


# Prevalence, Patterns, and Push Factors of Migration in Southern and Western Africa

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## A Comparison of South Africa and Nigeria

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### Abstract

The study examines the prevalence, patterns, and push factors of international migration in Southern and Western Africa, taking South Africa and Nigeria, respectively, as comparative examples. Scant studies have been conducted that compare the migration phenomenon between these two prominent African countries. This is the gap this study fills. The study employs an explanatory research design and a document analysis approach, relying on secondary data. Data was analysed using discourse analysis. Among other findings, it was shown that while international emigration is prevalent in Nigeria, there is a greater influx of international immigration into South Africa than emigration. The study concludes that the prevalence, patterns and push factors of international migration in South Africa and Nigeria differ significantly.

**Keywords:** Migration, Push Factor, Migration Patterns, South Africa, Nigeria

### Introduction

This study examines the prevalence, patterns, and push factors of international migration in Southern and Western Africa, taking South Africa and Nigeria from

a comparative perspective. Migration – the movement of people from one destination to another (whether within or outside the territories of a state)- is a global phenomenon, as it is not peculiar to any part of the world, gender, race or tribe. The migration of people is as old as humanity and society itself, as man has been migrating from time immemorial for diverse reasons. With specific reference to Africa, Okunade and Awosusi (2023) trace the mass expansion of regular and irregular migration in Africa to the last two decades. It is pertinent to state, however, that while migration is a global phenomenon, the rate at which people move across their national territories to other territories differs significantly. In recent years, Africa has witnessed a surge in migration of people outside the continent, often in search of greener pastures and a better life (Africa-Europe Foundation, 2022). While migration could be internal, that is, migration from an area within a geographic entity to another, international migration, the movement of people across geographical territories, has been at an escalating rate over the years (Hatton 2021). According to data from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM 2020), there are approximately 281 million people who have moved across their national boundaries and are living elsewhere worldwide.

According to Kurunova (2013), international migration takes place for several reasons, ranging from political instability in the home country, search for better job opportunities elsewhere, absence of, or poor social security in the home country, and low level of, or total loss of confidence in the home country, among others. For other scholars, international migration occurs as a result of one's search for a better quality of life, education, economic, family, medical, political or career reasons (Okafor and Chimereze 2020). With specific reference to Africa and developing and underdeveloped countries, it is evident that there is a strong desire for many of the youthful population (irrespective of job or education status) to emigrate to developed countries (Lemmermann and Riphahn 2018). This is not far-fetched from the economic and social hardships that are rampant in Africa, as well as other developing and underdeveloped countries. For instance, Liu, Deng and Song (2018) observed that the general perception of both young and old, illiterates and literates, is that a good and better life is a possibility outside of Nigeria, and this remains a strong push factor among many Nigerian emigrants.

Indeed, Africa and developing countries continue to bear the brunt of international migration. This is a result of the continent's continuous brain drain, in the form of human capital flight, occurring in large numbers. Hence,

the assertion by Oluwaseyi and Oluyemi (2022, 4) that “human capital flight remains a major concern in developing countries” with respect to international migration. The fact that Africa, and indeed, other developing countries, are characterised by poor human development means that the movement of people (especially the best brains) out of the continent will bring more trouble for the continent, as it translates into further suppression of the continent (Ita 2020; Kirwin and Anderson 2018).

Therefore, this study seeks to interrogate the patterns and push factors driving international migration in Southern and Western Africa, taking South Africa and Nigeria in comparative perspective. Nigeria and South Africa are chosen for this study for several reasons. First, both countries could be safely regarded as the economic and political leaders of the Western and Southern African sub-regions, respectively. Secondly, while evidence shows that international migration out of Nigeria is rampant (e.g. Oluwaseyi and Oluyemi 2022; Liu et al. 2018), it appears international immigration into South Africa is more rampant (Facchini, Mayda and Mendola 2013; Friebe, Gallego and Mendola 2013). This, therefore, triggers the interest and curiosity to investigate the reasons for this discrepancy in the international migration pattern in these two prominent African countries. Thirdly, it is important to unravel the various push factors common to, and peculiar to, the two countries, with respect to international migration.

No doubt that several studies exist on international migration in Nigeria (e.g. Oluwaseyi and Oluyemi 2022; Dimkpa 2019; Okafor and Chimereze 2020), and South Africa (e.g. Anjofui 2018; Facchini et al. 2013; Friebe et al. 2013), they have, however, focused predominantly on internal migration within the countries, pull factors and implications of international migration for the development of sending countries, and have studied the countries separately. There is, therefore, a dearth of studies which comparatively examine the subject matter of prevalence, patterns, and push factors of international migration between these two prominent countries in Africa. Following the introduction, the next section presents a literature review on migration at both global and continental levels, and the next presents the theoretical framework. The subsequent sections provide an analysis of migration in Southern Africa, with specific reference to South Africa, and then an analysis of migration in West Africa, using Nigeria’s case study. Lastly, a comparative analysis of the patterns and push factors of migration in Nigeria and South Africa is made, followed by the conclusion.

