

GOVERNANCE DEFICITS AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION PATHWAYS: A  
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIA AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA WITH EMPHASIS  
ON YOUTH VULNERABILITY AND POLICY RESPONSES.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Irregular migration is a major humanitarian challenge in twenty-first-century Sub-Saharan Africa and India and a persistent global issue. In India, it often occurs through informal agents, driven by high recruitment costs, visa restrictions, and weak governance in states such as Punjab, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh. This study aims to examine how governance deficits shape irregular migration in both regions, with a focus on youth vulnerability and policy responses. Using a comparative qualitative/mixed-methods design, it draws on IOM and World Bank reports, national migration documents, and case studies of major routes, with comparative policy review and descriptive statistics. The research indicated that inadequate governance intensifies irregular migration, which in turn hinders economic prospects for youth. The analysis demonstrates that although India has established formal migration frameworks, such as the Ministry of External Affairs and the Protectorate of Emigrants, their effectiveness remains consistently restricted. Findings indicate that governance deficits and high youth unemployment are structural drivers of irregular migration, operating independently of economic factors. Governance failure is identified as a primary cause of irregular migration among youth. The study recommends strengthening migration governance, mechanizing agriculture, providing sustainable youth business financing, and expanding access to education and vocational training. These measures would increase meaningful employment and reduce incentives for dangerous, illegal journeys.

**Keywords:** *Irregular Migration, Governance, Youth Vulnerability*

## **1. Introduction**

Irregular migration is a lasting global issue shaped by unequal development, labour market imbalances, and weak governance (Castles, 2010; IOM, 2022). While most studies emphasize economic drivers such as poverty and lack of jobs, governance failures also play a major role (Betts, 2013). This essay compares India and Sub-Saharan Africa to examine how governance deficits shape irregular migration pathways, particularly for youth excluded from economic opportunities and policy decisions (Crush & Tevera, 2010; Nayyar, 2019).

In India, irregular migration often occurs through informal agents, driven by high recruitment costs, visa restrictions, and weak regulation in states such as Punjab, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh (Chandrasekhar & Sharma, 2015; Sadiq, 2009). In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is linked to high youth unemployment, weak institutions, and dangerous routes to Europe (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016; World Bank, 2021). Both regions maintain migration policies, yet irregular flows persist, revealing a gap between policy goals and outcomes (IOM, 2020). Current research examines how corruption, weak enforcement, and youth exclusion sustain irregular migration (Ghimire & Maharjan, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2019), and a few comparative studies link India and Sub-Saharan Africa (Skeldon, 2017).

This essay examines how governance deficits shape irregular migration in both regions, with a focus on youth vulnerability and policy responses. It asks (1) How do weak institutions, limited regulatory capacity, and corruption contribute to irregular migration? (2) What role does youth unemployment play in migration decisions?

Using a comparative qualitative/mixed-methods design, it draws on IOM and World Bank reports, national migration documents, and case studies of major routes, with comparative policy review and descriptive statistics. It aims to develop a comparative governance-migration model, improve understanding of youth migration, and inform safer migration pathways, while acknowledging limitations posed by the hidden nature of irregular migration and varying national data systems (Black et al., 2006).

## **2. Research Gap**

Existing literature on irregular migration has predominantly focused on economic determinants such as income disparities, unemployment, and labour market imbalances between origin and destination countries (World Bank, 2023; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). While these factors are significant, they often overshadow the critical role of governance structures in shaping migration pathways. In both India and Sub-Saharan Africa, studies have examined migration trends, remittance flows, and labour migration systems (de Haas, 2010; Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020); however, there remains limited analytical focus on how governance deficits such as weak regulatory frameworks, corruption, inadequate migration management systems, and limited institutional accountability actively produce and sustain irregular migration channels (Betts, 2011; Crisp, 2018). Although youth are frequently identified as a dominant demographic within irregular migration flows, their specific vulnerabilities remain underexplored in policy-oriented research.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by providing a comparative analysis of India and Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on how governance deficits shape irregular migration pathways and intensify youth vulnerability. By integrating a governance-centered and youth-focused perspective, the research aims to move beyond traditional economic explanations and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of irregular migration and its policy implications.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Conceptual Review**

