

## “Japa” and the Left-Behinds: An Analytical Review of the Socio-economic Effects of Emigration

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### **Introduction**

In much of pre-colonial Africa, migration took place primarily in quest of safety, new territory that was suitable for settlement, and good soil for cultivation. (Adepoju, 2005). Individuals relocate for a variety of reasons, such as persecution or improved job opportunities (Zanker, 2008). Migration is the process by which people migrate across large or small distances based on a variety of causes. These parameters change depending on the traits of the individual or group. The motivations might be solely financial, familial, or ethnic. Persecution, hunger, conflict, mass expulsion, widespread political and economic unrest, or environmental catastrophes in the origin regions can all lead to movement (Russel & Teitelbaum, 1992).

There are many spatial scales at which migration occurs (Afolayan, 1997). Migration is fueled by both economic and non-economic factors. People travel to make a livelihood or enhance

their economic standing; at times, the force imposed on the “weaker” groups by the more “powerful” groups in quest of a better life forces the weaker groups to migrate. A migrant’s decision to relocate may be motivated by a desire to escape economic problems and prejudice, a desire to secure freedom from political or religious persecution, a desire to liberate themselves from personal maladjustments to family and community life, and military or national concerns. Migration may not always be motivated by financial gain, but rather by a desire to survive in the face of persecution.

In the Nigerian online discourse and colloquial language, “Japa” is coined to describe situations where individuals, especially young people, decide to leave the country in search of better economic opportunities, educational prospects, or improved quality of life. It refers to the act of leaving or escaping from a challenging or undesirable situation, often in search of better opportunities abroad has become popular in Nigerian social media and youth culture (Adebayo, 2021). It gained prominence on Nigerian social media platforms and among young people as a term used in describing the act of fleeing from difficult circumstances such as economic hardship, political instability, or social challenges. In the Nigerian space, “japa” does not specifically refer to going to Japan but rather symbolizes the desire to escape or migrate to another country for better prospects (Odugbesan, 2020).

The term is often associated with the aspirations and challenges faced by Nigerian youth, reflecting their desires for upward mobility, escape from socio-economic constraints, and pursuit of personal growth and success (Ogunfowora, 2022). The use of “japa” in the Nigerian society reflects deeper themes of migration, mobility, and aspirations for a better life. It underscores the complex interplay between language, culture, and digital media in shaping contemporary narratives around migration and societal challenges. It represents the resilience of young Nigerians who navigate socio-economic constraints by seeking opportunities beyond their immediate environment (Adegoju, 2022; Omotosho, 2021).

In migration studies, the term “left behinds” typically refers to individuals who remain in the country of origin when others

migrate, particularly in the context of labor migration (Parreñas, 2005). This term is often used to describe the social and economic impact on those who stay behind, including changes in family dynamics, care-giving responsibilities, and economic opportunities. The “left behinds” are family members, often including children, spouses, or elderly relatives, who remain in the country of origin when other family members migrate, usually for employment, marriage or economic reasons (Salazar, 2010). These individuals are left behind to manage households, maintain social networks, and cope with the emotional and practical challenges of separation. The concept of the “left behinds” highlights the complex dynamics within transnational families, including the division of labour, emotional strain, and the resilience of those who stay behind. It also underscores the role of migration in shaping family structures, care-giving arrangements, and the well-being of both migrants and those left behind (Hugo, 2008, Massey *et al*, 1993).

### **Factors Underlying the “Japa” Situation in Nigeria**

The “Japa” situation in the Nigerian context, referring to the trend of young Nigerians leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad, is influenced by a range of underlying factors. These factors encompass economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions that contribute to the decision-making process of individuals opting to migrate (Afolayan, Ikwuyatum & Abejide, 2011). People migrate from their home countries for a variety of reasons, which can be broadly categorized into push and pull factors (Afolayan, 1997, Massey *et al*. 1993). Push factors are those that compel individuals to leave their home countries, while pull factors are those that attract individuals to move to another country (Castles *et al*. 2014, Van Hear 2010).

Push Factors are factors such as economic instability, poverty, lack of job opportunities, low wages, and limited access to basic services such as education (Afolayan, 2001; Akorede, (2004), King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003), environmental degradation, natural disasters, climate change impacts, droughts, floods, and resource scarcity among others while pull factors are better job prospects, higher

wages, economic stability, access to social services, opportunities for upward mobility, environmental sustainability, better living conditions, access to clean water and natural resources, and climate-resilient communities (Hatton & Williamson 2005; McLeman & Hunter, 2010; Zolberg, Suhrk & Aguayo; 1989).