## Literature Review – Migration from a Global and African Perspective

Migration refers to the movement of people and things from one geographical area to another. It has been defined as the movement of people from their home region to another region, either from one country to another, or from one geographical area of a country to another area within the country (Anene, Njoku and Iyala 2019, 61). Migration is the “movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a state” (IOM 2024). According to Bashorun (2023), migration can be categorised into two classes: emigration and immigration. While the former refers to movement outside of a geographical area into another, the latter refers to the movement into a geographical area from another.

Regarding the push factors of migration globally, Betts (2013) noted that non-economic factors drive migration, which she refers to as “survival migration.” This implies that while economic factors may drive the desire of many to migrate, there are certain non-economic factors that could also play a similar role. For instance, refugees outside their home countries are fleeing home from dangers and threats/fear of persecution, and civil wars. Others flee their home countries from what Betts (2013, 3) refers to as “state incompetence” – food insecurity, climate change, and violence.

Black, Adger, Arnell, Dercon and Thomas (2011) also identified certain migration push factors as political, environmental, demographic, social, and economic drivers of migration. In this case, environmental drivers refer to land productivity and weather conditions; economic drivers refer to lack of employment opportunities (Neumann, Sietz, Hilderink, Janssen and van Dijk 2015). Political push factors refer to political conflicts or ethno-religious conflicts (Black et al. 2011; Neumann et al. 2015), and infrastructural decadence (Parrish, Colbourn, Lauriola, Leonardi and Zeka 2020). Also, Bhandari and Chaudhry (2016) found that job discrimination, favouritism, dissatisfaction among employees who are assigned roles that did not align with their expertise, and lack of growth opportunities could push migrants out of their countries in search of a better life.

With specific reference to Africa, scholars have studied the patterns of migration and the push factors of migration in Africa. For Collier (2013), African migration has taken on a ‘South-North’ pattern, which is largely driven by poverty, underdevelopment, and income gaps. Hence, Bakewell (2008)

critiques South-North migration because of development failures. These assertions imply that the major push factors influencing African migration to the North are poverty, income gaps, and underdevelopment in Africa. While earlier studies had emphasised the point that African migration is directed towards Europe, more recent studies show that most African migrations are directed towards other African countries, rather than Europe (Flahaux and De Haas 2016; Schoumaker, Flahaux, Schans, Beauchemin, Mazzucato and Sakho 2018). Others also reveal that African migration is not only tilted towards Europe, but also towards the Americas and the Gulf countries (Bakewell and De Haas 2007). According to Schoumaker et al. (2018) and Bakewell and Jonsson (2011), most Africans migrate for the purpose of study, work and/or family.

In his study, Nwajiuba (2005) found that economic and educational factors accounted for 80 per cent and 18 per cent of migration push and pull factors from Nigeria, respectively. For Adepoju (2011), the major driving forces of migration in Sub-Saharan Africa are increasing population, unstable political and economic environment, and poverty. Weda (2012) investigated the push factors of Zimbabwean teachers to South Africa. The study found that the quest for a better standard of life and better conditions of work/social prestige were the major factors which motivate Zimbabwean teachers to migrate from their home country to South Africa. Furthermore, Anjofui (2018) studied the push factors of migrants from Cameroon and Congo into South Africa. The study revealed that exposure and aspirations were the push factors; however, migrants' expectations of migrating were not eventually met.

In another study, Kirwin and Anderson (2018) examined the factors responsible for international migration in West Africa. The study found that patriotism towards country and family were the only factors which prompted people to remain in their countries and not migrate, while literate and skilled workers were more likely to migrate than unskilled and illiterate workers. Dimkpa (2019) studied the push factors which propel Nigerians to migrate using the Libya-Mediterranean route to Europe. Findings from the study show that political instability, corruption, terrorism, anti-homosexual laws, and economic instability are the push factors leading Nigerians through the Libya-Mediterranean route to Europe.

Data provided by the Africa-Europe Foundation (2022) reveal that only 3 per cent of Africans are living outside of the continent, compared to 8.5

per cent of Europeans living outside of Europe. Intra-African migration had increased by +43 per cent, compared to Africa-Europe migration at +26 per cent. The data also show that there are 40.6 million African migrants, representing 14.5 per cent of the global migrant population. This is lower when compared to Asia, with 41 per cent, and Europe (22.5 per cent). The Africa-Europe Foundation (2022) also revealed that less than 27.2 per cent of all African migrants live in Europe.

The figures below present some statistics on migration trends in Africa.

