



The Impact of COVID-19 on Migration Intentions and Human Trafficking in Benin City, Nigeria

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Contents

Contents	1
Executive Summary	1
Key findings	1
Migration intentions	1
Smuggling and human trafficking	2
Recommendations	2
Introduction	4
Methodology	4
Research questions	4
Data collection methods	6
Context	7
Migration in Edo State	7
Main consequences of COVID-19	8
Impact of COVID-19 on Migration Intentions	10
Economic impact caused an increased sense of urgency to migrate	10
Increased vulnerability among returnees and survivors of human trafficking is re-igniting desire to migrate	11
Despite urgency to leave, COVID-19 is slowing migration plans	11
Some potential migrants believe that COVID-19 has increased job opportunities in destination countries	11
Nigerian government's COVID-19 response and continuous remittance flows as additional migration drivers	12
COVID-19 as new but not influential risk in irregular migration	13
Case Study: Effects of COVID-19 on Nigerian Diaspora and Influence on Potential Migrants	14
Ongoing lack of knowledge around irregular and legal migration	15
COVID-19 did not impact most people's planned destinations	16
Smuggling and Human Trafficking in Benin City	17
COVID-19 increases reliance on smugglers and traffickers, rise in trafficking anticipated	17
COVID-19 increases cost of smuggling services, likely leading to heightened vulnerabilities	18
Case Study: Football careers and indicators of unfree recruitment linked to human trafficking	19
Respondents did not link their own travel plans to the risk of human trafficking	21
Perceived increase in online recruitment	21
For some, online channels enable more secret migration planning	22
Reported increase of trafficking cases to other African countries	22
Case Study: Online Travel Agents	23
Conclusions and Recommendations	24
1. Engage the most vulnerable potential migrants and their families to change migration behaviours	24

2. Link potential migrants, returnees and victims of trafficking to viable livelihood opportunities.....25
3. Address increased signs of online trafficking schemes.....26
4. Explore the role of the Nigerian diaspora in influencing and informing migration plans26
5. Counter risks of forced labour by fostering regular, ethical labour migration27

Annex 1

Methodology	28
Desk Review	28
Social Media Content Analysis.....	28
Remote Key Informant Interviews	28
Remote In-depth Interviews	29
Limitations	29

Executive Summary

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding around the world and the global death rate continues to rise in 2021, secondary effects have become a harsh living reality for many. In addition to the immediate physical and psychological concerns, as well as the economic impact, one area deeply affected by the crisis is international migration – both legal and irregular.

With this study, Seefar provides a snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on current and future migration intentions and patterns in human trafficking in Benin City, Nigeria.

“My travel plans remain the same, COVID-19 has not changed them. But the pandemic has changed what I plan to do when I get to my destination. My friends over there keep assuring me that I can secure a better job once I have entered successfully because a good number of those who died from COVID-19 are employees who have to be replaced at work.”

Potential migrant, male

The study explores changes to attitudes and behaviours concerning irregular migration, smuggling and human trafficking. In doing so, it seeks to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of what kinds of support might be needed to address potentially harmful migration practices resulting from COVID-19.

This report draws on the perspectives of 38 potential migrants and family members of potential migrants currently living in and around Benin City. Seefar also conducted key informant interviews (KIIs), a desk review and social media content analysis to inform and crosscheck findings from the in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Key findings

Migration intentions

- For most potential migrants and their families the sense of urgency to migrate had increased. This is because their incomes and economic situations had been heavily impacted by COVID-19. According to one key informant, COVID-19 threatens to undermine years of public awareness campaigns around the risks of irregular migration and human trafficking.
- Despite the high level of urgency and desire to leave Benin City as soon as possible, respondents also reported delays to their migration plans, primarily because of significant reduction of funds available to finance journeys.
- Key informants, potential migrants and their families predict a high number of Nigerians to leave the country once restrictions lift and funds have been, at least partially, regained.
- Returnees, many of whom are survivors of human trafficking, too, reported that the impact of COVID-19 increased their desire to re-migrate.
- Some potential migrants and their families saw COVID-19 as a concrete opportunity with the potential for better migration outcomes at destination. They referred to increased job opportunities abroad due to fatalities and job losses, access to COVID-19 relief packages and social welfare.

- COVID-19 resulted in several new migration drivers, including that the respondents believed the Nigerian government is not handling the pandemic well as well as COVID-19-related benefits abroad (such as the vaccine). COVID-19 also affected the influence of remittances on migration plans among potential migrants and their families: The perceived economic difference during the pandemic between those who had remittance-sending family members abroad and those who did not made many respondents want to migrate themselves.

Smuggling and human trafficking

- Respondents projected an increased reliance on smugglers and an anticipated rise in human trafficking due to the hardships brought about by COVID-19.
- The already thin line between irregular migration, smuggling and human trafficking has been further complicated as a result of limited in-person interaction and movement restrictions.
- There appears to be an increase in 'travel agents' participating in online recruitment as well as an influx in online job advertisements for 'legal' migration opportunities that promise hassle-free visas and travel-now-pay-later schemes.
- Respondents continued to have a limited understanding of human trafficking. Most viewed it as only encompassing sex trafficking of young women, and had difficulty connecting their own migration plans to the risk of human trafficking. This is despite respondents' plans including indicators for recruitment linked to debt and/or deceptive recruitment.

Recommendations

1. Engage the most vulnerable potential migrants and their families to change migration behaviours.

- ➔ Donors should invest in new or existing migration communications initiatives to engage the most vulnerable potential migrants and their families, with an emphasis on changing their migration behaviours.
- ➔ These activities should, among others, a) provide a detailed and balanced portrayal of life abroad during COVID-19; b) help potential migrants navigate complex migration decisions, including the connection between increased economic distress and investment in risky migration; c) target young men who are often unaware of different forms of TIP that do not involve trafficking for the purpose of sex work.

2. Link potential migrants, returnees and victims of trafficking to viable livelihood opportunities.

- ➔ Provide ongoing support to returnees and victims of trafficking through individualised coaching on how to obtain and maintain businesses or income streams. For example: Explore projects focusing on supporting returnees and survivors of violence in becoming more self-starting and confident of overcoming barriers.
- ➔ Business development programmes for returnees and TIP survivors should include coaching on new market opportunities and support to pivot business models in response to new market demands, such as those brought by COVID-19.
- ➔ Migration communications activities should be connected to viable livelihood alternatives for those remaining in Nigeria. This could be achieved through opportunity monitoring and sharing, where coaches/mentors could help potential migrants access local opportunities.

3. Address increased signs of online trafficking schemes.

- ➔ Donors should commission research to better understand the effects of increasing online recruitment on the recruitment chain and demand among potential migrants.
- ➔ Key stakeholders working on human trafficking in Nigeria, especially law-enforcement, should increase responses to online recruitment and prevent and respond to forms of TIP originating on social media platforms. Both technical equipment and training for online investigations could be beneficial for this.
- ➔ Communications activities should include messaging that focuses on addressing false information shared in online job advertisements.
- ➔ Strategically address people at risk of falling victim to online recruitment through campaigns using Google AdWords and/or Facebook targeting as a low-cost investment to inform and divert people engaged in risky migration planning.

4. Explore the role of the Nigerian diaspora in influencing and informing migration plans.

- ➔ Conduct further research to parse out cognitive dissonance among Nigerian diaspora and identify key myths portrayed about life abroad, in order to inform the future design and implementation of migration and human trafficking awareness campaigns.

5. Counter risks of forced labour by fostering regular, ethical labour migration.

- ➔ Donors and key stakeholders in the region should explore avenues to foster alternative (productive) migration options (regional and international labour migration) to prevent dangerous irregular migration practices.
- ➔ Ethical recruitment initiatives that focus on enabling migrants to leave their home countries and gain meaningful and ethical employment abroad are one way of addressing economic drivers and the associated risks of forced labour.

