



Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

Migration Can Work for All

Written by: Ibrahim Wambai & Ifeoma Malo
March, 2026



Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

Migration Can Work for All

Migration, a defining staple of human history, an adaptive response to sometimes instability, scarcity, conflict and may be just to satisfy the human wish of exploration. Across continents and epochs, people have crossed borders and seas, seeking refuge, opportunity, leisure and safety

Across Nigeria, “Japa” the colloquial shorthand for mass emigration has become both a dream and a dilemma. From doctors leaving for the United Kingdom, United States and other developed economies to students pursuing degrees in Canada, and our skilled professionals applying for visas to leave, to unskilled workers seeking uncertain opportunities abroad, migration has become the most visible symptom of deep social, economic and human fragility at home. Since 2010, Nigeria has lost over \$2 billion in medical training investments as doctors emigrate and many never return¹. This hemorrhage of talent has left the country with just one doctor for every 5,000 patients, far below the World Health Organization’s recommended 1 to 600 ratio², As critical public services fray, more people see migration not as an adventure, but the only exit.

The *Japa conundrum* is not only a Nigerian story, It reflects a global truth. Migration has always been an age-old coping mechanism, a way humanity has survived shocks, rebuilt lives and forged new opportunities across centuries.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_capital_flight_from_Nigeria?

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_capital_flight_from_Nigeria

Today, however, the drivers of migration are multiplying, with economic motivations being the most significant driver,

- Poverty and inequality persistently and widening economic disparities between nations which push individuals to seek better opportunities elsewhere.
- The absence of Job opportunities/unemployment, low wages in origin countries, contrasted with job demands and higher pay in destination countries, are major drivers, particularly for young, working-age people.
- The Remittances success of previous migrants provides incentive and the financial means for others to migrate and contribute to a "culture of migration".

With Security and Political Factors birthing Instability and conflict, this posing as the new most powerful drivers of forced migration.

- Conflict and violence, resulting in wars, civil unrest, and widespread violence force millions to flee their homes in search of safety, oftentimes resulting in large numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons.
- With Political instability and human rights violations, the Repressions and loss of political freedoms, discrimination, and a general absence of the rule of law compel people to leave.



Environmental degradation, increasingly recognized as a significant "threat multiplier" for migration. Sudden-onset disasters (floods, storms) and progressive changes (drought, land degradation, water scarcity) do destroy livelihoods and force people to move, although the effects are often indirect and linked to socioeconomic and livelihood factors.

All aforementioned factors combine to reinforce Social dynamics and aspirations, playing a key role in the decision-making process.

- In Education and healthcare, the desire for better educational opportunities for oneself or one's children, and access to quality healthcare services drives migration.
- Migrant networks as diaspora communities and family members in destination countries provide crucial information, support, and financial assistance, significantly enabling and facilitating migration.
- The aspirations and personal attitudes of Individual desire for a better life and personal ambition fosters critical micro-level factors in the migration decision.

Climate change as an Arsonist, has inundated the savannah in northern Nigeria, wiped out harvests for farmers in the Middle Belt and diminished fish stocks for coastal fisherfolk, hollowing out livelihoods. Insurgency, banditry, and ethno-religious conflict have uprooted communities from Zamfara to Borno, while economic shocks and prolonged energy poverty, have crippled micro / macro industries and shrunk opportunities. For millions of Nigerians, the choice is stark: remain trapped in an environment of insecurity and socio-economic decline, or migrate internally or abroad in pursuit of livelihood emancipation.

Yet, rather than viewing this migration as an existential threat, policymakers at home and abroad can and should recognize that managed properly, **migration can work for all**. For Nigeria, this means addressing the active and passive drivers of migration and creating opportunities that reduce the compulsion to flee under undue pressure and circumstances. For destination countries, it means recognizing that migration is not zero-sum; it is a potential solution to aging populations and labor-market shortages. For the international system, it requires building institutional frameworks that balance border integrity with human dignity, ensuring that migration strengthens rather than undermines peace and security.



Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

NIGERIA

STATE OF FRAGILITY



Nigeria's Fragility & Japa Dilemma

Nigeria's constitution enshrines the right to freedom of movement, residence, and lawful occupation within the federation. In principle, a Nigerian should be able to relocate internally to pursue opportunity. In practice, insecurity, ethnic divisions, and weak local economies frustrate this right. A farmer displaced by desertification in Yobe may find little recourse in Lagos, where housing costs and unemployment already strain the city. A teacher from Plateau fleeing communal violence may struggle to integrate in Abuja, where social protections are weak.

This internal dislocation has created a class of "invisible migrants" within Nigeria, whose plight rarely makes international headlines but fuels the cycle of local fragility which in turn is responsible for overstretched cities, heightened competition for scarce jobs and deepening social mistrust, the external dimension of skilled professionals leaving for Europe and North America only compounds the problem. Nigeria's public health system, already crippled by underfunding, faces shortages as doctors, nurses, and midwives "japa" en masse. Universities struggle as lecturers seek greener pastures abroad. The labor market suffers a hollowing out, with ripple effects on productivity and GDP growth and National stability.