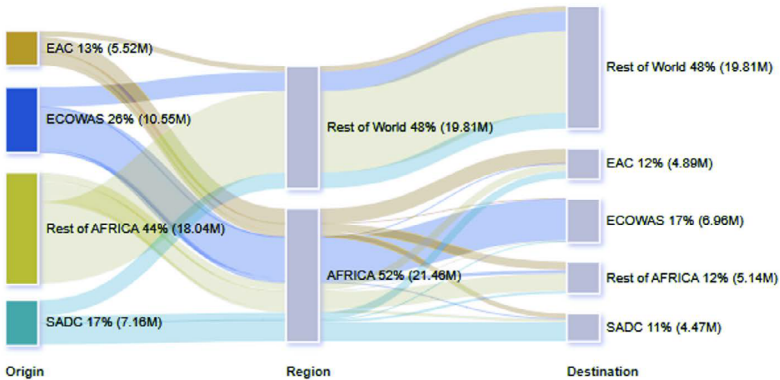


Figure 1: Migration Trends from Africa. Source: Mutava (2023, 8)

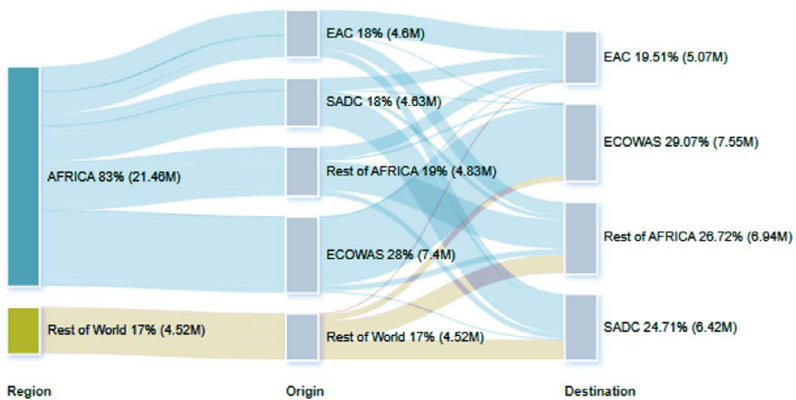


Figure 2: Migration Trends to Africa. Source: Mutava (2023, 9)

Table 1 below shows the intra-African migration as a proportion of African migration.

**Table 1:** Intra-African Migration as a Proportion of African Migration

	Migrant Population	%
Total African Emigrants	40,567,163	100
Emigrants to Africa	20,917,565	52
Emigrants outside Africa	19,649,598	48
Total African Immigrants	25,389,464	100
Immigrants from Africa	20,917,565	82
Immigrants from outside Africa	4,471,899	18

**Source:** Mutava (2023, 9)

Several push factors of migration in Africa have been identified by Anjofui (2018). These include political factors such as political instability, civil wars, and violence; economic factors epitomised by unemployment, limited job opportunities, economic instability, and inflation; social factors demonstrated by a lack of welfare packages for the people, a high level of social inequalities, poor standard of living, and healthcare facilities.

## Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the push-pull models of migration as frameworks of analysis. The push-pull models of migration were propounded by Lee (1966). The theory is an offshoot of the Ravenstein theory of human migration. The major argument/assumption of Lee's push-pull models of migration is that there are certain push factors, such as unemployment, poverty, and harsh economic conditions, that compel people to move out of their home country into countries or regions with a better life and better opportunities. On the other hand, the individuals migrating out of their home countries are usually attracted (pulled) by those opportunities and facilities they lack in their home country, but are available in the destination country. These are referred to as the pull factors of migration. Even though social, economic and political factors look similar at home and destination countries, these factors are usually more favourable/pleasant in destination countries, and unfavourable/unpleasant in the home country of migrants (Stanojoska and Petrevski 2012).

Oluwaseyi and Oluyemi (2020, 9) describe the push-pull models as follows: “with the inability [of people] to continue coping with the harsh realities around them, people from developing countries where there are economic and socio-political opportunities.” This assertion, therefore, implies, quite understandably, that push factors are associated with developing countries, while pull factors are associated with developed countries. Several push and pull factors have been identified in the literature. Some of the push factors include: unemployment, and/or job insecurity, poor health facilities, low/poor salaries, limited and/or poor social services and infrastructure, poor educational system, insecurity, violence and crime, and poor/low per capita income, among others (World Economic Forum and PwC 2017; El-Khawas 2004; Duru 2021, 185). Some of the pull factors include: high salaries and per capita income; safety/security, job opportunities, freedom; presence of advanced technologies; and other facilities; food security; high standard of living; better health care facilities; and high level of educational system, etc. (World Economic Forum 2017; Duru 2021, 185-186; El-Khawas 2004).

Despite the pull factors that encourage people to move to destination countries, Lee (1966) identified many intervening obstacles that may serve as a barrier to migration. These may include immigration policy, the cost of migration, strict border control, distance, and language barriers.

