



IRREGULAR MIGRATION ACROSS THE SAHARA DESERT TO LIBYA: STORIES OF PAIN, HOPE, AND RESILIENCE

Bismark Akotoⁱ

Institute of Human Rights (IDHL),
Lyon Catholic University. 10,
Place des Archives – 69288 Lyon,
France

orcid.org/0009-0008-8260-6511

Abstract:

This paper examines the lived experiences of irregular migrants from Ghana who migrated to Libya through the Sahara Desert, focusing on the challenges encountered and the coping strategies adopted. Using a qualitative research design, 20 participants (19 males and 1 female) were purposively recruited for the study. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted to gather data which were analyzed thematically. The findings of the study indicated that majority of irregular migrants faced challenges such as dehydration, inability to access healthcare, and exposure to harsh weather conditions due to the remoteness of the Sahara Desert. The study further revealed that migrants included in this study resorted to religion, goal setting, and reliance on fellow travelers for emotional support as their coping strategies. Key recommendations included creation of regular pathways for foreign workers through multilateral collaboration, creation of viable economic opportunities in sending countries, and the urgent need to reach migrants trapped in transit countries.

Keywords: coping strategies, irregular routes, irregular migrants, challenges

1. Introduction

International migration has recorded a consistent increase recently, reaching approximately 281 million or 3.6% of the world's population in 2024. Although many people migrate legally, the number of irregular migrants remains high (Bah & Batista, 2020; McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Martin and Sashidharan (2023) estimate that nearly 15% of international migrants have irregular status. Irregular migration refers to the movement of people through or into a country without satisfying the necessary legal requirements or staying beyond the permissible duration of a visa (Aksoy & Poutvaara,

ⁱ Correspondence: email bakoto002@gmail.com

2021; Ikuteyijo, 2020). In Africa, the existence of free movement protocols has been crucial in facilitating the easy movement of people across its borders. For example, within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region, the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Establishment adopted in the 1970s has been hailed as an exemplary form of regional integration due to its role in deepening intra-regional movement and trade (Garba & Yeboah, 2022). Whereas intra-regional migration was estimated at around 52% in Africa, 59% in Europe and 54% in Asia in 2021, that of West Africa was nearly 90% (ICMPD, 2022). This data not only refutes the widely held belief that West Africans are migrating in large numbers to Europe, but it exemplifies the potential socioeconomic dividends the subregion could benefit from if the protocol is optimally implemented.

Despite the socio-economic opportunities provided by the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, irregular migration from West Africa to Europe remains a concern. Recent data show that West Africans constitute a significant proportion of irregular arrivals into the European Union (EU). A significant number of these migrants travel across the Sahara Desert to Libya, from where they cross the Mediterranean Sea to countries like Italy and Malta. In Italy, for instance, it is estimated that West Africans constitute more than half of all asylum applications (Idemudia & Boehnke 2020; McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Teye, 2022; Tjaden & Gninafon, 2022). Aside the widely reported mortalities in the Mediterranean Sea, the journey across the Sahelian Desert entails significant life-threatening risks such as death from starvation, torture, thirst, and hunger (Madadin *et al.*, 2021; Pearce, 2019; Vammen *et al.*, 2021). In June 2017, about 44 Ghanaian and Nigerian migrants, including women and children, died of thirst in the desert after their truck broke down (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). Black (2020) further opines that nearly 2,000 casualties have been recorded since 2014, raising genuine humanitarian concern for governments and policymakers. Notwithstanding the high mortality rate, several studies have asserted that the true state of casualties may be much higher because many deaths go unrecorded, given the harsh and inaccessible nature of the Sahara Desert (Brachet, 2018; Singleton *et al.*, 2017).