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a power plant complex. In the foreground, there are several large, rectangular solar panels. In the middle ground, a large industrial building with a complex roof structure is visible, surrounded by various pipes and smaller structures. To the right, there are two large, cylindrical cooling towers. In the background, several wind turbines are visible against a dark, overcast sky. The entire scene is bathed in a blue, monochromatic light, giving it a futuristic or industrial feel.

Climate & Energy: The Hidden Drivers

At the root of Nigeria's complex *Japa Conundrum* lies the challenge of Socio-environmental, **climatic variability** and **energy poverty**. Unpredictable rainfall, droughts, and flooding have devastated farms, eroded incomes, and triggered conflict between farmers and herders. Meanwhile, chronic underinvestment in power generation has kept industries in the dark, forcing businesses to close or relocate to destinations unknown. These structural weaknesses strip citizens of resilience and erode the state's sovereignty. A country that cannot guarantee livelihoods cannot guarantee stability.

Climate variability shocks do not occur in isolation, they converge with insecurity as evident in Nigeria, and coupling economic inequality that results in forced migration. The pastoralist who loses cattle to drought becomes vulnerable to recruitment by insurgent groups; the fisherman who loses his home and his catch to rising sea levels considers migrating to the hinterlands or to Europe. As livelihoods vanish, local micro and macro economies follow in the same vein, the fragility that propels outward migration deepens, creating a feedback loop that destabilizes both Nigeria and its neighbors and beyond.



Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

Migration as a Global Public Good

Globally, migration has been miscast as a crisis to be “solved” rather than a system to be managed. Europe spends billions fortifying its borders, even as its economies face labor shortages in construction, agriculture, and healthcare. The United States wrestles with surges at its southern border, while millions of unauthorized migrants sustain its food supply chains. These contradictions highlight a central truth: migration is not merely inevitable - it is indispensable.

A smarter framework would link development and migration, recognizing that poverty is a central driver of irregular flows across the Mediterranean, the Sahel, and beyond. Official development assistance (ODA) alone cannot stem migration pressures nor can border security, what is needed is a system that aligns migration pathways with labor market needs while investing in stability in countries of origin. Migration, in other words, should be seen not as a threat to sovereignty but as a tool to reinforce it.

Nigeria's Institutional and Regional Role

Nigeria has the beginnings of an institutional architecture to manage migration constructively: the National Boundary Commission, the Border Community Development Agency, and the Office of the Surveyor General of the Federation, Nigerians in Diaspora Commission among others. Regionally, initiatives like the UN Borderland Agency could provide a framework for cooperative governance, but these institutions must be empowered, resourced, and integrated into a national and regional strategy that recognizes migration as both a domestic and foreign policy priority.

Just as importantly, Nigeria must work with Europe and other partners to reframe migration not as a one-way drain but as a mutually beneficial exchange. Diaspora remittances already exceed \$20 billion annually, this underscores how migrants fuel both host and home economies. But remittances alone cannot compensate for systemic fragility, sustainable livelihoods, energy access, and peacebuilding must be central to Nigeria's national development strategy, ensuring that migration remains a choice, not a compulsion.

Migration, Development, and Security

Migration and development are inseparable. Poverty and underdevelopment propel people across seas and deserts, often into the arms of smugglers and traffickers. But when migration is managed legally and safely, it can enhance development in both source and destination countries. For fragile states and for Nigeria, migration policy cannot be siloed from public health, climate adaptation, energy security, and conflict prevention. It must be understood as the fulcrum around which fragility either deepens or recedes.

The lesson is clear: by reducing poverty and stabilizing communities, governments can reduce the desperation that fuels irregular migration. By opening regulated labor pathways, destination countries can fill critical workforce gaps while reducing the incentives for dangerous, unauthorized journeys. And by embedding migration into the broader peace and security architecture, the international community can ease pressures that threaten global order.



Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

The Promise of Migration

Migration has always been humanity's way of surviving upheaval. From the trans-Saharan trade routes to today's globalized labor markets, people have moved to escape danger, find work, and build new lives. The question for policymakers is not whether migration will happen, but how it can be made to work for all.

For Nigeria, that means addressing fragility at the root, insecurity, poverty, inequality, livelihoods loss and energy deprivation, so that migration is a matter of choice, not desperation. For Europe and the wider world, it means rethinking border-first approaches and recognizing that Africa's stability is Europe's stability. For the global system, it means creating a new migration architecture that is orderly, dignified, and mutually beneficial.

Migration can work for all, but only if it is managed not as a crisis to be contained, but as an opportunity to be harnessed, a bottom-up approach that restores livelihoods, reduces fragility, and strengthens the very foundations of global peace and security.

