village, PHC

Code	Respondent	Status	Portfolio	Gender	
				Male	Female
FGD01	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Unemployed Undergraduate	1	
FGD02	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Small-Scale Fashion Designer	1	
FGD03	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Unskilled Unemployed Youth	1	
FGD04	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Small-Scale Phone Technician	1	
FGD05	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Underemployed Graduate	1	
FGD06	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Unemployed Artisan	1	
FGD07	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Freelancer	1	
FGD08	Okuru-Ama Youth, PHC	Okuru-Ama Village, PHC	Unemployed Graduate	1	

Table 5: Profile of FGD 2 participants in Diobu village, PHC

Code	Respondent	Status	Portfolio	Gender	
				Male	Female
FGD-D1	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Small-Scale Hairstylist		1
FGD-D2	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Small-Scale Graphic Designer		1
FGD-D3	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Unskilled Unemployed Youth		1
FGD-D4	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Waitress		1
FGD-D5	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Underemployed Graduate		1
FGD-D6	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Unemployed Youth		1
FGD-D7	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Undergraduate Student		1
FGD-D8	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Skilled Unemployed Youth		1
FGD-D9	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Graduate and doing Small-Scale Business		1
FGD-D10	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Fashion Designing Apprentice		1
FGD-D11	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Small-Scale Hairstylist Business		1
FGD-D12	Diobu Youth, PHC	Diobu Village, PHC	Underemployed Nurse		1

## RESULTS

Table 6: Gender variation of research participants

Gender	Key Informants	Individual Interview in PHC	Individual Interview Abroad	Online Respondents	Focus Group Discussions
Male	10	8	8	18	8
Female	1	2	2	26	12

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

### *Accessing decent jobs and opportunities to start small-scale businesses in Port Harcourt City*

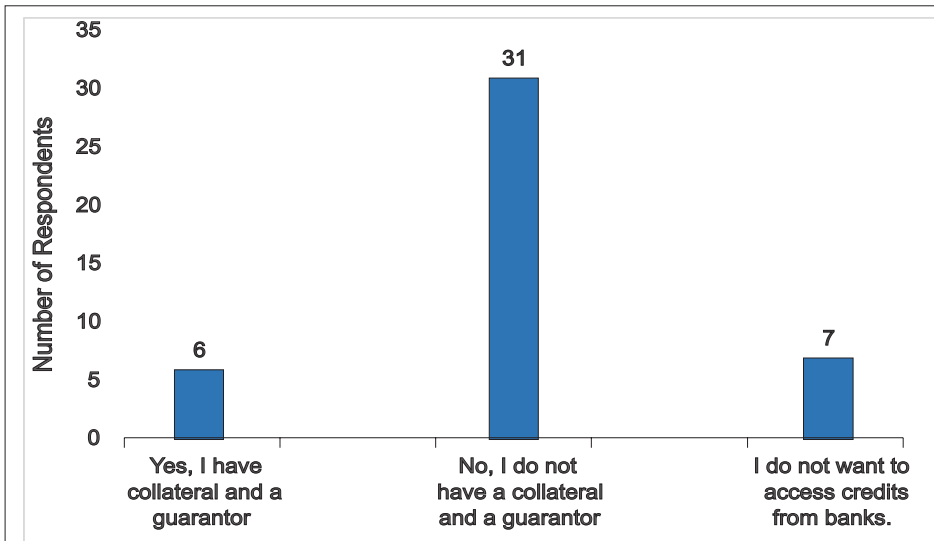
The study gauged participants' views to better understand opportunities for a decent job and the feasibility of starting a sustainable small-scale business that can provide youths with a stable income to meet their daily essential needs. For many of the respondents, youths find it difficult to access decent jobs due to high practices of nepotism, and lack of social connection to the upper class in the society. This obnoxious norm has affected mostly youths in the lower class who often represent a

majority of the youth population, from accessing fairly decent jobs to meet their daily essential needs. One of the respondents said:

I have graduated from university for over 5 years, but I have not gotten a job. There is a lot of nepotism, and corruption in the system. Even farming is a challenge due to harsh agrarian land. As an average youth in Nigeria, you must know someone who knows someone for you to get a decent job. Some female youths are sexually exploited for them to get a chance at a job. So, you can see why the motivation is high for youths in Nigeria to move to Europe in search of a better life through these dangerous routes (Port Harcourt youth resident).