Generally, migrants who make it across the desert to Libya are often traumatized with varying degrees of health complications due to the harsh desert conditions. These conditions are further exacerbated as many people spend long periods in prisons and detention facilities in transit countries like Libya, and the few that are able to escape apprehension are unable to seek medical care nor access legal protection due to their irregular status (Kuehne *et al.*, 2021; Tanle, 2012). Studies on irregular migration have often adopted secondary sources of information, such as reports and documentary analysis, rather than deeper insight into the lived experiences of irregular migrants (Castles *et al.*, 2012; Triandafyllidou *et al.*, 2019). This study, therefore, fills this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Ghanaians who migrated across the Sahara Desert to Libya, focusing on the challenges they encountered and the coping mechanisms adopted.

2. Existing Literature

2.1 Ghanaian Migration to Libya: from Regular to Irregular Migration

Migration from Ghana to Libya began in the early 1980s during the era of severe socio-economic crisis. This period, however, coincided with the demand for skilled workers such as English teachers in Libya, which influenced the migration of sub-Saharan Africans, including Ghanaians (Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2013). The perks received vis-à-vis the decent livelihood opportunities motivated the migration of several more Ghanaians with diverse skills to Libya until the guest worker program was cancelled in 1986. Migration from Ghana to Libya continued despite the cancellation, and by the 1990s, unskilled migrants overtook skilled migrants, where the majority were engaged within the construction sector (Bob-Milliar, 2012; Kleist, 2017; Tonah & Codjoe, 2020). The increased number of irregular migrants, mostly from Africa, as well as deteriorating social and economic fortunes, deepened anti-immigrant sentiments between Libyans and African workers in the early 2000s, leading to several clashes and loss of lives. These incidents led to the introduction of stringent immigration laws and border control measures by 2007, including the introduction of visa requirements to manage irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and the possession of fake travelling documents (Bob-Milliar, 2012; de Haas, 2013; Kleist, 2017). Consequently, arbitrary detention, physical abuse, and deportation became frequent, affecting several Ghanaians who had entered Libya without proper documentation. The situation further worsened following the 2011 Libyan conflict, where 790,000 sub-Saharan African migrants fled Libya into neighboring countries, including 18,455 Ghanaians who were later repatriated. This number does not include the 12,202 Ghanaians who were deported from Libya between 2000 and 2012, highlighting the scale of irregular Ghanaian migrants in Libya (DeVargas & Donzellia, 2014; Kleist, 2017). The continuous political and security instability created a significant governance vacuum in Libya, leading to the proliferation of militias and armed groups who subject new and trapped migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana, to various forms of xenophobic and dehumanizing experiences, including slavery. This underscores the need for a holistic review of the root causes of irregular migration while rethinking ways to repatriate those trapped in slavery and other inhumane conditions in Libya (Beşer & Elfeitori, 2018; IOM, 2017; Kah, 2019; Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020).

2.2 Drivers of Irregular Migration

Despite the multiplicity of scholarship on the drivers of migration in general, resources on the drivers of irregular migration are notably limited. Nevertheless, migration literature has asserted that economic, social and political factors are often the underlying causes of irregular migration (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013; McAuliffe, 2013). Migration from the global south to the north is often undertaken by migrants with significant social networks or from high-income families who are able to meet stringent visa requirements, such as the provision of bank statements, employment contracts, or the ability to prove

home ties. Such households often benefit from remittances and other investments, including businesses and real estate, creating an impression of a better life abroad. This encourages other low-income families who do not yet have members abroad to start their own migration 'project' often through irregular means (de Haas, 2011b; Ehirim *et al.*, 2012; Mbaye, 2014). Kandilige and Adiku (2020) corroborate this assertion by establishing that Ghanaian migrants who cross the Sahara Desert to Libya are amongst the poorest in society who often need to mobilize meagre resources from friends and family to embark on the journey. The perpetuation of this cycle creates a migration culture where successful migrants influence and provide useful information to prospective migrants through a transnational family network (Timmerman *et al.*, 2014). This aligns with Hall's (2018) view that irregular migration from Ghana to Libya, particularly from the Brong Ahafo region, now the Bono region, is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms and sustained by the successes of returnees who influence friends and family to migrate. Similarly, there is burgeoning literature on how social media influencers contribute to the perpetuation of irregular migration. In an era of ubiquitous internet, social media influencers curate their online personas on social media sites through narrations of their daily lives to attract a fan base (Raun, 2018). According to Eshun and Agyekum (2022), the continuous and often inaccurate online reports of a hustle-free living standard abroad, often likened to "heaven on earth", vis-à-vis poor living conditions back home by some Ghanaians living abroad, inevitably influence people to migrate at all costs, even at the peril of their lives.