Introduction

As COVID-19 continues to shape migratory flows, some commentators anticipate increased risks for those pursuing irregular migration routes, with job losses at home and abroad placing more potential migrants at risk of forced labour and human trafficking.¹ Previous research by Seefar has pointed out that the line between irregular migration and human trafficking is often not clear cut in Nigeria and it is likely that many Nigerians who intend to journey north as a result of COVID-19 will end up in exploitative conditions. However, little is known about the impact of COVID-19 on a) migration intentions or b) risks of human trafficking in Nigeria.

This study therefore provides a snapshot of how COVID-19, and the subsequent containment measures, have impacted potential migrants' migration intentions. It looks at how 38 potential migrants and their families in Benin City think about, and plan on, accessing smuggling services and their views on human trafficking since the outbreak. The purpose of this study is to generate evidence on COVID-19's impact on migration intentions in order to better anticipate future migration challenges. This will enable more effective decision making and help adapt the response to likely increasing rates of human trafficking as a secondary effect of COVID-19.

The report first outlines the methodology of the study. It then provides a background context on migration flows from Edo State based on available literature and the qualitative data collected before it addresses the impact of COVID-19 on migration plans and intentions, and the perceived risks and benefits of migration. It then outlines the perceived changes to smuggling and human trafficking and provides a set of recommendations for international donors and key stakeholders.

Methodology

Research questions

This study focused on two primary research areas: the impact of COVID-19 on migration intentions; and with that, perceived changes to smuggling services and human trafficking. The table below outlines the research areas and research questions (RQs) used to guide the study.

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Global Report on Trafficking in Persons' (UNODC, 2020), 69 https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf.



Research Areas



Research Questions

How have COVID-19 and containment measures since March 2020 impacted Nigerian potential migrants' migration intentions?

What are the main economic and social consequences of COVID-19 and the subsequent containment measures in Edo State, Nigeria between March 2020 and December 2020?

Prior to COVID-19 what were the main push and pull factors governing migration intentions in Edo State?

Specifically, how has COVID-19 impacted potential migrants and/or their families? Has the pandemic exacerbated or changed known push and pull factors?

What are perceived to be the primary risks and benefits of irregular migration identified in light of COVID-19?

How has this impacted migration intentions?

How do potential migrants think about and plan on accessing smuggling services since the outbreak of COVID-19?

How have patterns of irregular migration and human trafficking in and from Nigeria changed since March 2020?

Prior to COVID-19 how did potential migrants perceive smuggling services?

How have self-reported behaviours regarding, and access to, smuggling services changed?

Since March 2020, what are the primary mediums smugglers (and potentially human traffickers) are using to interact with potential migrants?

How do potential migrants and families of potential migrants view human trafficking since the outbreak of the virus?

What role do social and familial networks have in potential human trafficking schemes?

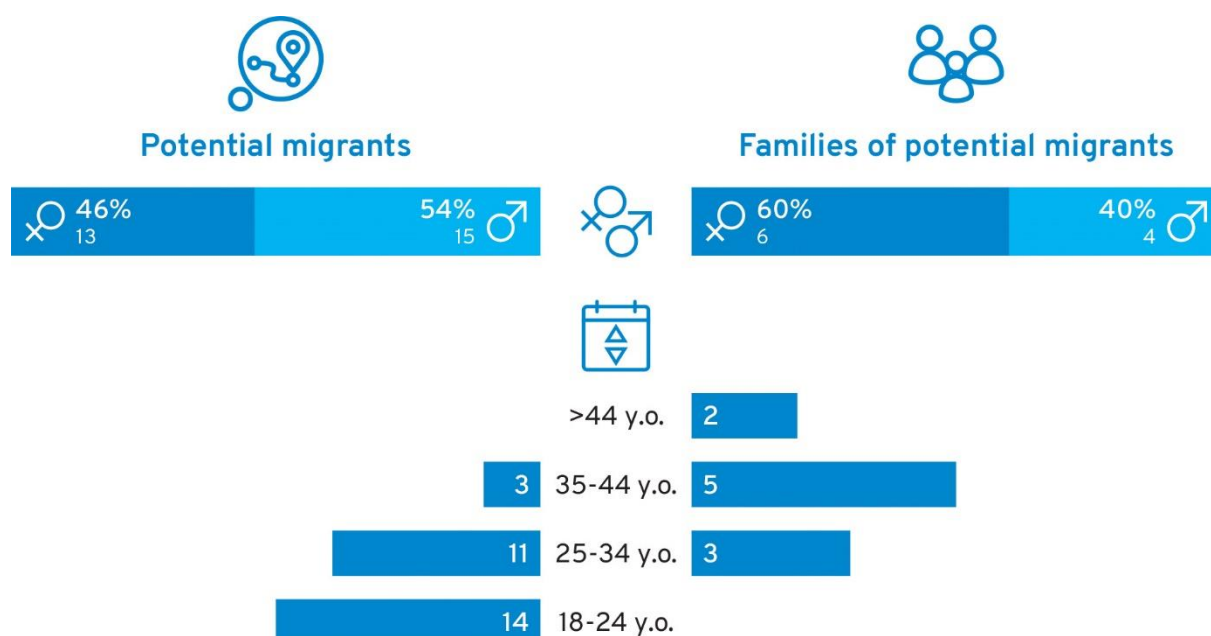
Is there a perceived increased role of social media in facilitating and/or recruiting for human trafficking since the outbreak?

Do potential migrants or families of potential migrants consider their views on human trafficking as having changed since the outbreak of COVID-19? If so, how?

Data collection methods

Data for this study was collected through a phased approach, using complementary methods where primary data collection tools built on findings from secondary research:

- **A desk review** of existing literature on migrant intentions in order to establish what changes have taken place since the outbreak of COVID-19 and to support the design of the interview tool.
- **A content analysis of social media posts and messages**, selected for relevance, to provide non-representative, general insights on how COVID-19 impacted migration intentions, trends, and behaviours regarding migration plans, smugglers and human traffickers. Seefar used both desk review and social media content analysis to develop the research tools and to further investigate emerging findings.
- **Seefar's in-country teams** worked with potential migrants prior to and during COVID-19 and associated mitigation measures, and regularly curated social media content on migration. They provided additional input to the research design and questions.
- **Remote key informant interviews** (KIIs) with nine stakeholders involved in migration and anti-human trafficking related work in Benin City to contextualise and frame research questions and offer insights on perceived changes to migration intentions since the outbreak.
- **In-depth, semi-structured interviews** (IDIs) with 28 potential migrants and 10 families of potential migrants. The remote interviews were carried out by four Nigerian qualitative researchers and took place over four weeks in December 2020 and January 2021.



More details on the data collection methods, a list of organisations consulted and the limitations to this study are available in the [Annex](#).

Context

Migration in Edo State

For decades migrant-sending locations such as Edo State, Nigeria, have witnessed dangerous irregular migration practices, as well as concomitant human smuggling and human trafficking.² In Edo State and Benin City irregular migration and human trafficking are endemic.³ Flow-monitoring data collected in 2015–2016 found that 62% of Nigerians interviewed en route to Europe were from Edo State.⁴ In 2017, of the 4,316 Nigerians the International Organization for Migration (IOM) repatriated from Libya, 4,000 originated from Edo State, and many had been subjected to trafficking and violence.⁵

Early 2020 was poised to see a high influx of asylum seekers to Europe but the onset of COVID-19 changed the number of arrivals significantly. In April 2020, irregular crossings to Europe had fallen by 85% compared to the same month 2019, whereas just two months earlier there had been a 58% increase from February 2019 to February 2020.⁶ Overall irregular arrivals to Europe fell by 25% during the first six months of 2020.⁷ Reports of migrants en route to Europe but stuck in transit countries due to movement restrictions were common.⁸

Despite this early decrease in irregular migration, respondents to this study anticipated that smuggling and human trafficking from Nigeria would continue to increase in response to rising hardship and poverty brought on by COVID-19.⁹ According to one key informant, COVID-19 threatens to undermine years of public awareness campaigns around the risks of irregular migration and human trafficking.