Similarly, as indicated in the figure below, due to the strict collateral conditions, most of the youths expressed difficulty in accessing credit from banks and other credit houses to start a small-scale business.

Figure 2: Access to credit from the banks for small-scale businesses in PHC



### *Opportunities for decent jobs for irregular migrants abroad*

Generally, different factors influence the perceptions of youths in many sub-Saharan African countries about unlimited work opportunities abroad. In this study, the views of Port Harcourt City youths were explored to understand what informed their knowledge about living and getting a decent job abroad as irregular migrants. Most of the results showed that the perceptions of youths in PHC on decent work opportunities abroad was informed mostly by their interpretation of western films and information obtained from various social media platforms. According to one of

the respondents:

I read in the news about how government abroad creates job opportunities and supports business start-ups among youths, hence I have this perception that there are more chances to get a job abroad. Also, western movies further highlight how people abroad easily find a job. So, I think if I get the chance to move to Europe or America, I will find a decent job (female youth, Port Harcourt City).

Similarly, interviews revealed that the sending of remittances to their families back home, by peers who moved abroad through irregular means, further strengthened the perceptions of youths in the community that there are enough job opportunities with better income abroad. This perception further motivated male and female youths to decide on accepting the risk of traveling abroad through any available irregular routes in the hope of getting a stable job that supports them to also send money towards improving their family conditions back home. In contrast, irregular migrants living in Europe painted a picture of a flashy environment, rosy images, a free-flowing easy life and opportunities for decent jobs with better income perceptions about Europe. This motivated their decisions to risk their lives through the desert and across the sea, but circumstances sadly changed a few months after their arrival. Also, the language difference in many of the European countries hindered their smooth integration. According to one respondent:

I heard Europe was a nice and good place to hustle, but when I arrived, I realized that success in Europe is dependent on your status. Without a residency that offers a work permit, you cannot work or access the opportunities you imagined about Europe while you were in Africa. The unskilled job I got, did not meet my expectation; I was just working to survive. Even at that, things were so rough for me in Macedonia, with no money on me, I had to trek to Greece where I had to seek asylum. From there I moved again to Germany (Nigerian irregular migrant, Germany).

According to a key informant:

The views of these youths are borne out of frustration and the hostile environment that exists in the country. For those moving for security reasons, it is justified. But for economic migrants moving through these dangerous routes, their movements are borne out of a desperate mirage. I have seen irregular migrants that have come to seek support to return home because things did not work as they had initially imagined. Many of these migrants who were deceitfully lured into making these journeys are so ashamed to return home because of the failure of not making it as they had initially perceived after making a huge sacrifice of crossing the desert and the Mediterranean Sea

(Nigerian Ambassador to the Netherlands).

*Knowledge of the risk implications of illegal migration to Europe through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea*

Findings from the in-depth interviews with respondents revealed that male and female youths traveling through the desert and across the Mediterranean Sea have constantly been exposed to various dangerous encounters ranging from heatwaves to attacks by bandits and traffickers. In many circumstances, these attacks often result in the deaths of hundreds of migrants. Also, many youths who make this journey do not have an in-depth knowledge of the nature of the risks involved in the journey. Hence their decision to risk their lives on the journey. According to one respondent:

[The] majority of the youths have no idea of what crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea looks like in real life, while some just have a shallow knowledge of what the journey entails. For instance, I know someone in the community with an average knowledge of the risks, yet, he made up his mind to accept the risks involved in the journey because of the depressing economic condition of his family. He believed this journey was a stroll to death, but he said to me, “If I die, I die; if I perish, I perish” (male youth, Port Harcourt City).

However, interviews with irregular migrants who undertook these journeys revealed that there was a strong belief in predestination among migrants who made the journey. Many of the migrants who survived this dangerous endeavor, were willing to risk it in the belief that God would protect them from the dangers if they were not destined to die in the desert or the sea.

According to some respondents:

I did not know the risk will be this dangerous; many persons died in the desert, but a few of us survived. My friend did not clearly explain to me the dangers involved; he told me that the journey to Libya will be smooth and easy, and not through the desert. So, the information I received was so easy for me to opt into the idea of embarking on the journey. It took me three weeks to travel from Port Harcourt to Libya. While on transit, I was spending money to save myself from being taken into captivity by the desert warriors and rebels each time we were attacked. I spent about \$2,000 to make the journey to Libya, and now I cannot continue to cross the Mediterranean because my money finished in the desert. So, I am now hustling in Libya to raise money for a boat [trip] to reach Europe (Port Harcourt irregular migrant in Libya).