Recent studies have also shown that restrictive immigration policies, usually adopted by countries in the global north, are likely to divert migrants onto other irregular routes, often more dangerous ones, rather than deter them (Mbaye, 2014). The Mediterranean migration routes, which I hope to unpack in the next section, provide a classic example of this adaptive behavior of irregular migrants. Increased surveillance along the frequently used Central Mediterranean route (from northern Africa to Italy and Malta) opened up the Eastern route (crossing through Turkey into the EU via Greece). Others who are unable to cross the Mediterranean Sea engage in stepwise migration by legally entering Turkey before gaining unauthorized access to the EU with the help of smugglers (see de Haas, 2008; de Haas, 2011a; Duvell, 2009). Similar trends have been noticed along the US-Mexico border as well, where heightened enforcement has led to growing irregular movement mostly across deserts in Arizona, accounting for the death of over 5,000 migrants whose stories may never be told (De León, 2013; Ewing, 2014; Kerwin & Martínez, 2024). This assertion has been corroborated by Cornelius and Salehyan (2007), who describe heightened border enforcement against irregular migration as a "prevention through deterrence" strategy and further posit that they often increase the physical risk and financial cost of irregular immigration.

2.2 Irregular Migration Routes

Existing literature has shown that irregular migration routes to Europe keep evolving, notably due to the involvement of criminal organizations whose activities have become

widely connected (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2014; Malakooti, 2020). Achilli (2016) identified three main irregular migratory routes used by migrants to enter the EU: Western Mediterranean route (WMR), Central Mediterranean route (CMR), and Eastern Mediterranean route (EMR). These pathways exist partly due to the proximity of Europe to Africa and the Middle East. The EMR, for instance, entails unauthorized land and maritime movement from Turkey to Greece, often with the help of smugglers (Cummings *et al.*, 2015). The route is dominated by migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan, who endure several days of movement on foot and by vans (Pace, 2016). According to existing studies, Iran serves as a major transit point along this route, although other migrants move southwards through Pakistan. In Afghanistan, for example, migrants are either smuggled through Iran or Pakistan before making the journey to Turkey with the hope of reaching Greece (Dimitriadi, 2013; Siegel & Buil, 2014). In West Africa, CMR is a well-known route to Libya. While Libya serves as the primary destination for migrants on this route, a smaller percentage of such movements end up in Algeria. Migrants typically travel through Niger, specifically Agadez, where they engage the services of middlemen to help them continue the journey to either Libya or Algeria (UNODC, 2010). From Agadez, migrants aiming for Italy or Malta travel through several transit points before reaching Tripoli, along the Libyan coast. Key transit locations include Dirkou, Seguidine, Madama, Tummo, and Sebha (Benattia *et al.*, 2015). Others who wish to avoid the dangers of this route, such as human trafficking and sexual violence, typically use the WMR, which crosses the Malian desert enroute to Algeria or Morocco with the aim of reaching Spain (Bish *et al.*, 2025; Schapendonk, 2012). Wittenberg (2017) observes that migration through the CMR has assumed a mixed flow in recent years, comprising complex population movement with varying legal statuses and vulnerabilities, notably in relation to forced migrants from outside West Africa. Similar studies have confirmed this position owing to the increased involvement of migrants from Asia and the Middle East in the trans Sahelian migration via the CMR. These migrants often travel by air to West African cities of Accra or Bamako, and then proceed via Niger, where border control is believed to be porous and weak (Linekar & Achilli, 2022).