The push-pull models of migration have been criticised for being too static, by their failure to explain how “original structural conditions are influenced by migration” (Duru 2021, 185). The theory is also criticised for its failure to consider “other” individual motives of migration, beyond the push and pull factors. De Haas, Castle, and Miller (2020, 45) also criticised the push-pull models for not providing an explanation as to why some countries experience a high level of both immigration and emigration, why some persons under the same condition may choose to migrate, while others stay, and why some migrants may decide to return to their home country. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to state that the intervening variables highlighted by Lee may be able to provide further explanations for those issues. In spite of those criticisms, the push-pull model of migration is still the most suitable theory for understanding the push factors of migration in South Africa and Nigeria. This theory is thus relevant for the factors it has identified as influencing migration. The push factors of the push-pull models will thus be relevant for this study.

## The South African Case Study

This section examines the prevalence, pattern and push factors of international migration in South Africa. International migration in South Africa has been ongoing since time immemorial, as Cross (2000) traces it to the 19th century, when the whites settled in the country and established colonial rule. Through this experience, Europeans, up to the tune of hundreds of thousands, permanently migrated into South Africa (Dinbabo and Nyasulu 2015). Afterwards, the emergence of large sugar cane farms in Natal and the establishment of gold and diamond mines in Kimberly and the Witwatersrand attracted several immigrants into South Africa, especially from India, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho (Dinbabo and Nyasulu 2015, 29). Hence, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, South Africa had begun to attract immigrants into the country. At the emergence of the apartheid rule in South Africa, the migration policy became stricter and favoured mostly white immigrants into South Africa, to the detriment of the blacks (Peberdy and Crush 2001). Several decades later, not much has changed in migration patterns in South Africa, as the country continues to attract more immigrants from outside the continent and neighbouring states (Mutava 2023; Anjofui 2018; Dinbabo and Nyasulu 2015).

Despite the immigration policy during post-apartheid South Africa, immigrants continue to flow into the country in search of economic and job opportunities. Dinbabo and Nyasulu (2015) posit that this continuous inflow of immigrants into South Africa has often drawn the ire of largely uneducated and unemployed South Africans, which has often resulted in xenophobic attacks against non-South African immigrants. Xenophobic attacks in South Africa are triggered by mass immigration into the country, and have often taken the form of violent attacks and killings of immigrants in the country (Isijola and Idowu, 2024). According to Bond, Ngwane and Amisi (2010: 4), factors such as poverty, employment issues including immigrants' acceptance of cheap labour, and taking over employment opportunities from South Africans, hatred, laziness among South Africans to work, jealousy, immigrants' relationship or marriage to South African women, increasing number of migrants into South Africa, crimes often committed by immigrants, greed, illiteracy, insecure feelings among South Africans, etc. are responsible for xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The fact that South Africa is the most industrialised country in Africa makes the country one of the most common

destinations for emigrants across Africa, especially the less developed countries (Isijola and Idowu, 2024).

Many such immigrants in South Africa, thus, seek to escape the poverty, war, economic crises, and government persecution in their home country (Hussein and Hitomi, 2013). Gumedel (2015) avers that xenophobic attacks in South Africa have risen drastically since 1994, especially in areas such as the Western Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Free State. It is also evident that xenophobic attacks against migrants in South Africa are carried out by black South Africans, and often against black African migrants. Between 1994 and 2024, xenophobic attacks in South Africa had recorded 1.096 incidents, 128,158 total displacements, 5,328 shops looted, and 674 deaths (Xenowatch, 2024).

Immigrants into South Africa have been categorised into three, viz: labour migrants, permanent migrants, and refugees (Kok, Gelderblom and van Zyl 2006). Employment opportunities, good healthcare facilities, and GDP per capita are some of the “pull” factors attracting immigrants into South Africa (Dinbabo and Nyasulu 2015).

Another prominent migration pattern in South Africa is the movement of South Africans from rural areas to urban centres (Mokoene and Khunou 2022). The fact that the majority of young South Africans lack the requisite skills and education required for employment means that many of them remain unemployed – a situation which creates the space and opportunity for immigrants to take up the jobs (Mokoene and Khunou 2022). Swaziland, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Malawi citizens have dominated the immigrant population in South Africa (Adepoju 2006; Mokoene and Khunou 2022).