*“There has been an unravelling of some of the efforts and gains of civil society organisation and NAPTIP that have taken place over the last two years. We had started to see a shift in mentality as more migrants were returning to Nigeria with horror stories. There started to be a shift in the mind-set of women in Edo State, coupled with awareness campaigns and resources. **But now a lot of that may have been undone by COVID.**”*

Key informant

² US Department of State, ‘2020 Trafficking in Persons Report’ (2020), 381 <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-TIP-Report-Complete-062420-FINAL.pdf>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ‘Trafficking in Persons to Europe for Sexual Exploitation’ (UNODC 2009), 6 https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/TiP_Europe_EN_LORES.pdf.

³ Context KII 1.

⁴ International Organization for Migration, ‘Enabling a better understanding of migration flows and (its root-causes) from Nigeria towards Europe’ (IOM 2017), 17.

⁵ US Department of State, ‘2020 Trafficking in Persons Report’ (2020), 382.

⁶ International Organization for Migration, COVID-19 and migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean IOM 2020), xxi – xxv <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/covid19-and-migration-in-west-and-north-africa.pdf>.

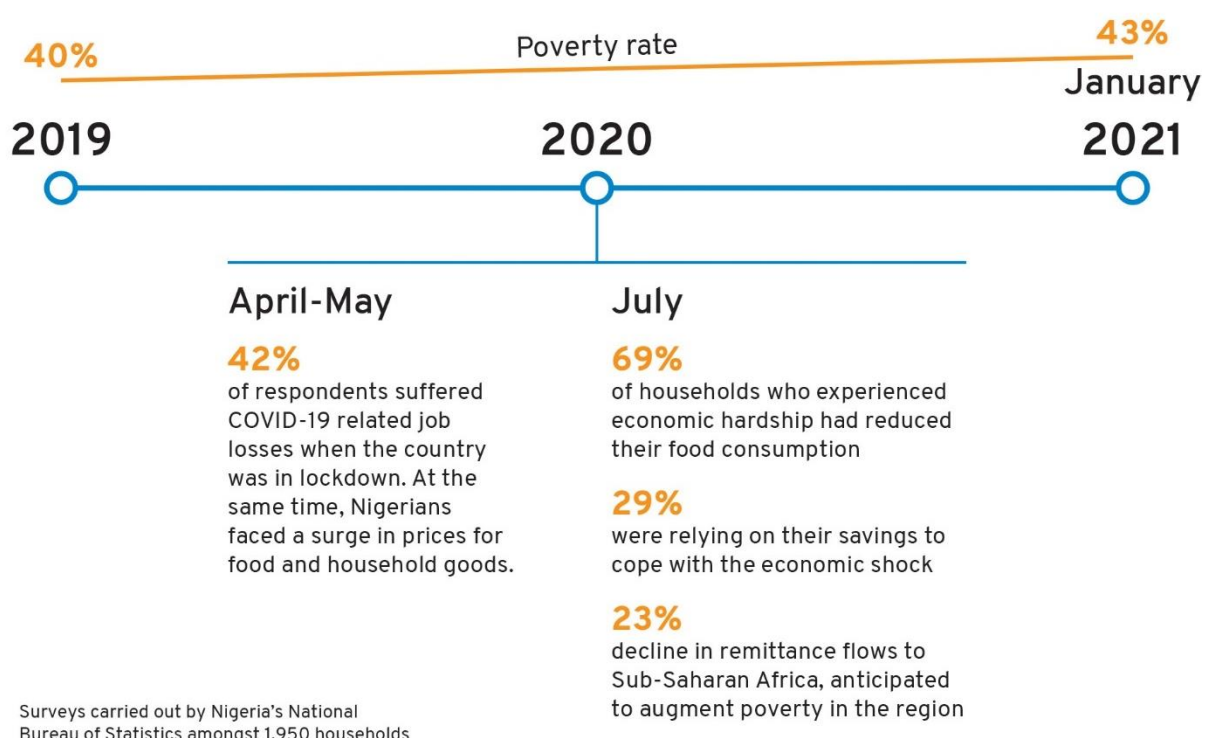
⁷ International Organization for Migration, COVID-19 and migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean IOM 2020), xxi – xxv.

⁸ Independent Monitoring, Rapid Research and Evidence Facility, ‘Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on the Vulnerabilities of Migrants on the Central Mediterranean Route’ (IMREF 2020), 8 https://seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FULL-REPORT_IMREF-COVID-19-study-Part-2.pdf.

⁹ 23 out of 38 IDIs and all context KIIs said that human trafficking would increase because of COVID-19.

Main consequences of COVID-19

One of the primary consequences of COVID-19 in the context of this study is the severe economic impact on Nigerian households. Surveys carried out by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics among 1,950 households found 42% of respondents suffered COVID-19 related job losses during April and May 2020 when the country was in lockdown.¹⁰ At the same time, Nigerians faced a surge in prices for food and household goods; in July 2020 69% of households who experienced economic hardship had reduced their food consumption and 29% were relying on their savings to cope with the economic shock.¹¹ The poverty rate increased from 40% of the population in 2019 to 43% by January 2021.¹² Additionally, remittance flows to Sub-Saharan Africa had declined by 23% by July 2020.¹³ This decline is expected to increase poverty in the region.¹⁴



The economic situation in Benin City is just as concerning. Many businesses were shut down for several months.¹⁵ Respondents cited April and May 2020 as the most challenging months, when the lockdown measures were strictest and all but essential services were closed.¹⁶

¹⁰ Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics, 'COVID-19 From the Ground Up: What the Crisis Means for Nigerians1 Findings from the Nigeria COVID-19 National Longitudinal Phone Survey (NLPS) Round 1, April-May 2020' (NBS 2020), 2 <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/757201593465025800/pdf/COVID-19-From-the-Ground-Up-What-the-Crisis-Means-for-Nigerians.pdf>.

¹¹ Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics, 'COVID-19 From the Ground Up: What the Crisis Means for Nigerians1 Findings from the Nigeria COVID-19 National Longitudinal Phone Survey (NLPS) Round 1, April-May 2020' (NBS 2020), 2.

¹² World Poverty Clock 'Nigeria' (World Data Lab 2021), accessed February 2021 <https://worldpoverty.io/map>.

¹³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 'Migrant workers and remittances in the context of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa' (FAO 2020), 2 - 4 <http://www.fao.org/3/cb0184en/CB0184EN.pdf>.

¹⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 'Migrant workers and remittances in the context of COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa' (FAO 2020), 2 - 4.

¹⁵ Context KII 2.

Potential migrants and their families experienced income losses due to COVID-19.

The majority of respondents were self-employed or unemployed at the time of data collection. For many, the lockdown meant that familial income was drastically reduced or stopped altogether, and the high cost of food was a commonly cited challenge: “My earnings changed drastically to the point that I was unable to get any work or earn anything. COVID-19 opened my eyes to the fact that if not for my grandparents, my younger sister and I would’ve starved to death.”¹⁷ Respondents had to use their savings or had to borrow from other family members to survive.

“If it were possible to disappear from Benin right now and appear in Europe, I would do it because of my current condition. I hate having to dip into my savings because I’m not earning enough. And I don’t want to ask people for money who have promised to help me when I’m ready to embark on my journey. They will think I’m not serious about my travel plans.”

Potential migrant, male

This economic decline experienced at the state and individual level places Nigerians from Edo State in a position of even higher vulnerability to human trafficking than before the pandemic, as poverty and unemployment represent well known vulnerability factors for human trafficking.¹⁸

Respondents also noted the social and political impacts felt across Nigeria since the start of the pandemic, likely compounded by the anti-police brutality protests known as #EndSARS, and the discovery that the government had warehouses of undistributed COVID-19 relief supplies.¹⁹ They also cited fear of contracting the virus—one essential medical worker expressed that she was facing this fear every day—and the struggle to remain socially distanced. Key informants noted that in Edo State, like many other parts of the world, the lockdown period saw a rise in sexual and gender-based violence and in mental health challenges as people faced acute stressors.²⁰



¹⁶ 33 out of 38 IDIs said their circumstances, particularly their incomes, were negatively impacted by the lockdown. Context KII 3 confirmed.

¹⁷ Male IDI 16.

¹⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ‘Global Report on Trafficking in Persons’ (UNODC, 2020), 69.

