

Assessing the Governance of Irregular Migration in the Gambia

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Abstract: *Irregular migration of youth using the perilous Mediterranean Sea or the Sahara Desert is a common practice in the Gambia. This study shows that thousands of youth from the Gambia lose their lives on this journey. The Findings revealed that irregular migration is exacerbated by poor governance that perpetuate limited economic opportunities for the youth. The study shows a decline in the number of irregular migrants from the Gambia in 2017, however, the trend is maintained recently with hundreds of lives perish in the last three years. The study revealed that bad governance and high rate unemployment of youth are widely held for this trend. The study shows that the government of the Gambia from 2020 to 2023 initiated youth employability programs such as the Youth Revolving Fund and the Youth Empowerment Program, however, both have failed to meet the expectations of youth in the Gambia. The study maintains that governance is the major course of the irregular migration of youth. This study recommends strengthening the governance of migration, mechanization of agriculture, and provisions sustainable financing schemes for youth in business, increasing access to education and vocational training for young people in the regions. This would provide them with more opportunities to find meaningful employment and reduce their incentive to undertake dangerous and illegal journeys.*

Keywords: Irregular Migration, Governance, Unemployment

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed an increasing swell of migration in the last three decades. According to studies done by Matteo Villa and Alissa Pavia (2023) from June 2022 to May 2023 one hundred and thirty-six thousand migrants mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa (136,000) disembarked in Italy using the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. This figure according to the duo exceeds the number of migrants arriving between 2014-2017 a period that was considered a high peak of irregular migration which on average constituted a statistic of One hundred and fifty-five thousand (155,000) migrants traveling each year.

According to Africanews (2021) Irregular migration trend leans towards the increase in Sub-Saharan Africa, rather than slowing down. United Nations Migration (2023) contends that, over the last three decades, the world has witnessed a growing increase in the international migration of people. According to IOM, in 2015, the total stock of international migrants worldwide reached 244 million compared to 173 million in the year 2000. According to IOM, 73% of irregular migrants in the world are youth.

The African Center for Strategic Studies (2022), indicated that 44% of all irregular migrants originate from an African country. They pointed out that the total of displaced migrants from Africa stood at 36 million in 2022, a 12% increase (an increase of 3.7 million persons) in comparison to 2021. Bad governance violence and instability have resulted in the migration and displacement of youth on the continent.

Many scholars argue that Unemployment, and conflict produced by bad governance on the continent have driven many youth out of Africa looking for greener pastures in Europe.

Bad governance in the Gambia has been one of the leading factors that push many young people to embark on irregular migration. Jhoomar Mehta (2019) posits that during the 22 years of leadership of President Jammeh, the Gambia turned towards dictatorship, democratic norms were not respected and access to jobs was based on patronage and loyalty to his party. She argues that out of such bad governance practices many youth in the Gambia sought irregular migration to make ends meet. IOM pointed out that between 2015 and 2017, primarily through the Central Mediterranean Route more than 30,000 irregular Gambian migrant arrivals were recorded. The majority of these Migrants they maintained were seeking for freedom and economic opportunities outside the Gambia.

The Labour Force survey of the Gambia 2023 revealed that 70% of the Gambia's population depends on agriculture and as a result of irregular migration, agricultural productivity has been on the decline in the last decades which constrains national development.

Irregular migration in the Gambia is constituted by the youth and it has posed a significant threat to agriculture and other productive sectors in the Gambian economy. Because the potentials of youth power in agriculture is untapped

According to IOM (2022), the widening of freedom and pursuit of socio-economic advancement has driven many to undertake irregular migration to reach Europe. IOM pointed out that The Gambia's per capita migration rate remains one of the highest in Africa.

Bad governance which produced limited economic opportunities is identified as the main push and pull factors for migration for young Gambians. The implication of irregular migration on the development of the Gambia is dire, ranging from low development in the productive sectors to the death of viable human capital of the country. In December 2019 a fatal shipwreck off the coast of Mauritania carrying hundreds of young Gambians aiming to reach the Canary Islands led to over 60 deaths of young Gambians (IOM 2019).