#### **3.1.1. The Concept of Irregular Migration**

Numerous nations around the globe, both developed and developing, encounter a significant surge of irregular migrants (Khadir et al., 2008). Irregular migration represents one of the most pressing humanitarian issues in Sub-Saharan Africa during the twenty-first century. It involves the relocation of individuals over a particular distance from one residence to another without adhering to the legal procedures for travel. According to Mourad Khalil (2022), irregular

migration refers to individuals or groups crossing the borders of a designated area as part of a residential change. Kostas Stylianios (2017) argues that an irregular migrant is someone who does not have legal status within a transit or host nation. He pointed out that individuals engage in irregular migration seeking educational or economic opportunities that their home countries are unable to provide due to deficiencies in democratic governance. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) describes migration as a multifaceted process shaped by social, economic, political, and environmental elements, rather than just a physical movement (IOM, 2019). Susan Doofan and Michael Udo (2022) concur that irregular migration continues to have extensive repercussions for the economy of migrants, as agriculture and other productive sectors remain stagnant.

### **3.1.2. The concept of Governance**

The notion of governance is frequently examined by policymakers and academics, yet there remains no agreement on a singular definition. According to the World Bank, governance refers to “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development.” This definition is pragmatic, emphasizing accountability, transparency, participation, and the rule of law as essential components of effective governance (World Bank, 1992). Kaufmann et al. (1999) describe governance as “the traditions and institutions through which authority in a country is exercised. This encompasses (i) the processes by which governments are selected, monitored, and replaced; (ii) the government’s ability to create and enforce sound policies; and (iii) the respect that citizens and the state have for the institutions governing economic and social interactions.” Rhodes (1996) characterizes governance as “self-organizing, interorganizational networks marked by interdependence, resource exchange, established rules, and a significant degree of autonomy from the state.” While scholars have diverged on particular facets of governance, traditional scholars focus primarily on the enforcement of existing rules and laws, whereas newer scholars emphasize the fairness of the laws’ content. Laura Rubidge (2023) argued that ineffective governance significantly contributes to Africa’s economic struggles. She asserts that poor governance leads to underdevelopment, including the high levels of irregular migration across the continent.

### **3.2. Theoretical Review**

#### **3.2.1. Pull and Push Migration**

The research was based on the Push-Pull Theory of Migration, created by Everett S. Lee in 1966, which serves as a fundamental theory to comprehend the multifaceted motivations that drive individuals to migrate from one location to another. It offers a straightforward yet impactful framework for examining the various elements that either "push" individuals away from their original location or "pull" them toward a new one (Chidinma, O.B., 2025). Some researchers argue that the push-pull approach to migration is overly simplistic. Haas (2007) suggests that there is value in the straightforward idea behind the push-pull model. He pointed out that the theory, with its inherent and empirically supported concept, provides a comprehensive explanation that structural factors influence migration processes globally. He asserts that traditional explanations of migration have often centered on the differences in conditions between the origin and destination locations. Tapinos (1990) contends that poverty is not necessarily a migrating factor. He posited that it is not the 'poorest of the poor' who are always driven to migrate. His view is that failure in governance in one's country pushes people to migrate, not necessarily due to poverty.

### **3.3. Empirical Review**

Numerous empirical studies have investigated these aspects, providing detailed insights into how governance frameworks affect migration patterns in various regions and contexts. Barra and Ruggiero (2023) analyzed the impact of governmental stability on emigration trends in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on educational and gender factors. By employing instrumental variable Poisson regressions and two-stage least squares on panel data from 32 nations, their results indicated that stable governments often lead to an increase in the emigration of highly skilled individuals, especially well-educated women. This surprising finding implies that improved governance provides individuals with enhanced resources for mobility, thereby raising their chances of pursuing opportunities overseas. In a related study, McAuliffe and Khadria

(2020) contend that, in addition to irregular immigration from developing nations, particularly in Asia, India also serves as a source of irregular emigration to developed countries.

#### **4. Methodology**

In this study, a comparative research design is used to explore how governance deficits affect irregular migration pathways with a focus on youth vulnerability in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. Comparative research designs are strategies in which two or more cases are compared to examine social, political, and economic similarities and differences. The use of a comparative research design for this study is determined by the study's goal of analyzing how governance deficits such as corruption, poor institutional capacities, lack of effective migration management structures, and inadequate regulation affect irregular migration in different settings.