Data on the prevalence and pattern of migration in South Africa show that the immigration between 1990 and 2020 increased by 146 per cent, and the emigration also increased by 197 per cent (Mutava 2023). In 2020, the number of immigrants dropped significantly from its previous annual increase, a situation which Mutava (2023) ascribed to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the restriction of human mobility across the globe. The South African immigrant population climbed to its peak in 2015, when the country housed 3.2 million immigrants. Also, the emigrant population rose to its peak in 2015 at 5.83 per cent, from 3.2 per cent in 1990, and experienced a decline in 2020 at 4.82 per cent (Mutava 2023; UNDESA 2020). In a nutshell, according to data from UNDESA (2020), South Africa

had a total of 914,901 emigrants in 2020, where 90 per cent emigrated out of the continent. Regarding immigration into South Africa in 2020, South Africa housed 2.9 million immigrants (65 per cent from Africa and 35 per cent from outside Africa) (UNDESA 2020; Mutava 2023). While Mozambique tops the list of countries South Africans immigrate to, Zimbabwe tops the list of countries whose citizens immigrate to South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2024; Mutava 2023).



Figure 3: Pattern of Emigration in South Africa. Source: Mutava (2023: 34)

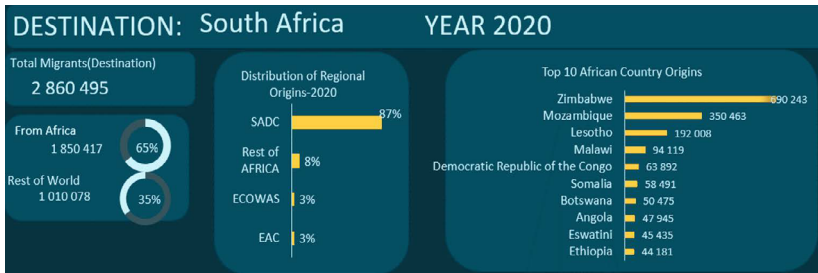
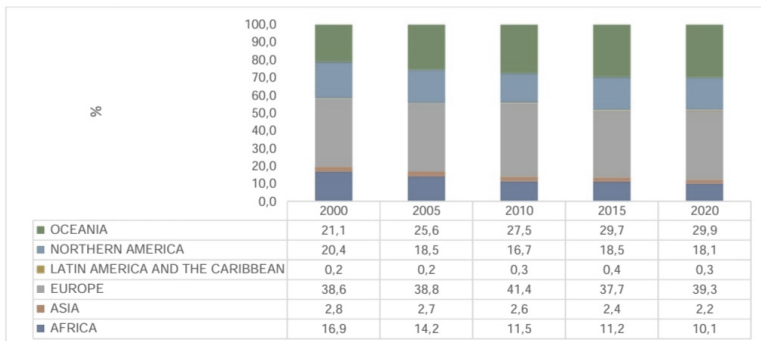


Figure 4: Pattern of Immigration in South Africa. Source: Mutava (2023: 34)

In 2022, the total number of immigrants into South Africa was 2.3 million (Statistics South Africa 2024). From the 2001, 2011 and 2022 South African censuses, the data show that while there was a total of 1,025,077 immigrants in South Africa in 2001, there were 2.1 million in 2011, and 2.3 million in 2022 (Statistics South Africa 2024). Furthermore, among every ten total immigrants into the Southern African region, more than nine immigrate into South Africa; and among the total 4.5 million immigrants into the region, 4.2 million live in South Africa (Maunganidze, Reitig and Fakhry 2019, 7).

On the other hand, data provided by Statistics South Africa (2024) show that in 2000, the number of South African emigrants was 501,600, in 2005, it rose to 550,462, by 2010, it further increased to 743,807, in 2015, the number rose to 786,554, and in 2020, the number reached 914,909. In terms of the destination of South African emigrants in the year 2000, 38.6 per cent of the total South African emigrants were resident in Europe; 20.4 per cent in North America; 21.1 per cent in Oceania; 16.9 per cent in Africa; 2.8 per cent in Asia; and 0.2 per cent in Latin America (Statistics South Africa 2024).

In 2005, 38.8 per cent of South African emigrants lived in Europe; 14.2 per cent in Africa; 18.5 per cent in North America; 25.6 per cent in Oceania; 2.7 per cent in Asia; and 0.2 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2010, 41.4 per cent of South African emigrants lived in Europe; 11.5 per cent in Africa; 16.7 per cent in North America; 27.5 per cent in Oceania; 2.6 per cent in Asia; and 0.3 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2015, 37.7 per cent of South African emigrants were resident in Europe; 11.2 per cent in Africa; 18.5 per cent in North America; 29.7 per cent in Oceania; 2.4 per cent in Asia; and 0.4 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. By the year 2020, 39.3 per cent of South African emigrants lived in Europe; 10.1 per cent in Africa; 18.1 per cent in North America; 29.9 per cent in Oceania; 2.2 per cent in Asia; and 0.3 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (Statistics South Africa 2024).