I met some Eritreans, Somalians, Ethiopians, in the asylum-seeking center who shared their horrific experiences with me. They told me they were not aware of any dangers involved in the journey. Everything seemed well when they set out for their journey from Eritrea; everything changed on the Mediterranean Sea

en route to Europe. They said their friends whom they made the journey with, all died at sea, but they were lucky to make it to Italy, and then to the refugee camp in the Netherlands (Congolese migrant in the Netherlands).

More results revealed that many of the male and female youths who travel along these routes come out mentally and psychologically damaged due to the terrible daily experiences, including torture, abuse and sexual exploitation that takes place on the journey. According to one respondent:

For days I journeyed with no water and food. On one of the nights, we got to a well, and we noticed there was some water; we all drank from it only to wake up in the morning to notice there was a dead body inside [the well]. Still, we fetched [water] from it to continue the journey because we had no choice. For female migrants whose money finished along the way, they had to pay with their bodies, some were also raped despite paying. When I got to Libya, I was arrested, and taken to prison by Libyan authorities. While I was there, many of the girls were sexually assaulted on a daily basis; and if you are sick, they would give you abortion pills, because the assumption is that you might be pregnant. It was devastating because my family did not know where I am, or what I am going through. Then the journey across the sea was another difficult experience, but at this point, I had made up my mind if I die, so be it. We used a balloon or floater to cross the sea. While on the journey, some of us [fellow migrants] died and were thrown into the sea. After some days, we were in the middle of nowhere. Luckily, we got rescued by a ship. When we arrived in Italy it was terrible there. Then I escaped to France; my asylum was rejected there. Again, I left for the Netherlands, where I am now in the refugee camp seeking asylum here. Now in Europe, to survive and get by every day, I have had to be exposed to the risk of meeting very dangerous people, and the police. I live each day watching my back. I have been in this refugee camp for two years hoping that my asylum request will be granted someday, so I can live a normal life (Nigerian refugee in the Netherlands).

Further findings indicated that youths who are more open to risk-taking will most likely embark on these dangerous journeys to Europe even if they are not certain about their chances of surviving the crossing of the desert and the sea. However, one of the respondents said:

My journey was not about the willingness to take a risk because making the cross is like having a close conversation with death. My situation was very terrible, so I had to find a way to help myself. I was an auto mechanic, but the job did not provide enough income to take care of my needs. So, I met a friend who shared the information to travel to Europe by road, and together we set



out on the journey. It was a terrible experience for me. I saw lots of death; I do not wish anybody to go through the journey; 150 of us were packed at the back of the truck with each of us carrying about 150 liters of water. Your survival is dependent on that water because no one will share theirs with you. On the journey, some fell off and died and they were buried in the desert sand. If you are unlucky to be attacked by rebels and desert warriors, they will torture, rape, and kidnap people, so due to these dangers, the journey took me 3 weeks in the desert. Crossing the Mediterranean was between life and death. I saw a lot of dead bodies floating in the sea. The 12-meter size fishing boat was carrying 51 of us on board. We struggled a lot with the waves; eventually, it changed our direction. We floated for days before a naval ship passing came to our rescue. But for the rescue, we would not have made it to cross the sea because the boat was already sinking. Based on these horrible experiences, I could not have signed up to take such a risk. I will not even make the journey again should the situation arise. Looking back, I do not think the opportunities in Europe are worth the risk of the journey. I am now considering returning to Nigeria because the green pastures are not the way we thought. As an illegal migrant, you have no dignity (Nigerian irregular migrant in Germany).