The comparative design also helps to strengthen the validity of the research since it allows for a more generalizable understanding of the dynamics of the connection between governance and irregular migration. It provides opportunities for identifying commonalities and differences in governance structures, youth employment situations, policies on migration, and their implementation.

The data for the research will be sourced from secondary sources, which include documents prepared by international organizations such as the IOM, World Bank, ILO, and UNDP. Other sources will include migration policies prepared by governments, academic journal articles, books, and conferences, among others, that relate to irregular migration and governance in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. Using secondary data is advantageous in this case because it allows for the gathering of information from a variety of sources, including countries and other organizations, without the limitations associated with collecting primary data.

The research employs comparative policy analysis and qualitative content analysis methodologies to examine governance frameworks, institutional capabilities, and policy approaches in India and selected Sub-Saharan African countries. It aims to identify commonalities related to governance issues, youth vulnerabilities, corruption, unemployment,

regulatory inadequacies, and migration channels. Descriptive statistics are used to support the qualitative findings.

## **5. Analysis & Findings**

### **5.1. Governance Deficits and Irregular Migration in India**

#### **5.1.1. Institutional Weaknesses and Regulatory Failures**

While India maintains formal migration institutions, including the Ministry of External Affairs and the Protectorate of Emigrants, their operational reach is persistently limited. The Emigration Act of 1983 has long failed to adapt to contemporary migration realities, creating a regulatory vacuum that informal actors exploit (McAuliffe & Khadria, 2020). Unlicensed recruitment agents charge migrants fees amounting to several times their annual household income, pushing migrants into debt bondage and compelling them toward irregular routes, particularly toward Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Khadria et al., 2008; IOM, 2022). This is especially acute in Punjab, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh (Srivastava, 2016; Chandrasekhar & Sharma, 2015). Corruption compounds these institutional weaknesses. Visa officials, local police, and district-level bureaucrats have been reported as facilitating irregular migration in exchange for bribes (Sadiq, 2009).

### **5.2. Governance Deficits and Irregular Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa**

#### **5.2.1. Weak Institutional Capacity and the Governance Crisis**

The Africa Governance Index (2021) documented persistent deficits in institutional accountability, rule of law, and public service delivery across Sub-Saharan Africa as structural drivers of outward migration. Many states lack the capacity to maintain functioning emigration management infrastructure such as biometric passport systems, bilateral labour agreements, or pre-departure orientation programmes, leaving migrants structurally dependent on informal and exploitative networks (Adepoju, 2000; Bakewell, 2010). Corruption at border crossings, police checkpoints, and within document-issuance agencies facilitates irregular migration while



extracting resources from migrants (Rubidge, 2023). Flahaux and De Haas (2016) identified these structural governance failures, rather than poverty per se, as the primary explanation for persistent irregular migration across the Sahel and West Africa.

### **5.3. Comparative Analysis**

#### **5.3.1. Convergences**

Both contexts share three common governance failure patterns. First, formal migration governance institutions exist but lack sufficient reach and enforcement capacity to regulate migration flows effectively (Betts, 2011; Skeldon, 2017). Second, corruption is a structural rather than incidental feature of migration governance in both regions, converting nominal formal systems into informal ones that serve corrupt actors rather than migrants (Sadiq, 2009; Rubidge, 2023; Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). Third, a governance-produced mismatch between migration demand and legal pathway supply structurally generates irregular migration across both contexts (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2020; IOM, 2022).

#### **5.3.2. Divergences**

India's governance failures occur within a context of comparatively higher state capacity, making its challenge more one of governance quality than governance presence. Much of Sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, faces chronic institutional under-resourcing and, in several cases, active state fragility (Adepoju, 2000; AU, 2021). Sub-Saharan Africa also contends with an additional layer of regional integration implementation failures specific to the African context (Bakewell, 2010). Demographically, the continent's youth population bulge, with 40% of Africa's population under fifteen (Africa Governance Index, 2021), creates migration pressure of a scale and demographic character that requires migration governance to be integrated with broader youth employment and education strategies at a historically unprecedented pace (ILO, 2022; UNDESA, 2021).