**Figure 5:** Percentage Distribution of Region of Residence of South African Citizens Living Abroad (2000-2020). Source: Statistics South Africa (2024, 59)

It becomes important to interrogate the push factors responsible for South African emigration within Africa. Bezuidenhout, Joubert, Hiemstra and

Struwig (2009) averred that the declining state of the public education system in South Africa is one major push factor for South African professionals out of the country. Dinbabo and Nyasulu (2015) argued that this is so because the public education system in South Africa has experienced a rapid decline over the years, now worse than some less developed countries on the continent. Some South Africans are 'forced' to enrol in schools abroad because the South African public education system is now being characterised by low/poor quality, reduced pass rates, weak/poor management, and unqualified/under-qualified teachers (SACSIS 2009). Moreover, widespread scepticism about the prospects of governance under Black majority rule, coupled with rising crime rates, served as major push factors driving South African emigration in the years preceding and immediately after the end of apartheid in 1994 (Harsch 2001).

Adepoju (2006) observed that professionals such as engineers, medical doctors, and accountants were pushed out of South Africa by low wages. The fear of being overshadowed and suppressed by the land appropriation by Zimbabweans in South Africa also pushed white South African farmers to emigrate out of the country (Adepoju 2006, 41). Among health practitioners in South Africa, Moodley (2017) posits that the dissatisfaction with the poor work environment, poor pay, ineffectiveness in providing access to care, excessive workload, and exposure to HIV/AIDS are push factors that make health practitioners leave South Africa. Bezuidenhout et al. (2009) also identified high crime rates and violence as push factors among South African emigrants. These identified push factors resonate with the assumptions of the push model of migration upon which this study is built, as several push factors outlined by the theory align with many of the factors associated with South African emigrants.

## The Nigerian Case Study

This section examines the prevalence, patterns, and push factors of migration in Nigeria. The establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, and the adoption of the Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment, meant that the migration of people within the West African region experienced a significant increase (Quartey, Setrana and Tagoe 2020). Migration in West Africa is characterised by 'mixed migration' – the "cross-border movements of people, including

refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities” (Mixed Migration Centre 2021, 2).

In Nigeria, the discovery of crude oil and its exploration began to attract migrants predominantly from the West African region into the country (Quartey et al. 2020). At the same time, pre-colonial and immediate post-colonial periods witnessed a high influx of immigrants into Nigeria, from the later periods of post-independence. As a matter of fact, given this migration trend in the country in the 1980s, the Nigerian government had to evict some migrants due to excessive influx of migrants, especially from neighbouring West African countries. One prominent example of such migrant evictions was the famous ‘Ghana must go’ that was targeted specifically at Ghanaian migrants by President Sheun Shagari’s government in 1983, which saw the deportation of over two million migrants, including one million Ghanaians (Daly, 2022). Nevertheless, over the years, there has been a drastic decline in immigrants into the country, with an increased level of emigration (Afolayan, Ikwuyatum and Olumuyiwa 2008). Owing to this fact, Nigeria has been tagged as the country with the highest number of emigrants (Migration Policy Institute (MPI) 2020). Furthermore, the emigrants’ population of Nigeria has surpassed, in no small measure, the number of immigrants attracted into the country in recent times – a situation which has resulted in a negative net migration rate for the country (Oluwaseyi and Oluyemi 2022).

As a matter of fact, Adedokun and Karzanov (2019, 208) submitted quite accurately that “indeed, it is the healthiest, most educated and most potentially economically active men and women who are leaving the country [Nigeria].” They further posit that Nigerian emigrants abroad consist of highly skilled professionals like medical doctors, nurses, IT professionals, and lecturers, who are predominant in the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. Also, in the category of emigrants from Nigeria are low or no-skilled workers who struggle to make a living as hairdressers, cleaners, construction labourers, retailers, automobile repairers, etc. (Adedokun and Karzanov 2019, 208). Others are students who are predominantly found in Algeria, Russia, and Hungary (Adedokun and Karzanov 2019), and the United Kingdom and the United States. In terms of gender, males have always outnumbered female migrants in Nigeria, with males constituting 55 per cent of the total Nigerian migrants’ population in 2020 (Mutava 2023).

International migration patterns in Nigeria include diaspora migration, immigration, asylum seekers, irregular migration (e.g., human trafficking, displaced refugees, etc.) (Arhin-Sam 2023). Outside the African continent, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Belgium, Ireland, and Spain constitute the most prominent destinations among Nigerian emigrants (Arhin-Sam 2023). While many highly skilled migrants are in the US and Canada, most low-skilled Nigerian migrants are in the UK and Europe (OECD 2019).

Another pattern of migration in Nigeria is that of human trafficking (the transportation of people over national territories by means of coercion, abduction and deception, etc., for the sole aim of exploitation) (UNICEF 2005; Afolayan et al. 2008). According to Afolayan et al. (2008, 17), "Nigeria is a major source, transit, and destination country of trafficked persons, inclusive of children." Victims of human trafficking in Nigeria are predominantly young girls resident in Edo, Lagos, Ogun, Cross River, and Osun States (Frontex 2018; IOM 2017).