While discussing these irregular routes, it is important to point out that movement along them varies from year to year depending on several factors. The number of irregular arrivals through the CMR, for instance, dropped from 170,100 in 2014 to 153,842 in 2015 and then to 119,369 by 2017 owing to stricter border controls (UNHCR, 2018). In the same period, however, the EMR recorded increased arrivals from 50,830 in 2014 to 885,000 in 2015 during the height of the 2015 migration crisis, partly due to the political and economic turmoil in Asia and the Middle East (Alexandridis & Dalkiran, 2017). Even though the magnitude of flow along the EMR (60,073 in 2023) and WMR (16,915 in 2023) has plummeted recently due to stricter border controls, the CMR has gained popularity once more, with 150,273 arrivals in 2023, representing a 73% increase compared to the previous year. This affirms the view that restrictive immigration policies may not entirely

eliminate the menace of irregular migration due to the agency of migrants (Frontex, 2024; IOM & UNHCR, 2023; Mbaye, 2014).

2.3 Information Campaigns as a Tool to Control Migration

Since the 1990s, migration information campaigns (MIC) have been funded by rich democracies, particularly by the EU and implemented by institutions such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as a means of discouraging irregular migration. This initiative, like those in other fields of development such as public health, aims to reduce vulnerabilities by educating prospective migrants from sending countries about the pitfalls of irregular migration, including the possibility of being smuggled (Cham & Trauner, 2023; Nelson & Bigala, 2016). Traditionally, information campaigns have been promoted through radio broadcasts, television, newspapers, billboards, and, more recently, social media (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011; Cham & Trauner, 2023). According to Pagogna & Sakdapolrak (2021), the EU has spent more than 23 million euros on nearly 110 awareness-raising campaigns to counter irregular migration, highlighting its crucial role in migration governance. The impact of this governance tool in deterring prospective irregular migrants has, however, come under strict scrutiny recently, primarily due to the absence of a proper assessment of its effectiveness (Browne, 2015).

Whereas Oeppen (2016) opines that potential migrant's generally distrust MICs owing to the believe that such messages are intended to deter migration, other scholars have argued that MICs are at best a soft tool meant to prevent irregular migration in a non-coercive way and needs to be complimented by hard power such as surveillance and criminal prosecution (FitzGerald, 2020; Van Dessel, 2023). Nonetheless, a recent review of literature on information campaigns presents mounting evidence of a positive impact on the migration intentions of irregular migrants, particularly in West Africa. In Senegal, the findings of a study by Tjaden and Dunsch (2021) showed a 20 percent reduction in the intention to migrate irregularly following an information campaign exercise. Similar outcomes have been recorded in Guinea, Ghana and Mali (Molenaar & Jucker, 2021; Tjaden & Gninafon, 2022). Despite these positives, the long-term impact of information campaigns on migrants' risk perceptions remains unknown, given that structural factors such as poverty, joblessness, or family pressures may outweigh the potential risks of irregular migration.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory of social resilience provides a framework to understand the ability of people to withstand external stresses arising from crises-driven change (Adger, 2000). It entails community dynamics and mechanisms of positive adjustments in the face of tremendous hardship (Luthar *et al.*, 2000). In the context of this study, 'community' is defined as a group of individuals that operationalize social capacity, offer crucial assistance and serve as a focal point for rekindled hope and optimism during difficult moments. It is known

to provide a setting within which people develop attachment while relying on the concept of social capital (Maclean *et al.*, 2014). Generally, people of shared communities have common traits and develop resilience through social relations, networks, experiences, and knowledge. These traits have been found to help people in dealing with stress and shocks, including those caused by environmental dangers (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Given the numerous traumas and psychological challenges associated with migration, notably irregular migration, it is important to fully understand the resilience mechanisms used by migrants to ameliorate the effects of the stresses they encounter. The use of the social resilience framework was therefore appropriate in understanding the traumatic experiences of irregular migrants and how they were managed.

4. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of irregular migrants. Instead of relying solely on migration-centric data, the research privileges personal, social, and community experiences to foreground perspectives often sidelined in mainstream discourses (Silverman, 2021). This approach was suitable for the design of this study because listening to the voices of returnees who once migrated irregularly was crucial in better understanding the challenges they faced. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and a close reading of secondary sources, including NGO reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature.

4.1 Study Area, Participants, and Procedures

The study was conducted in the Nkoranza Municipality, which is one of the 27 administrative districts in the Bono Region of Ghana. The selection of this study area was due to the ongoing phenomenon of irregular migration to Libya in the Municipality (Tanle, 2012; Tonah & Codjoe, 2020). The research sample involved 20 (19 males and 1 female) returnees who once migrated through the Sahara Desert to Libya for a minimum of 1 year. In line with the assertion that the accuracy of information by returnees decreases over time, participants interviewed returned to their present location between 2021 and 2024 (Arowolo, 2000). Snowball sampling technique was used in locating participants who were 18 years and above, after which in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. An interview guide was used to elicit information about migrants' experiences and coping strategies in the desert and in Libya. The data gathered was analyzed thematically through a process of inductive coding, allowing for recurring themes, silences, and contradictions to surface.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The ages of respondents ranged from 20 to 35 years, with the majority of them between the ages of 20 and 30 years. This data corroborates the claim that young people in Ghana and other sub-Saharan African countries often migrate abroad in pursuit of greener pastures (Dako-Gyeke, 2015). In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were males (19) with only 1 female, giving credence to the claim that males are more likely to migrate abroad compared to females (Naik and Laczko, 2012). Most of the respondents (13) were married with children, ranging from one to three, while 7 of them were single. Married participants disclosed that they migrated to improve their financial situation for the well-being of their family, while single participants mentioned that their migration was aimed at saving money for marriage and starting a family upon their return. The level of education of the respondents was generally low. The highest level of education attained by respondents was Senior High School, with the majority of them (10) completing Junior High School. Seven participants dropped out of school at the primary school level, and three had no formal education. The majority of respondents interviewed were farmers (11), six were construction workers, while the remaining were unemployed.

5.2 Challenges Faced by Irregular Ghanaian Migrants in the Sahara Desert

Irregular migration across the Sahara Desert entails many life-threatening risks, often exacerbated by the clandestine nature of the journey. Crossing the Sahara has turned into not just a physical ordeal, but also an extended cycle of social marginalization and dehumanization of migrants characterized by insecurity and systemic neglect. This section highlights the complex array of challenges faced by irregular migrants in the Sahara Desert, such as dehydration and exposure to harsh weather conditions, and the lack of access to healthcare.

5.3 Dehydration and Exposure to Harsh Weather Conditions

Due to the awareness of high temperatures and the lack of food and water in the desert, some respondents noted that they mixed their water with harmful chemicals to make it uncomfortable to drink, even when thirsty. This was to ensure that the little water they were allowed to bring on board would last the entire journey, which may be prolonged due to the many unforeseen situations in the desert. Commenting on this issue, a 23-year-old respondent noted:

“Although the desert poses many challenges, we cannot enumerate them all. At times, we returnees do not share the complete narrative. Hmm, before my journey, I mixed my water with petrol such that it became harder to drink. Although I was hesitant to drink, it became necessary to take small sips to satisfy my thirst due to the heat. We went in the hot season so you can imagine the struggle.”

Another participant who spent many hours without water had this to say:

"We had to take a break at Dirkou on our way from Agadez. Unfortunately, we ran out of water during the journey. After a full day without drinking anything, we became extremely thirsty. As we approached Dirkou, we felt exhausted; thankfully, we made it there without any casualties despite being weak and tired." (Male, 28 years old)

Another challenge highlighted was the exposure to extreme climatic conditions in the desert without shelter, which exposes migrants to deep-seated vulnerabilities. Narrating her experience, the only female included in the study revealed:

"The weather in the desert is harsh. At one point, our truck broke down and we had to wait helplessly for our driver to find a solution. For hours, we sat exposed to the scorching sun, with no shelter in sight. I endured all this while menstruating." (Female, 26 years old)