*The influence of peers and family on the decision to accept the risks involved in illegal migration abroad*

The results revealed that the desire to improve the living conditions of families in the country of origin, underlines the willingness to accept the risks involved in crossing the desert and the sea to Europe. Similarly, many families with large households will easily decide to support a member who decides to embark on this journey. They contribute money and even sell the family assets or mortgage them for a loan to fund this journey. Also, the influence of one's age and marital status influences one's decision to make this unsafe journey. One of the respondents said:

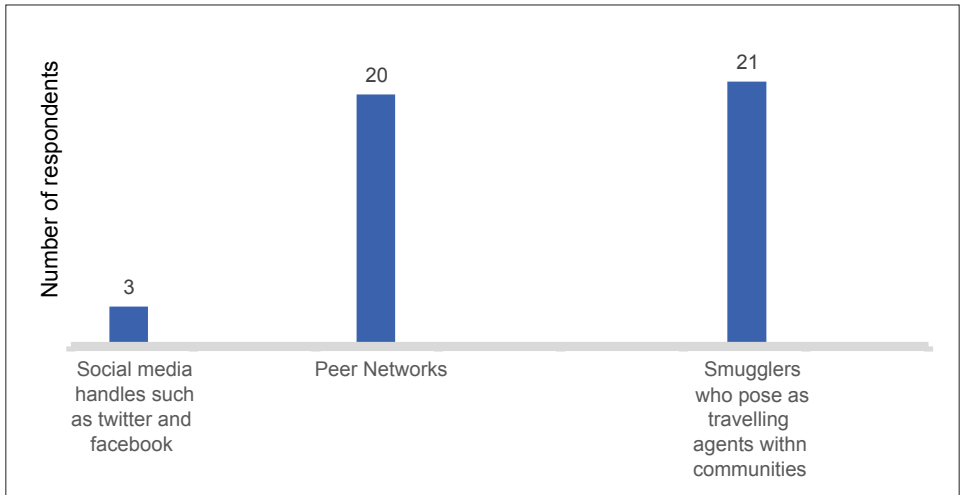
I think from age 18, youths are more audacious to make these journeys, and the idea is that they could still have the strength to withstand the challenges involved in the journey. In terms of marital status, mostly married men are likely to make the decision, because the belief will be, "If I move, I will be able to provide a life for my family." The women are most likely going to consider the children before deciding to make the move (Ugandan migrant in the Netherlands).

In terms of the influence of peer pressure, the majority of the respondents said that youths living in the same neighborhood are more likely to accept the decision to make this journey if they know an associate from the same environment who traveled abroad through these routes and made it to support his family through remittance. Also, on access to information related to making these journeys, one of

the respondents said:

I know people who arrange this kind of movement, in local name, they are called "the journeyman". It is a big network. You don't just wake up to make the journey. So, from what I know, when you want to make the journey, you go to the journeyman, they plan the trip, they know all the transit routes and have their networks there. It takes months of planning before you make the journey. Usually, they make the trip during the summer period, when the sea is calm and less turbulent, precisely between May and September (Nigerian migrant in the United States).

Figure 3: Access to information related to illegal migration through the desert and across the sea



Source: Fieldwork, 2020.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand the economic and risk perceptions related to the livelihood of youths about Port Harcourt and Europe that motivates their decision to embark on illegal migration through the desert and the sea. In line with the existing theories explored in this research which provided insights into the behaviors that shapes irregular migrant’s intention and risk perception regarding making the unsafe journey, the findings suggest that migrants’ intended outcome in many situations outweighs the thorough analysis of the perceived risk involved in making irregular movement across borders. Thus, during decision making, migrants consider the risks as an opportunity as long as it does not limit their freedom to move.

The ILO (2020) describes decent jobs to be productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity. As indicated

by the findings in this study, many of the youths in Port Harcourt City (PHC) are currently without decent employment that can provide them stable income to meet their daily essential needs. This is consistent with the National Bureau for Statistics (2016) report which notes that 34.9% of youths in Nigeria are currently without jobs. Hence, the rising incidence of illegal migration of male and female Port Harcourt City youths abroad, through these unsafe routes as an alternative livelihood strategy. The study established that without a strong social connection to elite members in the city, one will hardly get a decent job. This lack of connections to the upper echelon makes many average youths in PHC feel that they are treated like the precariat without rights and privileges which other members of the society enjoy. Imhonopi and Urim (2015, cited in Imhonopi et al., 2017), state that the precariat is a class with members who consist of impoverished youths belonging to lower-class families, including frustrated educated youths who do not like existing socio-economic conditions before them. Hence, the imagination of a better life outside Nigeria becomes the prism through which male and female youths in the city see the world, due to the polluted environmental conditions, and the rising unemployment in Nigeria.

More so, findings revealed that most of the youth's perceptions of the availability of better working opportunities abroad are informed by what they see in western films and other news media platforms. Etika et al. (2018) argue that the public perception of economic freedom in Europe has increased the quest for migration to countries such as Spain and Italy. Thus, many Nigerian youths embark on this deadly journey through these unsafe routes but, little did they know, that some of them will not get to their destination.