However in the last five years according to IOM, significant progress has been made in migration policy and governance in the Gambia. National Coordination Mechanism on Migration (NCM), led by the Office of the Vice is created to provide governance on migration trends through inclusive youth empowerment programs. This study set out to examine the implication of irregular migration on Gambia's development and how governance can stimulate growth and development and discourage irregular migration in the Gambia.

According to the IOM, in 2020 Gambians accounted for **8.1** percent of the total irregular migrants representing the sixth most common nationality of irregular migration in Africa.

Despite the democratic transition in the Gambia, the expected good governance which should ensure reforms and employment creation for young people in the Gambia and eradicate irregular migration is yet to be fully realized.

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To understand the reasons for irregular migration in the Gambia
2. To understand the implications of irregular migration on the development of the Gambia
3. To understand possible solutions that will mitigate irregular migration

Conceptual Review

Definition of Concepts

The Concept of Irregular Migration

Irregular Migration is one of the most significant humanitarian challenges in the twenty-first century in Sub-Saharan Africa. Irregular Migration is the movement of people over some distance from one place of residence to another without following the legal process of traveling. Mourad Khalil (2022) describes irregular migration as crossing the boundaries of a defined place by one or more persons involved in a change of residence. Stylianos Kostas (2017) contends that an irregular migrant is a person who does not possess legal status in a transit or host country. He noted that people go on irregular migration for educational or economic opportunities which their home countries fail to provide for lack of a democratic governance.

Florence Armitano (2017) describes a migrant as any person who changes his or her country of residence. According to her, migration includes movement of many kinds, such as people leaving their countries of origin for economic reasons, to join their families abroad, or as refugees. She argues that Irregular Migration is a complex and multidimensional process that involves different motivations, with far-reaching impacts or consequences on the individual and the places of origin and destination. According to IOM migration is the mobility of people across boundaries to live permanently or temporarily in another country other than theirs.

Susan Doofan and Micheal Udo (2022) agree that irregular migration continues to have far-reaching implications for the African economy. They argue that as a result of irregular migration, Agriculture and other productive sectors of the African economy are stagnated.

The concept of Governance

The Concept of governance is widely discussed among policymakers and scholars, yet there is no common agreement around a single definition of governance. Some scholars defined governance based on rules enforcement mechanisms offered by the World Bank.

Other scholars viewed governance from a public sector management perspective, which is aligned with the definition proposed by the World Bank in 1992 as *"how power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development"*. Scholars have disagreed on specific areas of governance, while classical scholars of governance focus narrowly on whether existing rules and laws are enforced, the latter scholars emphasize more on the justice of the content of the laws. Laura Rubidge (2023) posited that poor governance was a major contributor to Africa's poor economic health. She contends that poor governance is responsible for underdevelopment including the massive rate of irregular migration on the continent.

Mo Ibrahim Foundation Africa Governance Index report (2022) noted that governance is the provision of the political, social, economic, and environmental goods and services that every citizen has the right to expect from their state, which a state has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens.

According to the World Bank Governance Indicators (2021), six dimensions are critical in understanding the concept and the application of governance, such dimensions include: Accountability, Political stability, Absence of violence, Government effectiveness, Regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. These dimensions according to the World Governance Indicator provide the conceptual and practical basis for governance in all countries across the world.

The African Development Bank (1999) posited that accountability, transparency, combating corruption, stakeholder participation, and a legal and judicial framework provide a conceptual understanding of Governance. The Bank argues that good governance is imperative for creating and sustaining an enabling environment for development which will eradicate irregular migration of youth on the continent. It contends that good governance is one of Africa's collective aspirations without which, many of the others are unachievable.