5.4 Lack of Access to Healthcare

A significant theme referred to by several participants was the lack of access to healthcare on the desert. Due to the remoteness of the Sahara Desert, essential services such as healthcare access may be situated far away. Participants gave an account of how this lack of healthcare, in light of the threats posed by the conditions in the desert, endangers their lives – a situation that could ultimately lead to death:

"...we were hoping that we could manage him [a fellow migrant] until we reach Libya to access healthcare. But at a point, we noticed his condition was worsening so we had to do something. We brought him closer to the bonnet of our truck in hopes that the heat would assist him, but he died eventually." (Male, 23 years old)

5.5 Coping Strategies Employed by Irregular Ghanaian Migrants in the Sahara Desert

Coping strategies are essential for the psychosocial well-being of individuals who undergo stressful experiences, such as irregular migration. Although the returnees involved in this study faced challenges in the desert, they utilized coping mechanisms to support their survival. This included participating in religious activities and fellow travelers serving as a source of resilience.

5.6 Religion and Faith as Means of Coping

For many participants, spirituality and faith were significant factors that offered mechanisms to ameliorate their challenges. Religious resources have been acknowledged as a means through which individuals foster self-efficacy and active problem-solving, in contrast to helplessness and passivity (Faigin & Pargament, 2010). In tandem with this, participants highlighted the importance of prayer, meditation, and faith in God during the journey, particularly in troubling moments:

"We never stopped praying in the desert. We often engaged in group prayers, asking God for protection and guidance to help us endure. We undertook those actions because the things became so difficult to the point that divine intervention was the only way out."
(Male, 30 years old)

Another respondent was of the view that due to the severity of the challenges in the desert, it was necessary for everyone, including those who were not religious, to depend on some kind of supreme being for protection:

"In the face of the challenges in the desert, everyone automatically turns into a Christian. Even if you have never attended church before, you learn how to pray. Until you exit the desert, it's just you and your God." (Male, 28 years old)

5.7 Social Capital Derived from Fellow Travelers

Some participants highlighted how the crucial role of emotional support and solidarity from fellow migrants served as a survival mechanism in the absence of institutional aid. This included timely encouragements given by fellow migrants, particularly those with prior experience:

"Among us was a man who had previously undertaken this journey. He recounted that he faced a similar situation where they had to wait for four days when their truck broke down. They had run out of food, so they relied on just the little water left, yet he survived. So, when this happened, he encouraged us to endure and be brave. His encouragement was really timely." (Male, 22 years old)

5.8 Goal Setting

For other respondents, the ability to participate in the informal economy in Libya and the possibility of crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe were enough motivation for them to endure the difficulties in the Sahara Desert. A 33-year-old participant had his say:

"All I was thinking of in the midst of the challenges in the desert was arriving in Libya safely. I was convinced of making enough money once I arrived to be able to develop the piece of land my late mother gave me. I was determined to overcome the challenges in the desert as I had a bigger ambition of crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Italy, where my friends told me they are not getting people to even do the informal jobs."

6. Discussion and Policy Reflections

The study sought to explore the challenges and coping strategies employed by irregular Ghanaian migrants during their perilous journey through the Sahara Desert. The findings of the study indicated that irregular migration is a highly stressful experience with significant consequences on the physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being of

migrants. The lethal nature of the desert exposed participants to life-threatening challenges such as dehydration and the lack of access to healthcare, which is in consonance with observations by Black (2020). Through the examination of expansive data from IOM's Missing Migrants Project, Black argued that migrants face the risk of starvation, illness, and dehydration from high temperatures and a lack of food and water due to the inhospitable nature of the Sahara Desert. Similarly, another study of 237 returnees from Libya linked mortality in the Sahara Desert to dehydration from inadequate food and water (Tanle, 2012). Despite these significant challenges, respondents found positivity and hope from religion and community-focused perspectives, which appear to foster resilience and social bonds. In line with these findings, Deshingkar and Gueye (2022) have identified religious teachings, faith, and prayers as a means through which irregular migrants make sense of their adversities while transitioning through the Sahara Desert. However, unlike the Mediterranean Sea, which has garnered significant international attention in recent years due to tragic visuals entering mainstream media, the Sahara Desert has largely become a forgotten location where migrants lose their lives in unacceptable ways. Furthermore, academics, international, and non-governmental organizations are unable to account for the lives lost, the most dangerous areas, or the group of migrants most at risk in the Sahara. Even for those who make it to Libya, there is little information about their health needs, the number of people in detention, nor the gender disaggregation of vulnerable migrants, without which protective measures may not reach the people most affected.