On the prevalence of migration in Nigeria, the immigrant population in Nigeria increased between 1990 and 2020 by 187 per cent; likewise, the number of people leaving the country doubled by 274 per cent within the same period (Mutava 2023). Data from UNDESA (2020) and Mutava (2023) show that in 2020, Nigeria had 1.7 million emigrants who left the country. Among this number, only 42percent moved to other parts of Africa, while others moved outside the continent. In Africa, Cameroon constitutes the country with the largest number of Nigerian emigrants (169,602), with the lowest emigrant population resident in the Chad Republic (13,033) (Mutava 2023; UNDESA 2020). Of the immigrants into Nigeria from Africa, the Benin Republic contributes the largest immigrants, with 377,169 immigrants, while Sierra Leone contributes the lowest immigrants, with 4,363 immigrants.

In 2022, Nigeria hosted 82,513 refugees and 1,570 asylum seekers (UNHCR 2022). Nigeria has the lowest rate of immigrants to its population, and ECOWAS citizens make up the largest number of immigrants in Nigeria (predominantly Ghana, Benin, Togo, and the Niger Republic) (UNDESA 2020; Arhin-Sam 2023). Cumulatively, the net migration rate per 1,000 population within the period of 2015-2020 was 0.3 (IOM 2022). With respect to emigration, education has topped the aim for Nigerians' emigration decision, especially to the United Kingdom and the United States (Arhin-Sam 2023; Okunade and

Awosusi 2023). At the completion of their education, many Nigerian migrants in the UK and the US decide to stay for work. For instance, as of June 2022, the UK government granted 486,869 study visas, among which Nigeria ranked third with the largest number of applicants after India and China, with 65,929 visa applicants (Okunade and Awosusi 2023).

In terms of immigrants, as of 2020, Nigeria had a total of 1.3 million immigrants living in the country, with 90 per cent of them originating from other African countries, while only 10 per cent are from outside the continent.



Figure 6: Pattern of Emigration in Nigeria. Source: Mutava (2023, 20)



Figure 7: Pattern of Immigration in Nigeria. Source: Mutava (2023, 20)

In recent times, the emigration of Nigeria’s youthful population has taken a drastic and alarming increasing rate, which has now been colloquially tagged as ‘japa’ (the fast and increasing trend of emigration by any means – legal or illegal, of Nigerians to Europe and elsewhere) among the populace (Okunade and Awosusi 2023).

Many factors could be held responsible concerning the push factors responsible for emigration, With respect to youth mass exodus from the country, Okunade and Awosusi (2023, 2 & 12) observed that unemployment, poverty, desire for greener pastures, poor economic conditions, poor human

development index, the EndSARs youth protest of October 2021, and the resultant Toll Gate killings, poor education standard, lingering security issues, and exhaustion, etc. are the push factors responsible for the recent mass emigration of youth from Nigeria. The low level of development in Nigeria is also a push factor for international emigration in the country (Afolayan et al. 2008).

Also, violence (Connor and Gonzalez-Barrera 2019), poor state of health, rising insecurity and poverty, and high levels of unemployment (Oluwaseyi and Oluyemi 2020) are push factors in Nigeria. Reduced income earnings, dictatorship, political corruption, under-employment, failed leadership, tribal discriminations, political disturbances, and inadequate and poor research facilities (Kabalu, Mustapha and Suwaid 2017) are also push factors pushing Nigerians out of the country. With specific reference to the emigration of nurses and medical practitioners out of Nigeria, push factors like poor/limited educational opportunities, little progress in medical technology advancement, insufficient study leave, armed conflict, inadequate job opportunities, dissatisfaction with living conditions/standard in Nigeria, poor pay, and inconsistent education system, etc. are identified (Okafor and Chimereze 2020; Yarhere and Adeboye 2023, 111).

Furthermore, the dissatisfaction with democracy, lack of trust in the Police, inability of the government to fight terrorism, and poor and/or lack of access to water facilities have been identified as push factors for Nigerians out of the country (Kirwin and Anderson 2018). On the push factors that force Nigerians to emigrate through the dangerous Libya-Mediterranean route, factors like insecurity, terrorism, harsh laws against same-sex relationships and marriage, political instability, and economic crisis are prevalent in Nigeria (Dimkpa 2019). Poverty, unsustainable livelihood, crop failure and/or food insecurity, conflicts and/or threats, inadequate/limited urban services, low salaries and per capita income, lack of progress in career, limited chances of self-development, and poor conditions of services, etc., are also push factors responsible for international emigration from Nigeria (Duru 2021: 187). High-skilled youths in Nigeria emigrated out of the country due to an inadequate educational system, unemployment, uncertainty, and insecurity (Bashorun 2023, 21-26). Unfavourable and inconsistent exchange rates between the Nigerian Naira and other foreign currencies, widespread human rights violations by the defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), and a lack of

social and economic programmes for the youths (Inegbedion 2022) are other forms of push factors identified with the Nigerian youth population.