Theoretical Review

Pull and Push Migration Theory

Ravenstein (1885) conceptualized the Pull and Push Migration theory from one of his seminal writings, *The Law of Migration*. This theory explains how and why migration within or across borders occurs. Some scholars view the push-pull model of migration as too simplistic, Haas (2007) argues that there is merit in the simple notion of the push-pull model. He noted that with its in-built and empirically grounded idea, this theory explains holistically that structural forces shape migration processes in the world. He contends that explaining migration has conventionally focused on disparities in conditions between place of origin and place of destination. Michael P. Todaro (1969) posited that migrants were pushed by low incomes in their countries and pulled by better prospects in more affluent areas. Stephen Castle (2004) differs from this approach. He argued that long-standing inequities deriving from centuries of poor countries being exploited by rich ones drove migration, which he argues was perpetuated by the structures of labor markets in richer countries. Haas argued that it is impossible to separate governance from migration. He contends that migration has always been influenced by governance failures. Everett Lee (1966) argues that the forceful desire for opportunities and improvement of one's life influences and motivates migration. He contends that migration takes place when Pull factors outweigh the Push factors in the individual's country of origin.

Myrdal (1957) pointed out that only Push factors are responsible for international migration. Nicholas Van Hear (nd) noted that there is a nexus between both, he argues that the combination of "Push" and "Pull" factors is responsible for the migrant's decision to leave his territory. According to him migrants who respond to push factors are seeking to migrate out to another destination because of failure in governance in their home countries.

According to Tapinos (1990), poverty is not necessarily the factor of migration. He argues that it is not the 'poorest of the poor' who migrate. His view is that failure in governance in one's country pushes people to migrate not necessarily poverty.

The United Nations Development Program (2009) agrees with Tapinos that while there may be a strong relationship between migration and poverty, poverty in itself may not be a driver of migration. They contend that migration is strongly pushed by decay in governance, lack of political participation, and the rule of law in the home countries of migrants. According to them in most of the world, migrants generally come from countries where democratic rules are absent.

Empirical Review: State of Governance in Africa

According to the Democracy Index (2022) since 1996, when the world governance indicator data was published for the first time, the continent's average estimated scores for most dimensions except voice and accountability have shown a negative trend. The report noted that Control of corruption, regulatory quality, and rule of law continue to decline while political stability and government effectiveness have already collapsed on the continent. The report commends that considerable improvement in Voice and accountability have shown slight progress in the last decade. The continent has only one 'full democracy' Mauritius and six 'flawed democracies; Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa according to the report. The Index shows that the continent have not made significant gains in good governance since the turn of the century.

The Africa Governance Index (2021), shows that only 3% of Africa's population is over 65, the lowest of any region, and 40% of its population is under 15. An estimated 70,000 skilled professionals emigrate from Africa each year. The African Youth Survey (2022) found that more than half of those surveyed in 15 African countries were considering immigrating to another country within three years to secure education and employment opportunities for their future.

According to the survey, 80% of African migrations are driven by the search for jobs and economic opportunities which the survey noted are perpetuated by bad governance on the continent. The Ibrahim Africa Governance Index shows that 20.2% of the Continent's population is undernourished in 2021, an increase of 3.8 percentage Points compared to 2017. The report contends that

1 in 3 of the economically active population in Africa are unemployed. This is the result of bad governance on the continent which pushes many youth to embark on irregular migration to make ends meet.

Afrobarometer (2022) posited that the high rate of irregular migration of youth and the general underdevelopment on the continent is the result of decades of unparalleled volatility, lack of governance, and democratic norms on the continent which has exposed the continent's inability to respond to the development needs of its citizenry. As a result of the failure of African Governments to restore good governance, many African youth lost faith in their countries and took on irregular migration as a last resort.

Performance in overall governance in Sub-Saharan Africa

African average	2012-2019 trend	2019-2021 trend	Annual Average Trend 2012-2019	Annual Average Trend 2019-2021
Overall Governance	+1.1	0.0	+0.16	0.00
Security & Rule of Law	-0.6	-0.7	-0.09	-0.35
Participation & Inclusion	-0.3	-0.5	-0.04	-0.25
Economic Opportunity	+2.3	+0.7	+0.33	+0.35
Human Development	+2.9	+0.6	+0.41	+0.30

Table 1: Source, Author creation based on MIF Data

The data shows

that governance progress is at risk on the continent due to the deterioration in *Security, Rule of Law, Participation, and Rights and inclusion*. The data shows that a worsening security situation and democratic backsliding on the continent undermine the continent's capacity to respond to domestic challenges, as well as to global, non-African-born challenges such as COVID-19 and the climate crisis. According to the data the 2021 African average score for *Overall Governance* amounts to 48.9. The data shows that *overall Governance* has improved from 2012. According to the data from 2017-2021 the progress in overall governance in Africa was slowed and there has been no progress in the *Overall Governance* score since 2019.