The search for greener pasture and opportunity which have become absent in the source region, persistent unemployment and underemployment rates in Nigeria, particularly among young people, drive the desire to seek better job opportunities abroad (Ogunwale, 2018), fluctuations in the Nigerian economy, currency devaluation, inflation, and limited access to credit and financial resources contribute to the perception of better economic prospects outside the country (Makinwa, 1994).

Challenges in accessing quality education, healthcare, and social welfare services in Nigeria influence the decision to seek better social infrastructure abroad (Transparency International, 2021). Governance issues, corruption, insecurity, and lack of confidence in the political system contribute to the desire for a more stable and secure environment outside Nigeria (Omotola, 2013). Limited higher education capacity is also an underlying factor in explaining the mass exodus of youths from Nigeria. Challenges in accessing quality higher education, including limited spaces in universities and inadequate infrastructure, drive young Nigerians to seek educational opportunities abroad (Babalola, 2010, Falola & Heaton, 2008), aspirations for specialized skills, professional development, and exposure to global academic standards motivate individuals to pursue education outside Nigeria. Rising crime rates, ethnic and religious tensions, communal conflicts, and threats from insurgent groups contribute to concerns about safety and security, prompting individuals to seek safer environments.

One other reason which influences the decision to migrate from Nigeria refers to issues bordering on police brutality, human rights violations, societal discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation (Obinna & Okolie, 2019). Globalization and Information Access is another factor which encourages the Japa situation as increased connectivity through social media platforms

exposes young Nigerians to global trends, opportunities, and lifestyles, shaping their aspirations and perceptions of life outside Nigeria. Access to information about visa opportunities, job markets, educational institutions, and immigration pathways abroad facilitates decision-making and planning for migration (Johnson & Oni, 2021; Oyeboode & Adekunle, 2020).

### **Destinations of Migrants from Nigeria**

Many Nigerian emigrants who are actively employed are trained professionals such as doctors, nurses, engineers, information technology specialists, and professors. Over the last 10 years, skilled worker emigration has increased, raising worries about brain drain in areas crucial to Nigeria's growth. Nigerian students are increasingly seeking higher education options overseas, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Sweden, South Africa, and other nations with famous colleges and scholarship programs. This tendency is driven by variables such as educational excellence, foreign exposure, and professional opportunities. Young Nigerians have been a major component of emigration patterns, especially recent graduates and millennials.

Youth emigration is caused by a number of factors, including a lack of employment prospects, difficult economic conditions, unstable political environments, and desires for higher living standards. The Nigerian diaspora is a major contributor to emigration patterns, since many of its members keep in touch with their native country through charity, investments, remittances, and support for development projects. Some Nigerian migrants have pursued entrepreneurial enterprises overseas, using their talents, networks, and experiences to start firms and contribute to economic activity in both host nations and Nigeria through investments and partnerships. Emigration from Nigeria encompasses both legal channels, such as skilled migration programs, family sponsorship, and student visas, as well as illegal migration routes, such as sea and land migration, which are frequently motivated by economic hardship and a desire for a better life.

Migration patterns may change over time but changes in patterns may be due to shifts in policies, economic conditions, and global events. However, certain countries have served as destination regions for migrants from Nigeria. The United States is a top destination for Nigerians, particularly for education, employment opportunities, and family reunification. Nigerian immigrants in the U.S. are known for their contributions to various sectors, including healthcare, technology, and entrepreneurship (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The United Kingdom is another popular destination for Nigerians, especially for higher education, professional opportunities, and migration through family ties. Many Nigerians in the UK are students, skilled workers, and entrepreneurs (Office of the National Statistics, 2021). Canada has become increasingly attractive to Nigerians due to its immigration policies, quality of life, and economic opportunities.

Many Nigerians migrate to Canada for skilled work, education, and family sponsorship programs (Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada, 2021). The United Arab Emirates, particularly cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, attracts Nigerians for employment opportunities in sectors such as finance, construction, hospitality, healthcare, business and trade. South Africa is a destination for Nigerians seeking educational opportunities, especially in universities and colleges. Additionally, some Nigerians migrate to South Africa for work, business ventures, and investment opportunities. Australia is known for its immigration programs attracting skilled workers, students, and investors from around the world, including Nigerians. Many Nigerians migrate to Australia for higher education, skilled employment, and family sponsorship (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). Several European countries, including Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, also attract Nigerian migrants for education, employment, family reunification, and asylum seeking (Eurostat, 2021).