The push factors presented by the push model explain the predominantly economic push factors like unemployment, poverty, poor pay, and low standard of living, etc., associated with Nigerian emigrants.

## Findings: A Comparative Perspective

The tables below present a highlight of the main findings on the prevalence, patterns, and push factors of international migration in South Africa and Nigeria, on a comparative basis.

## Conclusion

The study has been able to examine the prevalence, patterns comparatively, and push factors of international migration in South Africa and Nigeria - in a bid to fill the knowledge gap in international migration literature. The findings show that international migration occurs in both South Africa and Nigeria, and that the phenomenon is on the rise in both countries. International migration is more prevalent in Nigeria than in South Africa. On the patterns of migration, the study found that both countries are characterised by regular and irregular migration, study migration, diaspora migration, immigration, and asylum seekers, albeit in different degrees. For both countries, the male gender dominates international migration, while high, middle and low-skilled workers are migrating in South Africa and Nigeria. In terms of migration patterns, Nigeria records higher levels of human trafficking and educational migration, and exhibits a net emigration trend, with significantly more emigration than immigration.

Findings also revealed that more Nigerians move outside Africa than their South African counterparts. On the push factors driving international migration in South Africa and Nigeria, the study finds factors similar to and peculiar to both countries. While push factors such as low wages/per capita income, poor education system, and dissatisfaction with the work environment, etc., are similar factors in both countries, South Africa has peculiar push factors like excessive workload, exposure to HIV/AIDS, and high scepticism of prospects, and Nigeria has peculiar factors like unemployment, poverty, and dissatisfaction with democracy. In a nutshell, the prevalence,

**Table 2:** Prevalence and Patterns of International Migration in South Africa and Nigeria

	Similarities	Differences
PREVALENCE	<p>International migration occurs in both countries</p> <p>International migration is on the rise in both countries</p>	<p>International migration is more prevalent in Nigeria than in South Africa</p> <p>Nigeria has the lowest rate of immigrants to the population, while South Africa has a higher number of immigrants</p>
PATTERNS	<p>Both are characterised by regular and irregular study, diaspora migrations, and immigration, asylum seekers</p> <p>Both have the male gender as the highest gender involved in international migration</p> <p>High, middle and low-skilled workers are involved in migration in both countries</p> <p>Emigrants from both countries are predominantly highly skilled and professionals</p>	<p>Nigeria experiences more human trafficking migrants than South Africa</p> <p>Nigeria experiences more study emigrants than South Africa</p> <p>South Africa has more immigrants than Nigeria</p> <p>Nigeria has a higher level of emigrants than South Africa</p> <p>While South Africa has more immigrants than emigrants, Nigeria has more emigrants than immigrants</p> <p>South Africans migrate more within the African continent than outside, while Nigerians migrate more outside the continent than within the continent</p> <p>Nigeria produces more student migrants than South Africa</p> <p>More Nigerians emigrate to South Africa than South Africans emigrate to Nigeria</p> <p>Migration through the dangerous Libya-Mediterranean route is rampant in Nigeria, but not in South Africa</p>

**Source:** The Author (2025)

**Table 3:** Push Factors of International Migration in South Africa and Nigeria

Push Factors are Similar in both Countries	Push Factors Peculiar to South Africa	Push Factors Peculiar to Nigeria
<p>Poor education system; high crime rates; low wages/per capita income; dissatisfaction with poor work environment; inadequate or ineffective access to healthcare practitioners' leave; violence; insecurity; and desire for greener pastures</p>	<p>High scepticism of prospects, especially under black majority rule; fear of being overshadowed by land appropriation by neighbouring nationals in the country; excessive workload; and exposure to HIV/AIDS</p>	<p>Unemployment, poverty, poor economic conditions; poor human development index; EndSARS youth protest of October 2021 and the resultant Toll Gate killings; exhaustion; low level of development; poor state of health; dictatorship; tribal discriminations; political disturbances; inadequate and poor research facilities; little progress in medical technology advancement; armed conflict; dissatisfaction with living conditions/standards; dissatisfaction with democracy; lack of trust in the Police; inability of government to fight terrorism; poor and/or lack of access to water facilities; harsh laws against same sex relationships and marriages; political instability; rural poverty; unsustainable livelihood; crop failure/food insecurity; inadequate/poor urban services; lack of progress in career; limited chance of self-development; poor conditions of services; uncertainty; unfavourable exchange rates between the Nigerian Naira and other foreign currencies; widespread human rights violation by SARS; and lack of economic and social programmes for youths</p>

**Source:** The Author (2025)

patterns, and push factors of international migration in South Africa and Nigeria differ significantly.

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