However, the study found that the transnational flow of money through remittances from migrants abroad has contributed immensely towards the improvement of the living conditions of many migrants' families and their communities in countries of origin. As a result, this study established that migrants' remittances in support of household income is a major motivation for these movements along these dangerous routes. Supporting the above findings towards addressing illegal migration and poverty reduction, the British House of Commons International Development Committee's Report on Migration and Development 2004, cited in Vertovec (2007), suggests that the UK Government should explore the potential development benefits which might be gained from more circular migration, and alongside its developing country partners should examine different ways in which such circular migration might be encouraged. The Committee's advice also goes beyond the government to other agencies by suggesting that circular migration schemes could act as an incentive for sending countries to assume more responsibility for countering illegal migration.

Knowledge of the risk involved along the traveling routes, as well as uncertainty about the realities of living abroad, were found to be major gaps that result in the death of migrants along the desert and at sea. Williams and Baláz (2012) show that irregular migrants rarely have full knowledge about the current living conditions

in the destination countries. Hence, their movement is often associated with uncertainties. Also, their perception of risk is formed based on partial knowledge of the destination country. Similarly, the hope for a better life and the belief in God's protection when making this dangerous journey to Europe in many circumstances beclouds the migrant's perception of the risk involved along the journey route. The perception of God's protection is corroborated by the work of Minaye and Zeleke (2017) who argue that if the attitude and spiritual belief of migrating youths are such that God has predetermined their fate, they may not bother about the risk or safety implications of their decisions concerning unsafe migration. This, therefore, implies that in order to understand migrants' decisions and their acceptance of the risks involved in undertaking this dangerous journey, it is crucial to comprehend the attitude that informs their choices and decision-making.

Given that migration offers an alternative livelihood strategy for vulnerable groups, it was very evident in the study that at the core of the decision to undertake this risky journey across the desert and the sea, lies the motivation to improve their family's economic situation. As a result, many families in Port Harcourt City often support the decision of a member to embark on this journey, which they strongly consider a necessary sacrifice to liberate one's family from the shackles of deprivation and poverty.

In relation to peer influence and access to information, this study established that activities of covert agents who live within the same community with these youths, provide easier access to information related to undertaking illegal migration abroad through these unsafe routes. Klabunde and Willekens (2016) conclude that individuals are likely to make a journey if there is an available social network within the prospective migrant's reach, as social networks support the movement of a potential migrant to a destination country.

Although issues related to harsh climatic conditions and the degradation of the environment did surface during the fieldwork, however, it was beyond the scope of the research to explore these areas and their consequences on cross-border migration.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The different accounts of the respondents in this study showed that the human mind is unstoppable when desperate for economic survival. Despite the efforts of the European Union (EU) through its funding of border externalization projects in Niger and Libya, as long as youths remain unemployed and have no sustainable means of livelihood, migrants from the Western route of the Sahara Desert will still find a way to maneuver the border checks to make their way into the desert and across the sea to fortress Europe. Therefore, based on the various findings, the study concludes that addressing the problem of illegal migration of youths abroad through these unsafe routes requires a practical intervention geared towards building the resilience and capabilities of youths for economic self-reliance. In relation to irregular migration,

when it rains in Africa, it thunders in Europe. It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian government facilitate a global multi-stakeholder partnership involving relevant stakeholders in the international community to develop a mechanism that builds the capability of youths against unemployment and poverty.

The study further recommends that Rivers State and the Federal Government of Nigeria partner with the IOM to ensure that returned migrants are encouraged to share the real story on the risks involved in crossing the desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Also, given that many youths have a significant presence on social media, the study recommends the use of mass media and various social media platforms to share and disseminate insights from the experiences of migrants. This will be vital in discouraging other youths from making the journey through these unsafe routes. Additionally, it is recommended that Rivers State, in collaboration with the Nigerian government, partner with relevant international bodies to design an ecopreneur project to train Nigerian youths in climate-resilient farming and plastic recycling business enterprises; this is particularly important given the increasing weather variabilities. This will help create more jobs and a stable income source that will build the resilient capabilities of youths against illegal migration. Furthermore, future research is needed to explore whether climate variabilities could spur mass migration across borders.

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