Methods and Materials

This study made use of secondary data from the Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS) and IOM Gambia office 2012-2023. Data was also collected from the World Bank, Mo Ibrahim Foundation Website, the African Union, and the Africa Peer Review Mechanism.

The author was a trainer for migrant returnees from January 2020 to February 2023. Reports and case study materials gained from my interaction with returnees were used to enrich this study.¹ Books and journal articles were also consulted as source materials for this study.

For ease of analysis, data sets were grouped into 2016-2019 and 2020-2023. The data covers a wide range of variables including demographic characteristics of migrant employment and it is nationally representative.

Findings and Discussion

Triggers of irregular migration in the Gambia

Based on the findings of this study, it was identified that the government's inability to employ the increasing number of graduates from the University of the Gambia and other tertiary institutions was the main factor of irregular migration. The study identifies that over 1300 students graduate from the University every year and only under 10% of this number get employed. It is identified that unemployment creates security risks and was the major trigger of irregular migration of youth in the Gambia.²

Unemployment

Based on the survey by the Gambia Bureau of Statistics, the youth unemployment rate in the Gambia was 41.5% in 2018. 2022-23 Gambia Labour Force Survey suggests that, among the 1,397,221 persons reached, 609,410 persons were in the labor force, either employed (563,395) or unemployed (46,015). The study found that the remainder 787,811 persons were outside the labor force including 86,204 persons engaged wholly or mostly in subsistence agriculture. The study found that the percentage of the working-age population engaged in the labor force was 43.6 percent which provides an increase percentage of unemployment from the last five years. This increment based on the findings was due to poor governance in the country.³

¹ Between 2020 – 2023 I trained 2200 Migrant returnees on entrepreneurship through the IOM Gambia office and the Government of the Gambia

² Gambia Bureau of Statistic surveys and reports were consulted

³ 2023 Labour Force Survey reports were consulted

Regional variations, Employment-to-population ratio

The study found that the data on the regional variation of labour, and unemployment rate is higher in the urban areas than rural areas. The findings of this study indicate that 60% of most irregular migrants in the Gambia come from the urban areas. The reasons for this high rate of irregular migrants from the urban areas according to the findings are largely due to the government's inability to provide employment opportunities for youth amidst rising living standards in the urban areas.⁴

Region	Percentage
Banjul (Urban)	9.7%
Kanifing (urban)	29
Brikama (urban)	8.2%
Janjangureh	3.1%
Mansakonko	4.1%
Basse	5.1
Kerewan	3.7%
Kuntaur	4.0%
National Average	7.6%

Table 2: Source, Authors extraction from Labour Force Data

5

According to the findings, there is a variation in labor force participation in productive sectors of the economy such as agriculture. This is because most of the abled-bodied youth have migrated. The findings in the 2023 labor force represent 43.6 percent of the working-age population. The remainder of the population based on the studies is outside the labor force (56.4%), of which 9.4 percent are in subsistence agriculture, and 23.6 percent are outside the labor force.

Government Response to controlling Irregular migration

The findings of this study show that in 2020, the Government of the Gambia through the Ministry of Youth and Sports initiated a Youth Revolving Fund to support youth migrant returnees and would-be migrants. The initiative according to the findings built the capacity of youth on entrepreneurship and supported them with 50 thousand Gambian Dalasi an equivalent of 800 USD as a start-up fund. The finding from National Enterprise Development Initiative's (NEDI) reports shows that from 2021-2022, 500 youths were provided grant support and training to enable them to start business.⁶

The findings also show that between 2021 and August 2023, IOM collaborated with the government to train 2000 migrant returnees on entrepreneurship and provide each with 1000 USD to start a business.⁷ The study also found that the government of the Gambia established a migration coordinating committee through the office of the Vice President to provide governance of migration and ensure the effective reintegration of migrant returnees in the Gambia.