### **Socio-economic Effects of Japa on the Left-Behinds**

These socio-economic effects of emigration highlight the complexity of migration dynamics and the need for comprehensive strategies

that maximize the positive impacts while mitigating the negative consequences for the population left behind. Emigration, particularly when significant numbers of individuals leave a country, can have various socio-economic effects on the population left behind. These effects can be both positive and negative, depending on factors such as the scale of emigration, the skills and demographics of those leaving, the specific circumstances of the families and communities impacted and the context of the sending country. The migration of family members, especially young adults and parents, can lead to separation, emotional strain, loneliness, and disruptions in family dynamics, affecting the mental health and well-being of those left behind (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Makinwa, 1994). Family members left behind, such as elderly relatives or younger siblings, may face increased care-giving responsibilities, adversely affecting their education, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life.

Emigration can lead to the inflow of remittances, which are financial transfers sent by migrants to their families and communities in the home country. Remittances can contribute to increased household income, poverty reduction, and improved standards of living for the recipients (Adams, & Page, 2005; Olaleye, Ogunboye & Olanusi, 2014). The migration of skilled and educated individuals can also result in a loss of human capital for the country, impacting sectors such as healthcare, education, technology, and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, remittances sent by migrants to their families in Nigeria can provide financial support and contribute to household income, although the extent and sustainability of these remittances vary. The remittances sent by emigrants help in the development of people left behind in the sense that it creates opportunities for economic empowerment and investments for the people left behind. Overreliance on remittances can create dependency and may not always result in long-term economic development. There can also be disparities in the distribution of remittances within communities, leading to social tensions or inequality.

In terms of labour market dynamics, emigration helps in the alleviation of pressure on the domestic labour market by reducing

unemployment rates and easing competition for jobs, especially in sectors with high emigration rates (IOM 2020, 2021). Emigration of skilled workers and professionals, known as brain drain, can lead to skill shortages, reduced productivity, and challenges in sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology. This can hinder economic growth and innovation in the long term. As regards human capital and skills drain, emigration can result in the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and experiences by migrants, which they may bring back to the home country through return migration or diaspora engagement, contributing to knowledge transfer and capacity building (Makinwa, 1993). Brain drain, particularly when skilled workers and professionals emigrate in large numbers, can lead to a loss of human capital and expertise, weakening key sectors and impeding development efforts (IOM 2017, 2018). Emigration also leads to changes in social norms, attitudes, and cultural exchange as individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences abroad. It can also foster diaspora networks and transnational communities that facilitate social and economic connections between countries.

Emigration can disrupt family structures, with potential consequences such as separation from loved ones, care-giving challenges for those left behind (elderly parents, children), and psychological strain due to the absence of family members (Agadjanian & Ezech, 2000). Emigration can spur entrepreneurship and investment in the home country, as returning migrants or diaspora members may start businesses, invest in local ventures, and contribute to economic diversification and job creation. Emigration can lead to a loss of entrepreneurial talent and investment potential, especially if individuals perceive better opportunities or more favorable business environments abroad (Mangala, 2016).

Emigration can prompt governments to implement policies and reforms that address the root causes of emigration, such as unemployment, lack of economic opportunities, and governance issues, leading to improvements in governance, economic development, and social welfare. Emigration can create challenges



for policymakers, including managing diaspora engagement, addressing brain drain, designing effective migration policies, and balancing the benefits and drawbacks of emigration on national development (ADB, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Migration can lead to changes in social networks and community cohesion, with potential impacts on social capital, community development initiatives, and collective action. The migration of skilled individuals can contribute to a “brain drain” phenomenon, but it can also lead to “brain gain” if return migration or diaspora engagement results in knowledge transfer, investments, and innovation. (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Saxenian, 2002).

Migration trends like “Japa” highlight policy challenges related to labour market dynamics, youth employment, education reforms, diaspora engagement, and the retention of skilled professionals in Nigeria. Addressing the socio-economic effects of migration requires effective governance, investment in human capital, job creation, infrastructure development, and policies that promote inclusive growth and opportunities for all segments of the population (Putnam, 2000).

### **Mitigating the Effects of the “Japa” Syndrome**

Mitigating the effects of outmigration, such as brain drain and socio-economic challenges faced by the population left behind, requires a multifaceted approach that addresses policy, governance, social, and economic dimensions. The Federal Government may invest in education and skills development as a means of discouraging the “Japa” syndrome. A deliberate improvement in the quality of education at all levels to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed for employment and entrepreneurship is also a way out. The encouragement of continuous learning, vocational training, and skills development programs to enhance employability and adaptability to changing labour market demands (UNESCO, 2020, Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

The support of entrepreneurship activities in terms of provision of resources, training, and incentives for entrepreneurship and small business development, including access to finance, mentorship, and

market linkages (ILO, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021) will help in reducing the rate of emigration. The promotion of economic diversification and investment in sectors such as technology, agriculture, renewable energy, and creative industries to create job opportunities and reduce dependency on traditional sectors will help in reducing the volume of emigration. The implementation of social protection programs, including unemployment benefits, healthcare coverage, and social assistance, to support vulnerable populations and reduce poverty (World Bank, 2021). The strengthening of family and community networks to provide social support, care-giving assistance, and psychosocial services for individuals affected by outmigration will help in alleviating the effects on left – behinds (UNICEF, 2020).