¹⁹ Percy Dabang, Angela Ukomadu, ‘In Nigeria, looters target government warehouses stocked with COVID-19 relief’ (Reuters, November 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-nigeria-food-idUKKBN27P0YZ>.

²⁰ Context KII 2; Context KII 3.

Impact of COVID-19 on Migration Intentions

Economic impact caused an increased sense of urgency to migrate

Economic factors have always been dominant drivers of migration, but COVID-19 has exacerbated the urgency of the situation for many respondents. Research has overwhelmingly indicated that one of the primary drivers of migration from Nigeria is economic hardship faced at home, relative to the perceived economic success or 'greener pastures' possible abroad.²¹ The economic pressure and COVID-19 related income losses as outlined in the previous section have increased the sense of urgency to travel.

Key informants all agreed that once restrictions lift, more migrants will leave Nigeria. This feeling was shared in comments made on social media, where people stated that they planned to travel as soon as COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted.²² According to one KII, some potential migrants consider life in a refugee camp in Europe as preferable to the current situation in Nigeria: "People are thinking, once they get to Europe, they get to a camp, the government will pay them and they will have a place to live."²³

"[Our family income] drastically changed. Sometimes there is nothing to feed on. As a petty trader, there is nowhere to go to because of this issue of COVID-19 restrictions. We sincerely need to migrate. And if death comes on the road, so be it."

Potential migrant, female

Yet, very few respondents stated that economic considerations were the only reason they wanted to migrate. Similar to before the outbreak of the pandemic, the majority listed several important reasons to migrate such as pursuing 'good' jobs or career advancement; an easier life; constant electricity; education opportunities; the need to generate remittances for dependants left behind in Nigeria; and social reasons, such as a change of location or "to live like friends" who have preceded them on the migration journey. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of factors driving migration, including supporting family members who remain behind and the perception of a better life abroad.

"All my intentions have been ruined. All the small money I had saved has been spent. Things are so bad and the only way out is for me to think deeper about how to survive here. Currently, I am even thinking of stopping the plan I have to migrate."

Potential migrant, female

Despite overall higher levels of urgency around migration, some respondents also planned to abandon their migration plans. Due to the increase in smuggler fees and a decrease in income, some respondents explained that they are considering halting their plans and putting their income and effort into remaining in Nigeria. However, these cases were the minority in the sample.

²¹ LO Ikuteyijo, 'Irregular Migration as Survival Strategy: Narratives from Youth in Urban Nigeria' (Palgrave 2020) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21092-2_3; Abieyuwa Ohonba and Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona

'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria' (Women's Studies Vol 48, 2019) DOI: [10.1080/00497878.2019.1632605](https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1632605).

²² Data from Seefar's "The Migrant Project", collected between 2019 and 2021 in Nigeria.

²³ Context KII 6.

Increased vulnerability among returnees and survivors of human trafficking is re-igniting desire to migrate

COVID-19 has increased the desire of returnees and survivors of human trafficking to attempt to migrate again. Migrant returnees and survivors of human trafficking faced serious economic difficulties during the lockdown.²⁴ According to key informants, many returnees – including survivors of human trafficking – had received support to start new businesses, but these have been closed by the pandemic and some were forced to sell their start-up assets to sustain themselves during the lockdown.²⁵

This has pushed some to say they want to migrate irregularly again: “Because of the untold challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic [...] I must be frank with you, I need to migrate as quickly as possible, but I wish to do it in a better way this time around.”²⁶ One KII shared that returnees, including survivors of human trafficking, often ask him why they should invest in a business in Nigeria when they will just fail, and whether it would not be better to use the start-up money to travel out of the country.²⁷ One respondent had previously successfully migrated from Nigeria to Egypt. She stated she had been able to pay off her travel costs within two years of arriving in Cairo, and had then returned to Nigeria. Spurred on by the current situation with COVID-19, she was now hoping to return to Cairo.

Despite urgency to leave, COVID-19 is slowing migration plans

COVID-19 caused most respondents to *delay* their migration plans. Several potential migrants in the sample had planned to depart in 2020. Although for many the urgency to leave Nigeria was much higher than prior to COVID-19, respondents either had less money and needed longer to save, or due to travel restrictions were unable to go when they wanted. None of the respondents felt their travel plans had been accelerated by COVID-19.

Key informants, potential migrants and family members agreed that people nonetheless migrated during the lockdown and a few respondents said they regretted that they too did not try: “In fact, because of the current level of hardship in the country, I wish I had gone.”²⁸

Some potential migrants believe that COVID-19 has increased job opportunities in destination countries

A few respondents thought that jobs abroad would be easily available because of COVID-19.

One respondent for example said: “I feel that the citizens of the country I want to travel to will be afraid and stay indoors due to COVID-19 and there will be many opportunities for jobs that they do not want to do that I can take advantage of.”²⁹ Others cited examples from non-European contexts:

²⁴ Female IDI 17, Male IDI 20, Male IDI 21; Context KII 1, Context KII 4; Giacomo Zandonini, ‘Nigerians returned from Europe face stigma and growing hardship’ (The New Humanitarian, 2020) accessed February 2021

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/07/28/Nigeria-migrants-return-Europe>.

²⁵ Context KII 1, Context KII 2.

²⁶ Male IDI 21.

²⁷ Context KII 1, Context KII 2.

²⁸ Male IDI 23.

²⁹ Male IDI 3.

- Most respondents knew and discussed that Canada had announced it would increase its immigration targets to boost its economic recovery.³⁰
- One potential migrant had been told that due to COVID-19, people from India and Pakistan had returned to their countries, leading to increased factory jobs in Dubai.³¹ In response he planned to take out a loan to travel, go on a one-month visa, overstay the visa, and pay back his loan once he got a job in a factory.
- Another migrant identified Oman as a preferred destination because a friend of his recently travelled there and told him there were jobs available.³²

Two respondents thought that the high number of COVID-19 fatalities abroad in particular meant increased job opportunities for migrants. One respondent for instance said that the COVID-19 period “is even the best time to migrate” as the news had shown that “the pandemic has claimed millions of lives in advanced countries like Spain, Italy, UK and France.” This made him conclude that “people need to replace these dead persons at their place of work, so migrants will be welcomed to help stabilise the workforce of such countries.”³³

“People I trust who are over there said COVID-19 has increased work opportunities for migrants because the dead have to be replaced at work. When you check the fatality figures in the western countries, you can’t but agree with them.”

Potential migrant, male

This belief that fatalities will mean more job availability is shared by other migrants according to a November 2020 article in *The Economist*, and also appears to be spread by Nigerians abroad who have called their friends or family members to encourage them to migrate.³⁴ Only a few respondents were aware of increasing unemployment rates in Europe, including for migrant workers.

Nigerian government’s COVID-19 response and continuous remittance flows as additional migration drivers

Multiple respondents felt the handling of COVID-19 by the Nigerian government in comparison to other countries was a new push factor. The sister of a male potential migrant shared how the COVID-19 pandemic had changed her mind regarding irregular migration. She stated that while she did not want anyone in her family to travel out of Nigeria by land because of the dangers, in the past six months she has started to feel conflicted especially after seeing how the Nigerian government officials “hoarded” aid meant for citizens.³⁵ She compared the harms caused by the Nigerian state to the harms committed by human traffickers against migrants in the desert. Another family member of a potential migrant said that the discovery that food aid had been locked up in warehouses rather than being distributed was enough to “change the mind [about migration] of even the most patriotic citizen”.³⁶

³⁰ 9 out of 38 respondents explicitly identified Canada as a destination location; Steve Schere, ‘Canada increases immigration targets, says they are key to economic recovery’ (Reuters, 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/article/canada-politics-immigration/canada-increases-immigration-targets-says-they-are-key-to-economic-recovery-idINKBN27F2NX>.

³¹ Context KII 6.

³² Male IDI 7.

³³ Male IDI 16.

³⁴ Male IDI 7, Male IDI 16; The Economist, ‘West Africans are dying trying to reach the Canary Islands’ (The Economist, November 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/11/26/west-africans-are-dying-trying-to-reach-the-canary-islands>.