In this study, the intention to migrate was primarily motivated by economic considerations. As noted in the narratives, the ambition is to take advantage of the opportunities within the informal sector in Libya and, hopefully, in Europe upon crossing the Mediterranean Sea. This view is in tandem with the assertion that the primary incentive for irregular migration from West Africa is the demand for cheap labor in Europe's informal economy, with Libya serving as a transit country (de Haas, 2013). Migrants have agency, and as the findings of the study have shown, in the face of persistent poverty and widespread inequality, migrants will continue to adapt to evolving border security measures in pursuit of prosperity elsewhere, even at the peril of their lives. Within this context, aid programs have often been used as a policy tool by richer democracies to address the root causes of migration, often irregular migration, but their effectiveness has been minimal. This is partly due to the evidence that economic and human development increases the ability of people to migrate, at least in the short to medium term (Restelli, 2021). Similarly, deterrence-based policies have largely failed to be a panacea to the irregular migration menace, as they fail to address the structural causes of migration (see De León, 2013; Ewing, 2014). Therefore, in the short term, multilateral collaboration through the expansion of legal channels of mobility for foreign workers through bilateral guestworker or seasonal programs is a promising option worth considering. The alignment of supply and demand for immigrant labor would significantly reduce the incentives to migrate irregularly and allow migrants to escape the sequential traps of vulnerabilities along the borders within the Sahel, in the desert,

and at sea, while interrupting smuggling and trafficking networks which has grown stronger due to the lack of regular pathways.

Ultimately, African states must pay particular attention to the creation of economic and social prosperity for their citizens. This will require deliberate human development through youth empowerment in local communities, particularly along transit routes where structures for good governance and economic development are often weak. In the Sahel region, particularly in Niger, which serves as a major transit location for irregular migration from West Africa to Libya, the informal sector employs over 80 percent of the population (Zakari *et al.*, 2022). However, exogenous constraints such as the spread of terrorism and climate change have significantly shattered the local economy, leading to widespread poverty. Several studies have noted that agricultural earnings of locals have declined due to long periods of drought, and the threat of extremism has further affected the tourism industry (Gafarou, 2021; Zakari *et al.*, 2022). The consequent decline in economic opportunities has made ancillary services linked to the perpetuation of smuggling and trafficking of migrants through the country a viable livelihood option for locals. Therefore, efforts must be made to address these challenges through, amongst others, investment in sustainable job creation opportunities for young people, while facilitating the adoption of migration policies that are guided by a comprehensive agenda for inclusive governance and regional stability.

A significant limitation of this study is the disproportionate gender representation among respondents (1 female out of 20 respondents). This gender imbalance may have obscured the depths of insights shared, particularly pertaining to the unique challenges female migrants may encounter in the desert, such as reproductive health risk and sexual violence. Although the only female respondent provided valuable insight, her singular inclusion did not meet the threshold sufficient for making broader assumptions concerning the feminine experience in the desert. Hence, follow-up studies should address this gap by recruiting more females to offer a bigger picture of the challenges irregular migrants face in the Sahara Desert.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Bismark Akoto is a graduate student at the Lyon Catholic University in France. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Migration Studies and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science, both from the University of Ghana. His research interests lie in the intersection of migration governance, refugee issues, human rights, and social protection, particularly how the immigration status of vulnerable migrants affects their integration and wellbeing.

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