Facilitating diaspora engagements through networks, platforms, and programs that promote knowledge sharing, investment, skills transfer, and collaboration between migrants and their home communities (IOM, 2018) can help in reducing the rate of emigration. The leverage remittances for development initiatives, such as infrastructure projects, healthcare improvements, education scholarships, and entrepreneurship support is a way out of the negative effects of the “Japa” situation (Ratha et al, 2020).

Government, in its bid to discourage and control emigration, may develop and implement migration policies. The development and implementation of migration policies that balance opportunities for emigration with strategies to retain and attract skilled professionals, foster circular migration, and ensure rights and protections for migrants and their families, the strengthening and promotion of good governance, transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures to improve public service delivery, promote inclusive growth, and create an enabling environment for development will go a long way in encouraging able-bodied men and women to consider living in the home country instead of leaving (IOM, 2019, UNDP, 2020). These strategies can help mitigate the effects of outmigration by creating opportunities, building resilience, strengthening social support systems, fostering diaspora engagement, and promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

**Conclusion**

Emigration has far-reaching effects not only on the individuals who emigrate but also on the family members, communities, and societies left behind in the country of origin. This study explores the multifaceted impacts of emigration on the left-behinds, considering the social and economic dimensions. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, empirical studies and qualitative data, this research sheds light on the effects of emigration on the left-behinds in various contexts. The findings indicate that emigration can have both positive and negative consequences for those who remain in the home country. On the economic front, remittances sent by emigrants to their families play a significant role in improving the financial well-being of the left-behind as it contributes to poverty reduction, increases disposable income and enhances access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. However, emigration also presents challenges for the left-behinds. The absence of skilled professionals may hinder economic development, perpetuate social inequalities, and strain the delivery of public services. The departure of a significant number of individuals, particularly young adults, can alter demographic patterns, disrupt community relationships, and alter social norms and traditions. Recognizing the complex interplay of these effects, policymakers and stakeholders need to implement strategies to address the challenges faced by the left-behinds. Policies should focus on creating opportunities for economic development, promoting social support systems, investing in education and skill development, and strengthening community resilience. This study contributes to the understanding of the impacts of emigration on the left-behinds, highlighting the need for comprehensive approaches that mitigate the negative consequences and maximize the potential benefits of emigration for the remaining communities. By addressing the challenges faced by the left-behinds, policymakers can promote sustainable development and social well-being in the home country.

**Recommendation: Changing The “Japa” Narrative**

Changing emigration patterns involves addressing the underlying factors that drive individuals to leave their home countries. This requires a comprehensive approach that combines policy interventions, economic development strategies, social programs and governance reforms. The following are some of the ways which can be implemented in the bid to change the existing “japa” trend:

- **Creating Economic Opportunities:** Implementing policies and initiatives to stimulate job creation, especially in sectors that can absorb the skills and talents of the workforce (World Bank, 2021).
- **Economic Diversification:** Promoting economic diversification to reduce dependency on limited sectors and create a more resilient economy with varied opportunities. (European Commission, 2020).
- **Investing in Education and Skills Development:** Improving the quality of education and training to equip individuals with the skills needed for employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation (OECD, 2021) and strengthening technical and vocational training programs to meet the demands of emerging industries and promote employability.
- **Enhancing Social Protection:** Implementing social protection programs that provide a safety net for vulnerable populations, including unemployment benefits, healthcare coverage, and social assistance and building family support systems to address social and economic challenges faced by households, especially those with members considering emigration (UNICEF, 2021).
- **Addressing Governance and Corruption:** Instituting governance structures, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law to create an enabling environment for economic development and social progress. Adopting and enforcing anti-Corruption Measures to reduce systemic corruption and improve public trust in institutions (Transparency International, 2021).

- Promoting Diaspora Engagement and Networks: Facilitating diaspora engagement through networks, platforms, and initiatives that encourage knowledge transfer, investment, skills exchange, and collaboration with home countries.
- Brain Gain Initiatives: Developing programs that incentivize skilled diaspora members to return and contribute to their home countries' development.
- Developing and implementing migration policies that balance the needs of countries of origin, transit, and destination, ensuring fair and orderly migration flows.
- Fostering partnerships and cooperation with other countries, international organizations, and stakeholders to address migration challenges collectively and promote sustainable solutions.
- These strategies can contribute to changing emigration patterns by creating opportunities, improving living conditions, strengthening governance, and fostering partnerships for sustainable development.

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