³⁵ Female IDI 31.

³⁶ Female IDI 33.

Four respondents felt that COVID-19 relief provided by Western governments – including, for one respondent, the prospect of getting the COVID-19 vaccine – was a new benefit of migration. Respondents mentioned that citizens and migrants in other countries received COVID-19 relief in the form of money and food. This was contrasted with the reports of aid (also referred to as ‘palliatives’) left locked in warehouses in Nigeria, still undistributed months after the beginning of lockdown.³⁷

“Being the breadwinner of the family, it has been very difficult since the pandemic began. Meanwhile, people that travelled are sending financial support to their family members. That is why it is so essential to achieve this migration at all cost.”

Potential migrant, female

The lack of government support throughout the lockdown increased the contrast between families who receive remittances from abroad and those who don’t. According to one mother, “Many of my neighbours’ daughters that travelled are still there sending money and other things to their mothers. My daughter too must go.”³⁸ Nigeria has for years been amongst the top receiving countries of remittances globally.³⁹ Preliminary research suggests that remittances will decline in the face of a global recession.⁴⁰ Potential migrants were not aware of possible challenges abroad in finding employment which may impact their ability to send remittances. Instead they focused on evidence that others were still receiving remittances even during the most challenging months of the pandemic.

COVID-19 as new but not influential risk in irregular migration

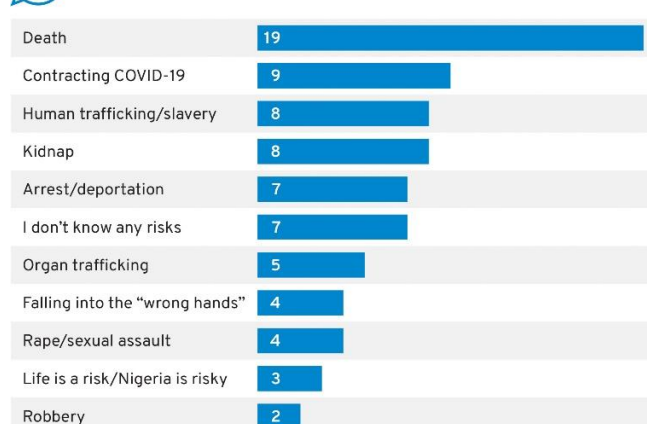
Three-quarters of the respondents were aware of serious risks from irregular migration. Seven respondents were not aware of any specific migration risks and three respondents did not take the risks very seriously. The rest of the respondents were able to identify key risks.

Even though contracting COVID-19 was a commonly cited risk, most felt that the global pandemic did not increase or decrease the risk of irregular travel. Instead, most of the risks mentioned were similar to the most commonly known risks prior to the pandemic, which many respondents were willing to take in order to ‘make it’ abroad. The most often mentioned risk was death, including by drowning at sea, starvation in the desert, or murder.

Nevertheless, the second most common risk cited was contracting COVID-19 (particularly in light of the difficulty of social distancing while traveling). This was, similar to many other risks, not a risk that respondents felt would make them change their migration intentions.



Respondent identified risks from migration



³⁷ Percy Dabang, Angela Ukomadu, ‘In Nigeria, looters target government warehouses stocked with COVID-19 relief’ (Reuters, November 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-nigeria-food-idUSKBN27P0VT>.

³⁸ Female IDI 38.

³⁹ International Organization for Migration, ‘World Migration Report’ (IOM, 2020), 36.

⁴⁰ IMREF, ‘Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on the Vulnerabilities of Migrants on the Central Mediterranean Route’ (IMREF 2020), 11; The World Bank, ‘COVID-19: Remittance Flows to Shrink 14% by 2021’ (The World Bank, 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/29/covid-19-remittance-flows-to-shrink-14-by-2021>.

Case Study: Effects of COVID-19 on Nigerian Diaspora and Influence on Potential Migrants

Nigerians in the diaspora remain a strong influence on potential migrants. The majority of respondents were being influenced by someone abroad to migrate - 28 out of 38 respondents cited family or friends abroad as a key factor in their migration decision making. Family and friends abroad were either encouraging, funding or facilitating migration; or they were taken as evidence of likely success. Potential migrants were confident that the information they received from friends and family about life in Europe was accurate.

When Peter [name changed] travelled out of Nigeria five years ago, his brother, who was recently married and had a good job, had originally wanted to go with him. Peter took time to plan his journey and worked hard to save enough to cover his travel expenses.

His journey over land to Europe was dangerous and involved tragedy, so much so that he said he would not recommend irregular migration to anyone: "Over 50% of the people we set out together with on this journey from Benin City did not make it across. Many died in the Libyan desert and on the sea. Some of these people I know and some were my childhood friends in Benin City. So, having gone through this, my opinion remains the same. Traveling out of Nigeria by land should be avoided at all costs."

He is now based in Italy. He still does not have legal papers and does not speak the language. He works sporadically in a factory, usually twice a week but sometimes not at all.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, Peter would send money home to family and friends for special occasions like Christmas and Easter, or to help with unexpected challenges such as the loss of a loved one. According to Peter, since the outbreak of COVID-19 he has been put under a new kind of financial pressure. He says that nearly every day he receives requests for financial assistance from family and friends. Most are asking for money to help pay for food. At the same time, two of his siblings, including the brother who originally wanted to travel with him, have lost their jobs. Peter says he has had to take out a loan in order to send money home, despite the fact that he is already struggling with "low earning capacity because the job opportunities available to people of my status are limited."

However, Peter's views to irregular migration are still mixed. Despite the challenges, he believes his situation is an improvement over life in Nigeria. He thinks COVID-19 has created new benefits of migration:

"Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Nigerian currency has continued to lose value compared to other currencies like the Dollar and Euro. For a Nigerian like me earning Euros abroad, that's a benefit because the little money I send home is now sufficient for my people to take care of their immediate needs after exchanging it to Nigerian Naira. [...] Another benefit I'm enjoying is good governance. During the lockdown in Edo State, my family said no form of aid got to them. Here in Italy, the government is making continued efforts to support people. They wire cash into your account. That is not so in Nigeria where the government is hoarding food in warehouses."

He nevertheless shared that now when his family calls him to ask for money, he sometimes gets angry, telling his brother to get a job and stop relying on him. His brother responds that he will soon join Peter abroad. Peter says COVID-19 delayed his brother's travel plans because his brother had to use some of his savings to buy food for the family. His brother has asked him for finances to support his travel and has asked for details about how to travel by land and how to cross borders without documents. Despite his recommendation not to travel irregularly, Peter says that he has "no objections to [my brother's]. After all, I did it myself and I'm better off today."

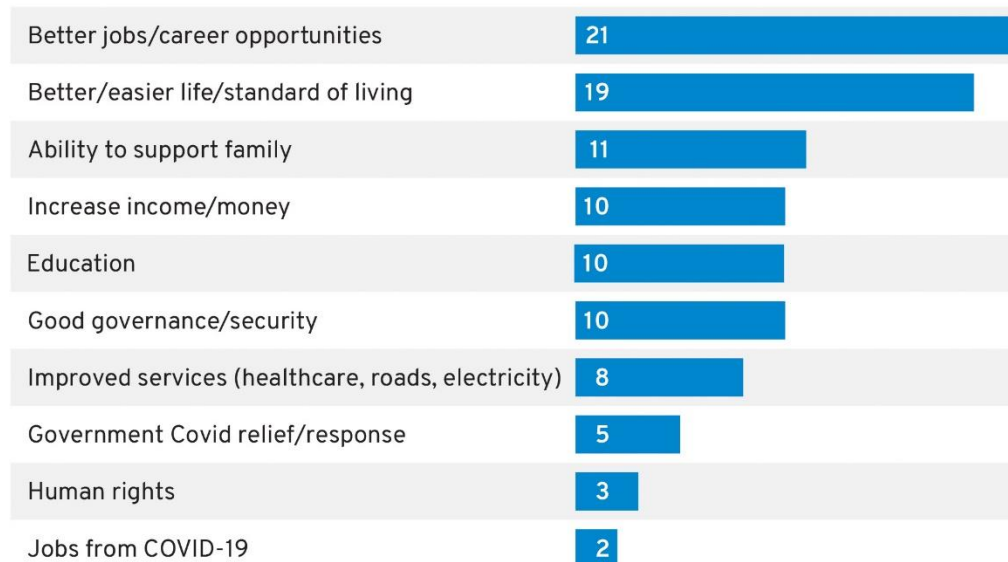
Key informants shared that many of those considering migrating are generally more focused on the benefits of migration (migration outcomes) than the risks (migration process). Some potential migrants felt the risk of dying in Nigeria would be just as high as dying on the road. Social media comments reflected this feeling, as people commented that it would be worth to risk dying of COVID-19 abroad than certainly dying in Nigeria either because of their economic situations or from COVID-19.⁴¹ For one key informant, this feeling was exacerbated by the #EndSARS protests and the focus on police brutality in Nigeria.