### **5.4. Summary of Findings**

Five key findings emerge from this analysis. First, governance deficits are structural drivers of irregular migration in both regions, operating independently of and in addition to economic factors (Betts, 2011; Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2020). Second, youth unemployment is a proximate driver mediated by governance quality: the same unemployment pressure produces regular migration in effective governance contexts and irregular migration where governance fails (ILO, 2022; Honwana, 2012). Third, youth vulnerability within irregular migration systems is governance-produced, reflecting exclusion from legal pathways, policy processes, and protective infrastructure (Honwana, 2012; UNDESA, 2021). Fourth, while India and Sub-Saharan Africa share common governance failure patterns, they differ in severity and nature in ways that require context-sensitive policy responses (Skeldon, 2017; Adepoju, 2000). Fifth, current policy responses in both contexts underinvest in institutional reform, anti-corruption measures, legal pathway expansion, and youth inclusion (Triandafyllidou, 2018; IOM, 2022).

## **6. Discussion**

The comparative analysis of India and Sub-Saharan Africa confirms that irregular migration is not merely an economic phenomenon driven by wage differentials or poverty; it is a product of governance failure. Governance deficits, including weak regulatory frameworks, inadequate institutional accountability, corruption, and the exclusion of youth from policy processes, are reasons for irregular migration decisions. This finding reframes the prevailing understanding in migration scholarship, which has disproportionately attributed irregular flows to income disparities and labour market imbalances (World Bank, 2023; IOM, 2022).

The Push-Pull Theory of Lee (1966) remains analytically useful but must be supplemented by a governance-centred perspective. As Tapinos (1990) argued, it is not the poorest of the poor who migrate; it is those who experience governance failure. This is evident in both regions: in Punjab and Kerala, informal recruitment agents thrive precisely because state-regulated migration channels are ineffective (Chandrasekhar & Sharma, 2015; Sadiq, 2009). In Sub-Saharan Africa, with 40% of the population under fifteen and an estimated 70,000 skilled professionals emigrating annually (AU, 2021), weak institutions and high youth unemployment leave irregular migration as the only visible pathway to economic participation.

The comparative framework also reveals what isolated regional studies have missed: India and Sub-Saharan Africa share structurally analogous governance deficits despite their different histories and economic profiles. Both regions exhibit a persistent gap between stated migration policies and their implementation, a failure that Betts (2011) and Triandafyllidou (2018) identify as endemic to migration governance systems globally. The findings broadly align with De Haas (2010) and Castles, De Haas, and Miller (2020), who argue that structural forces beyond individual economic decision-making shape migration transitions. Where this study departs from much of the existing literature is in treating youth not merely as economic actors responding to unemployment (ILO, 2022) but as structurally excluded participants within dysfunctional governance systems (Honwana, 2012; UNDESA, 2021).

A key unexpected finding is the convergence of governance-related drivers across two regions that differ substantially in geography, colonial history, and development level. Another is that policy responses in both regions remain weighted toward enforcement and deterrence rather than institutional reform, which, as Geddes (2008) notes, tends to drive irregular migration underground rather than reduce it, increasing risks to migrants without addressing structural causes. This study acknowledges its limitations: it relies entirely on secondary data, treats Sub-Saharan Africa as a composite unit with unavoidable generalisation, and cannot establish direct causal relationships between specific governance deficits and migration outcomes. These constraints are inherent to the comparative design (Black et al., 2006) and point toward future primary research needs.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study affirms that the relationship between governance and migration is generative rather than merely restrictive: where states invest in transparent, accessible, and well-regulated migration systems, they create the conditions under which movement becomes a vehicle for human development rather than a measure of last resort. The comparative analysis of India and Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that youth, the largest and most dynamic demographic in both regions, possess the aspiration, adaptability, and agency to be productive contributors to both origin and destination societies, provided that governance frameworks recognise and channel this

potential through legal, safe, and inclusive migration pathways. The governance-migration nexus, properly understood, is therefore not merely a site of challenge but an opportunity for policy innovation with transformative implications for two of the world's most consequential regions. The study recommends strengthening migration governance, mechanizing agriculture, providing sustainable youth business financing, and expanding access to education and vocational training. These measures would increase meaningful employment and reduce incentives for dangerous, illegal journeys. Therefore, the core foundation for managing irregular migration lies in effective governance practices, which will enhance economic opportunities for young people within the nation.

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