The findings show that the Youth Empowerment Project was initiated by the Government of the Gambia through support from the European Union and provided support to 7000 youth in Technical and vocational education and business development for self-employment. The findings show that as a result of government and partner collaboration, the number of Gambian migrants fell drastically from 2018-2023.⁸

⁴ See 2023 Labour Force Report

⁵ Banjul is the capital and Kanifing and Brikama are the biggest urban administrative areas in the Gambia

⁶ Reports from NEDI were consulted

⁷ The author was the principal trainer and consulted reports and case studies

⁸ IOM reports were consulted

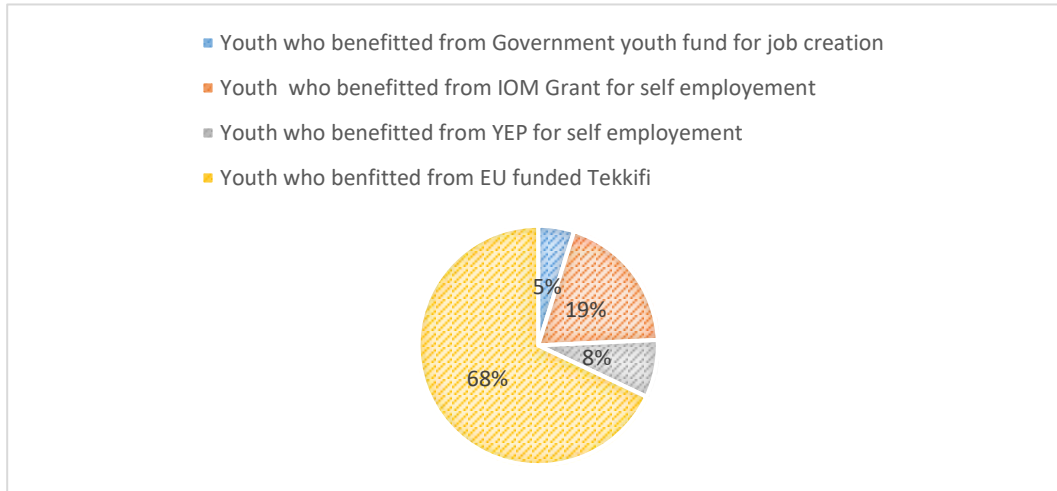


Figure 2: Source Authors creation from Government report

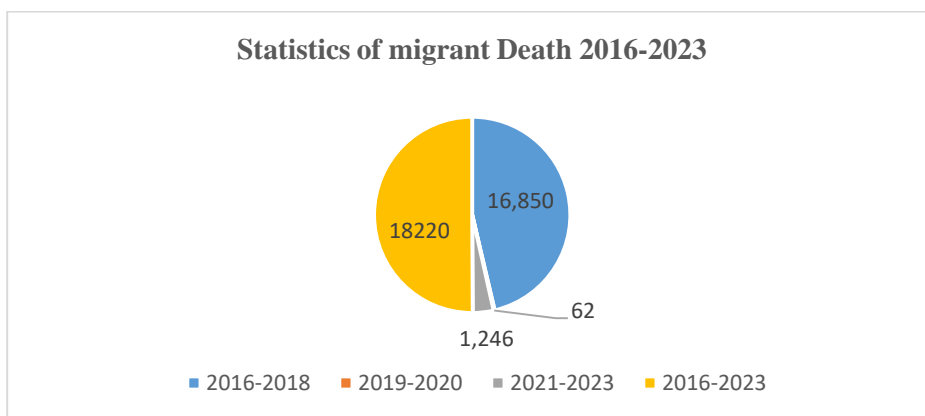
Implications of Irregular Migration

Death of migrants

The findings show that in Libya, many migrants were arrested and detained in camps run by militias, with high levels of violence. ⁹The study shows that Hundreds of migrants die in the Sahara Desert each year. The study revealed that from 2016 to 2018, 16,850 migrants died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The findings revealed that in December 2019, sixty-two (62) Gambian youth perished in a tragic shipwreck on the Coast of Mauritania. ¹⁰

The findings revealed that in July 2021, 200 Gambian Migrants on the boat to Europe went missing and eventually died. The findings show that in January 2021 ninety –five (95) migrants from the Gambia died on their way to Europe. Based on the findings in January 2023, 951 Gambian migrants including some Senegalese died on their route to Europe. The findings revealed that 90% of migrants who died on their route to Europe were youths between the ages of 15-35.