"If the government can kill those people, these migration risks are nothing. The government persecuted citizens and people died. The government shot people, so if the government can do that then any risk is worth taking. They say 'All die na die'. It means either I die in the desert, or on the sea, but everyone is going to die eventually so it doesn't matter what risk I take."

Key informant



Respondent identified benefits of migration



Ongoing lack of knowledge around irregular and legal migration

Respondents to this study often confused irregular and legal migration. On one hand, they felt that the legal route is too expensive and even less accessible since the outbreak of COVID-19 which is why they felt it is better to travel by land with the help of a sponsor or smuggler. On the other hand, some claimed they were planning to travel legally, despite describing irregular migration plans.

According to a female respondent, for instance, her family planned to travel 'legally' but when asked about the details of their plans, they were actually sending her husband 'by road' (irregularly): "We are only interested in a legal travelling arrangement in my family [...]. Part of the family plan is to gather money together and allow the head of family to go first. We strongly believe that he would be able to assist others very soon to join him there. He would be going by road, but later we would go there by air through his arrangement."⁴²

⁴¹ Social Media Data collected by Seefar's "The Migrant Project", March 2020 – December 2020.

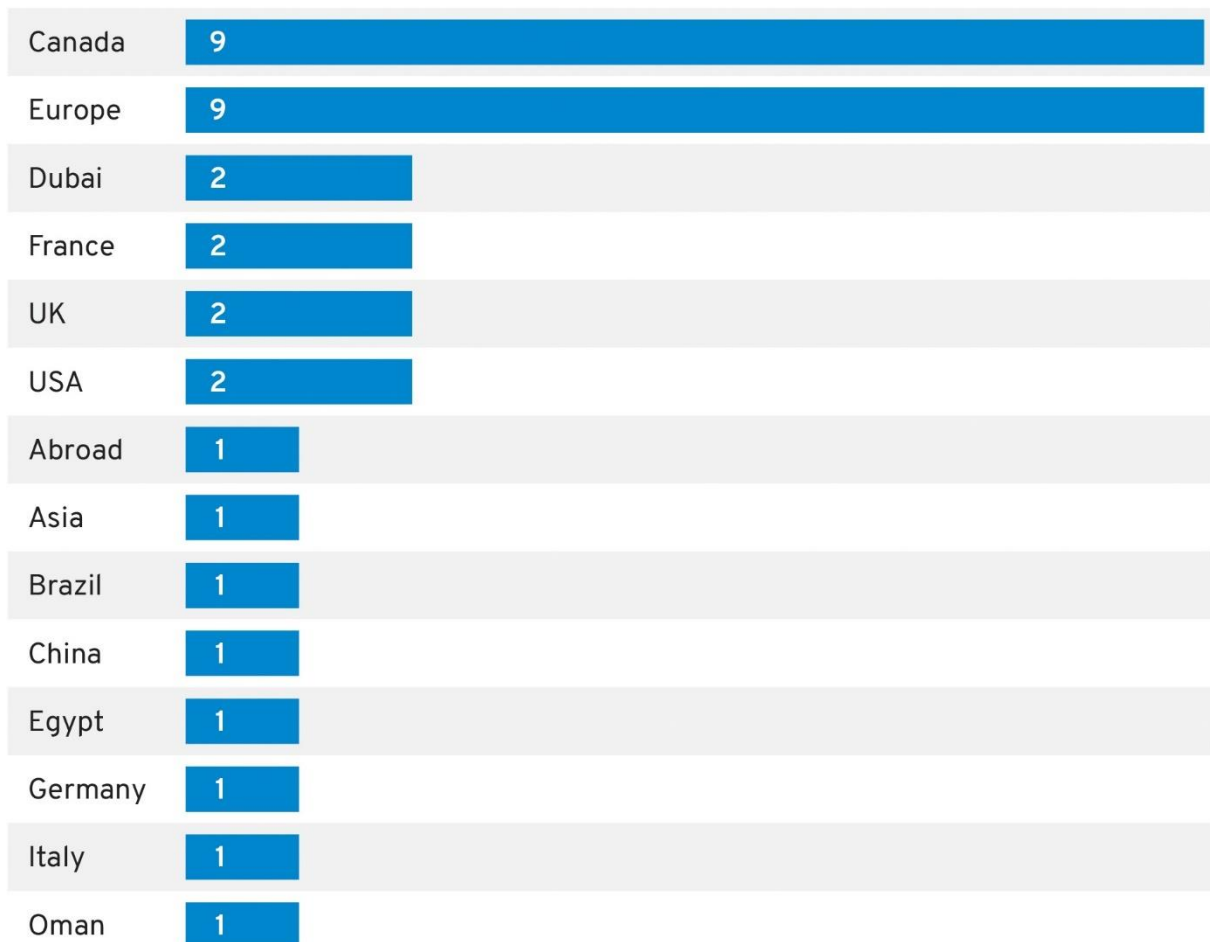
⁴² Female IDI 35.

COVID-19 did not impact most people's planned destinations

COVID-19 did not impact the majority of destination plans. Canada and “anywhere in Europe” were the most commonly cited preferred destinations in this study. This reflects data collected by Seefar prior to and during the outbreak of the pandemic. Of the more than 6,000 individuals in Nigeria who reached out for migration counselling between 1 March 2020 and 25 December 2020, 37% wanted to go to Canada, 11% said “anywhere in Europe” (without specifying a country), with the USA (10%) and the UK (9%) representing the next most desired destinations.⁴³ Data collected in the 6 months before March 2020 of approximately 4,000 potential migrants, shows there was a slightly lower preference for Canada (26% of the 4,000), a lower preference for anywhere in Europe (6%) and a higher preference for the USA (20%) and the UK (14%).



Preferred destination countries mentioned by interview respondents



⁴³ Data from Seefar's "The Migrant Project", collected between 2019 and 2021 in Nigeria.

Smuggling and Human Trafficking in Benin City

As shown in previous research, there is a thin line between TIP and migrant smuggling, particularly in Benin City.⁴⁴

- Trafficking in persons requires the presence of force, fraud, deception or coercion, with the aim of exploiting the person, and may or may not involve crossing borders.
- Smuggling of migrants involves assisting a person, for financial or material benefit, to irregularly cross a country's border to a place where the person is not a national or resident.⁴⁵

In this study and in previous literature, the general perception in Benin City is that smugglers are 'helpers' providing assistance, particularly to those in poverty, and are thus seen positively by members of the community and potential migrants.⁴⁶ Human traffickers on the other hand are viewed as dangerous: "Human traffickers are demons. I don't want to have anything to do with them."⁴⁷

However, many of the tactics employed by smugglers in Benin City are similar to those used by traffickers, particularly given the high rates of migration 'sponsorship' or debt-financed migration that also became apparent among respondents in this study. Migration debt can easily turn into debt-bondage, leaving a person trapped in an exploitative situation until they can pay off their travel. Similarly, it is not uncommon to hear of smuggling situations devolving into human trafficking on the journey. As such, many smuggled migrants are at high risk of being trafficked.⁴⁸

Keeping in mind the close links between smuggling and human trafficking, this section will first cover attitudes and emerging trends related to smuggling and irregular migration before looking into perceived changes to the situation of human trafficking.

"My neighbour fell into the hands of human traffickers in Libya. She was used for all sorts of work. She had no choice and was forced to sleep with some men who she never had a desire for. She confided in me that she did it thinking that they would help her to move to Europe."

Potential migrant, female

COVID-19 increases reliance on smugglers and traffickers

Irregular migration from Sub-Saharan Africa has continued despite restrictions on movement. Similar to existing literature, potential migrants and families as well as key informants all agreed that Nigerians continued to migrate irregularly during the lockdown, stating that despite travel restrictions it was still possible to go.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Context KII 3.

⁴⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime' (UNODC, 2000); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime' (UNODC, 2000).

⁴⁶ Context KII 4, Context KII 5; R. Evon Benson-Idahosa *et al* (eds), 'Pathway to Prevention: A Research Report on Recruiters of Sex Trafficking in Oredo LGA, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria' (Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2020).

⁴⁷ Female IDI 26.

⁴⁸ International Organization for Migration, 'Migrants and their Vulnerability to Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Forced Labour' (IOM, 2019) https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrants_and_their_vulnerability.pdf.

⁴⁹ The majority of IDI respondents and all KIIs agreed that migration continued during the lockdown; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Impact of the COVID crisis on migrant smuggling' (UNODC, September 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2020/September/impact-of-the-covid-crisis-on-the-crime-of-migrant-smuggling.html>.

Respondents felt that human trafficking would increase because of COVID-19, especially once travel restrictions ease. According to one potential migrant, “Human trafficking will be more now because young Nigerians desperate to leave Nigeria as a result of hardship caused by COVID-19 will fall victim.”⁵⁰ Previous research supports this, suggesting that trafficking victims are often recruited during periods of ongoing or deteriorating economic hardship. A key informant from NAPTIP felt that human trafficking would increase once the travel bans are lifted: “As soon as there is a lift in travel bans this is going to change. Already now, as soon as things relaxed, human traffickers began posing as travel agents and advertising a lot.”⁵¹

Key informants thought that increased COVID-19 related desperation means smugglers do not need to go out to recruit potential migrants, but that instead migrants will come to them. This could, however, not be corroborated by interviews with potential migrants themselves.

Border restrictions were thought to benefit smugglers and human traffickers, and increase vulnerabilities, as people rely on them more heavily to travel.⁵² According to a potential migrant, “since countries are on restriction mode, any other means to get to such country is a high risk to fall victim to human trafficking.”⁵³ Key informants similarly felt that there would be a greater reliance on smugglers because of the more complicated border situation and a higher level of desperation to travel.⁵⁴ According to the IOM, from January to November 2020, 16,760 people crossed irregularly by boat from the coasts of West Africa to the Canary Islands, representing a 1,019% increase in arrivals compared to the same period in 2019.⁵⁵ By December 2020, the number was estimated to be over 20,000.⁵⁶ Key informants stated that they were aware of migrants from Nigeria using the West Africa route to the Canary Islands.⁵⁷

COVID-19 increases cost of smuggling services, likely leading to heightened vulnerabilities

The cost of smuggling services has increased because of COVID-19. Key informants and potential migrants both stated that the pandemic benefited smugglers: “The only thing [that has changed because of COVID-19] is that the travel costs have increased. The connection people are demanding for so much more money now than before the pandemic.”⁵⁸

Increased prices are likely to also have increased vulnerability to risky smuggling practices and human trafficking. This is because most respondents felt the more expensive the smuggler the more likely that their journey would be successful. Respondents thought that if they paid more for a smuggler they were less likely to be trafficked or exploited. Potential migrants were aware of the rising costs due to COVID-19, but they primarily focused on paying more as a way to ensure they had a trustworthy smuggler.

“Yes, I am fully aware of the problem of human trafficking and that is why the amount being paid to the connection people are high to ensure that we don’t fall into the wrong hands. Those looking for the cheap connection people may likely fall into the hands of the human traffickers.”

Potential migrant, Female

⁵⁰ Female IDI 18.

⁵¹ Context KII 3.

⁵² Context KII 1, Context KII 4.

⁵³ Male IDI 2.

⁵⁴ Context KII 4.

⁵⁵ International Organization for Migration, ‘Irregular Migration Towards Europe | Western African Route: Migration to the Canary Islands’ (IOM, November 2020).

⁵⁶ Lucía Benavides, ‘Canary Islands face influx of migrants from West Africa’ (The World, December 2020) accessed February 2021 <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-12-09/canary-islands-face-influx-migrants-west-africa>.

⁵⁷ Context KII 2, Context KII 3.

⁵⁸ Female IDI 23.

Case Study: Football careers and indicators of unfree recruitment linked to human trafficking









A concerning theme raised in the data collected for this research was the prevalence of those planning to migrate for their football careers. Four of the 15 male potential migrants interviewed and 2 of the 10 families cited pursuing a professional football career as one of the primary reasons to migrate. Their migration plans had several similarities to cases reported in the media of potential footballers duped by smugglers and human traffickers.

Of the six aspiring footballers, one planned to irregularly migrate with the help of his friends who had already crossed to Europe. The other five were in touch with smuggling agents who were helping to arrange their travel. All believed that they had a good chance of making it as a professional footballer. The use of these agents, together with the plans disclosed by respondents, raises several indicators for human trafficking risks.

Data collected by Seefar demonstrates an increase in interest from potential migrants hoping to leave Nigeria to pursue a professional football career. In the six months prior to March 2020, 1% (50) of potential migrants were interested in migrating to pursue a football career. From March 2020 - December 2020, 4% of potential migrants (265) who reached out for information on migration cited pursuing a professional football career as their primary motivation for wanting to migrate.

Given the set up of football travel schemes, there is a high risk of fraud, debt bondage or human trafficking. As one respondent said: “One of the scariest human trafficking stories I’ve heard was about a young footballer that was supposed to have travelled with a football agent. I was told that the young boy has not been in contact with friends and families for years now. He can’t be reached and even the football agent has disappeared into thin air.”

The following table analyses the aspiring footballers’ plans against the risk of recruitment linked to debt and/or deceptive recruitment, indicators of unfree recruitment linked to human trafficking (International Labour Organization).

Respondent	Plans	Employment status	Migration plans	Destination	Payment	Indicators
Female family member, IDI 29	 Unknown  He is a footballer and has had this passion to travel out to go and play football. He plans to travel through Niger to Libya with four others arranged by an agent.			 Europe  He said that he has been giving the agent 50 thousand Naira every month and that after 10 months he will be qualified to travel with them. He has not asked me for money, but when he is traveling I plan to support him with some money to ease his journey.		Recruitment linked to debt.
Female family member, IDI 31	 Unknown  He stands a better chance of succeeding in his football career out there in more developed countries.			 Asia  He’s saving up money from his job as a sales assistant at a shopping mall to cover part of his travel expenses. He also confided in me that some of his old friends that have successfully crossed and are doing well have promised to assist him when it’s time to embark on the journey.		Respondent’s plans are not yet concrete. The family member is vulnerable to deceptive recruitment .



Respondent



Plans



Employment status



Migration plans



Destination



Payment



Indicators

Male IDI 14



Unemployed



I believe that if I travel out of Nigeria to Europe, sponsors will fall over themselves to sign me.



England, Canada or Brazil



I was told N100k - N150k [£200 - £300 GBP] it should be enough to finance my travel expenses by land.

The respondent is at risk for **recruitment linked to debt** and **deceptive recruitment**.

Male IDI 6



Part-time



I belong to a football academy in [...] and our coach registered us with an agent that will help process our papers to Asia. My agent is very reliable, he has helped other people too to cross.



Asia



I am not paying for now, my coach said that when they register me at a club in Asia then from the monthly salary they will pay me, they will take their money from there.

The payment plan is recruitment **linked to debt** and likely **deceptive recruitment**.

Respondent's plans echo known football scams to Asia.

Male IDI 10



Unemployed



Right now I'm talking to an agent that says he can help me travel to France. He said there are other boys like me and that we can all go together.



America or France



My cousin abroad has promised to help me when I'm ready and when my papers are out.