This has serious implications for the economy of a country that depends on Agriculture. The findings show that because of irregular migration, agriculture is stagnated in the hands of the elderly people, and rural Gambia particularly is only left with women and the elderly.



⁹ Testimonies from returnees

¹⁰ IOM and Government reports consulted

Figure 3: Source, Authors extraction

Statistics of Migrant who died on the Journey

Period	Number of Migrants Who Died
2016-2018	16,850
2019-2020	62
2021-2023	1,246

Table 3: Source, Authors extraction

Based on the findings of the data, the trend of migrant death has been on the decline in the last 8 years. This decline according to the findings is largely due to the opening up of the democratic space in the country and the series of training and empowerment programs the government, International organizations, and CSOs are engaged in.

Exploitation of irregular migrants

The testimonies of migrant returnees show that Smugglers demand ransoms from family members when migrants run out of money and can no longer pay, the finding shows that they are often violent and even kill migrants. The testimony from one of the returnees revealed that Smugglers kill migrants in Libya when migrants' families delay paying ransom. One of the former returnees revealed that kidnappers often torture migrants and call their families so that they can hear what is happening and demand money for the safe release of the migrant. Another former returnee revealed that five of his colleagues were killed brutally by kidnappers because their families delayed in sending money. One of the returnees from Sukuta noted that his father in The Gambia had to sell his compound to pay the kidnappers who insisted that they would kill him if the family failed to pay the ransom.

Exploitation of women

The finding from a former female returnee revealed that women experienced physical and psychological abuse, torture, and rape on the journey. Her testimony revealed that she was five months pregnant at the time of her interaction with the author due to rape and constant sexual exploitation by her 'master'. She revealed that she was locked in the house daily and was sexually exploited day and night. The finding revealed that lots of women migrants were forced to turn to prostitution in Libya. According to the findings of the study, if they refused, they would be locked up in a room for days without food or water. The findings show that 90% of the returnees in the Gambia had either physical challenges or mental problems due to the hardship they encountered.

Increment in crimes

The study found that as a result of the high number of migrant returnees in the country, the rate of crimes in the urban Gambia has increased. This according to the findings is due to the experience of the migrants in Libya and the challenge of getting reintegrated in their communities when they return.

Possible solutions to mitigate irregular migration in the Gambia

Governance

The government needs to strengthen the rule of law and eliminate nepotism and favoritism in getting opportunities. The Government needs to mainstream migration into government plans and policies, support policy coordination, strengthen implementation of migration governance practices, and build the evidence base for migration data and trends.

Education

Incorporate Technical and Vocational Education in the Mainstream Education curriculum: TVET educational programs should be strengthened and modernized. Students in the basic education system should be introduced to TVET programs at an early age to provide livelihood and employability skills that they can depend on after graduating from school.

Agriculture

Mechanized agriculture and made it attractive for youth to venture in. Strengthened Entrepreneurship programs with the availability of sustainable financing schemes for young people to start small businesses.

Conclusion

To sustain the solutions to irregular migration requires a response from all stakeholders to reduce the number of victims, reintegrate the returned, and provide hope for the would-be migrants.

The fundamental basis for control of irregular migration is good governance practices which will strengthen economic opportunities for youth in the country. More awareness drives at the local and national levels are needed to de-escalate the trend. Re-modeling agriculture to make it enticing for youth and provide sustainable financing scheme for youth who wish to venture into the business, increasing access to education and vocational training for young people in the region. This would provide them with more opportunities to find meaningful employment and reduce their incentive to undertake dangerous and illegal journeys.

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