The respondent is at risk of **deceptive recruitment**.

France is a known destination country for trafficking via football scams.

Male IDI 15



Unemployed



My migration plans are still in the starting phase. I've discussed with a football agent about travelling to France. He told me it's a difficult task and that it's very dangerous also, but I still believe that it can be done the same way others before me did.



France



I'll be able to raise the money to cover my travel expenses through my friends and other family members since my parents have told me that they can't afford regular migration.

The respondent is at risk of **deceptive recruitment**.

France is a known destination country for trafficking via football scams.



Respondents did not link their own travel plans to the risk of human trafficking

Most respondents were aware of human trafficking but had a very limited sense of what constitutes human trafficking. Out of the 38 respondents, 7 said they did not know anything about human trafficking. The rest spoke strongly against human trafficking. However, for the majority human trafficking was defined, broadly, as young women tricked into forced sexual exploitation. A few potential migrants knew about organ trafficking.

"My own migration circumstance is a bit different [unlike other irregular migrants]. Someone, a close family friend based overseas, wants to assist me with the financing. When I get there I will be helped with employment and I will work and pay her back the money she spent on my migration."

Potential migrant, female

No one mentioned the risk of other forms of labour trafficking and respondents did not seem to realise that men could also fall victim to human trafficking. This situation is similar to before the outbreak of COVID-19 and data collected for this report does not indicate an increase/decrease in awareness of human trafficking and associated risks.

Respondents in this study also did not view their own travel plans as possible cases of TIP, in part because they trusted the person helping with their migration. According to research by the Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 76% of trafficked persons from Edo State knew their recruiter.⁵⁹ Smuggling networks were deeply linked to family and friends and the majority of respondents had contacts to smugglers through friends or family members who they were planning to rely on for their migration.

This lack of risk internalisation may also be based on the limited perception on the different forms of human trafficking. For example, one female respondent described a classic trafficking recruitment scheme – which has often been used by those who traffic young women into domestic work – sharing that a close family friend would support her migration, using the relationship of trust to enable recruitment linked to debt, an indicator of human trafficking. Another potential migrant shared a similar case, where the outcome was typical of human trafficking: "I heard about the story of a young girl that travelled overseas from my neighbourhood in Benin City. She was helped overseas by a lady. On getting there, the lady who helped her tripled the amount they agreed on before leaving Nigeria."⁶⁰

Perceived increase in online recruitment

Respondents felt smugglers and traffickers were increasingly recruiting online, particularly because people were stuck at home, spending more time on social media and coming across more online opportunities.⁶¹ Potential migrants reported seeing more opportunities abroad on social media: "All over social media there are adverts announcing different migration plans for people."⁶²

Key informants felt that with social media, there was less need to recruit in person. Some informants suggested that the lockdown period gave smugglers and traffickers time to refine their tactics online.

⁵⁹ R. Evon Benson-Idahosa *et al* (eds), 'Pathway to Prevention: A Research Report on Recruiters of Sex Trafficking in Oredo LGA, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria' (Pathfinders Justice Initiative, 2020)

⁶⁰ Female IDI 19.

⁶¹ Male IDI 10, Female IDI 19, Male IDI 22; Context KII 1, Context KII 3, Context KII 6, Context KII 7, Context KII 8, Context KII 9.

⁶² Male IDI 10.

This change is particularly concerning because of the lack of risk internalisation outlined above, where, for example, respondents felt their own migration plans were unlikely to end in exploitative conditions. These perceptions were often linked to personal recruitment networks – a trust perception that might be transferred to online recruitment practices that manage to seem “reliable” or “trustworthy” but which may further increase vulnerability to human trafficking.

“Nigerian women are being trafficked to Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Togo etc. This seems to be the new trafficking pattern since the outbreak of COVID-19. I think this is as a result of tighter control of migration over the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa and lack of funds to travel as far as North Africa in the first instance.”

Family member

For some, online channels enable more secret migration planning

The increasing use of online channels – including as a result of COVID-19 – also enables some youth to plan their journeys without informing their families. Several respondents shared that they were planning their journeys through friends or agents and would not share their plans with their families until they had their ‘papers’.⁶³

An informant explained that as awareness about the danger of irregular migration has increased, there are families who do not want their children to go abroad, particularly during the pandemic. According to him, these young people who still want to migrate may organise their travel online, disappear, only to reappear later on Facebook, with photos clearly taken in Europe. These online photos and posts showing a ‘successful’ journey to Europe in turn again serve as a form of passive recruitment through social media.

“They are more calculated now because of COVID-19. They are smarter, they work more with technology in terms of communication. Because of COVID-19 they are not [physically present] but communicate a lot through social media [...] and they have increased their knowledge in terms of operation.”

Kev informant

Key informants say that traditional recruitment is still happening in rural areas where there is less internet access and much less awareness of human trafficking. They gave examples such as banners being erected and flyers or business cards being distributed by traffickers advertising opportunities abroad.⁶⁴

Reported increase of trafficking cases to other African countries

A NAPTIP key informant reported an increase of human trafficking cases to other African countries. Victims were told they would be taken to Italy or Dubai but were instead trafficked to Burkina Faso or Mali.⁶⁵ Smugglers and traffickers may use the restrictions on movement as an excuse to take migrants’ money, move them to another African country and then abandon them or sell them to traffickers, citing border closures as preventing them from travelling any further.⁶⁶ One family member had heard of increased trafficking to other African countries, sharing that since the outbreak of COVID-19.

⁶³ Female IDI 4, Male IDI 15, Female IDI 17, Female IDI 18.

⁶⁴ Context KII 9.

⁶⁵ Context KII 3.

⁶⁶ Context KII 3.

Case Study: Online Travel Agents

In the aftermath of the lockdown, there has been an increase of online ads promising 'legal' migration opportunities and travel-now-pay-later schemes. Respondents stated that they were aware of new job opportunities being shared online since the pandemic: "Some of our friends outside the country are sending us travel opportunities on WhatsApp. There are so many opportunities there, outside the shores of this country." Kils also agreed a significant amount of recruitment is now being done over social media, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Key informants stated that traffickers are posing as legitimate travel agents. This type of recruitment likely contributes to the confusion between legal and irregular migration opportunities that potential migrants expressed in this study.

According to one key informant, smugglers (and traffickers) just need a graphic designer to set them up with an advertisement and they are able to begin recruiting people with promises of hassle-free visas or travel-now-pay-later schemes, placing people at high risk of debt bondage. Another key informant explained:

"Since the recent lifting of travel bans there have been travel agents who have been smuggling migrants, and they have added more posts and advertisements to social media making promises and saying you can go here, the travel ban is lifted, you will get a good job, we will help you, and they are promising hassle-free visas."

Several of these ads were analysed as part of this study. The ads used language that made the opportunity appear urgent. They used slogans like "Only a few slots available", "First come first serve" and "Fastest fingers only", leaving the reader with the feeling that if they do not act immediately then they might miss the opportunity.

Ads promised "legitimate" visas to Canada, Poland, Germany, France, Australia, New Zealand, UAE etc., and asked for a "visa fee" to be paid immediately, with amounts ranging from NGN 50,000-NGN 400,000. They included details such as a travel route to Europe through Belarus - the "Easiest way to enter Europe". Or in one case, a two-year "visit" visa to New Zealand and a guaranteed job on arrival. This ad included a complicated travel plan using a Cruise Ship to travel to New Zealand via Fiji:

"Once the visa is out, upon travelling you will fly from Nigeria by air to Fuji Island [sic]. From Fuji Island you will join Cruise ship to New Zealand where you will be picked by our contact person who will fix you up with a job." - Nigerian travel ad shared on Social Media, December 2020.

One key informant explained that she tries to encourage critical thinking by asking potential migrants to reflect on why someone would offer them a (low-skill) travel-now-pay-later job, when the unemployment rates in destination countries are currently on the rise:

"I tell them that travel-now-pay-later is not possible. You either get a smuggler or trafficker. The majority of migrants are looking for assistance from someone that will take them abroad. A lot of people are really looking now. If there are smugglers online, if they are looking for someone to pay, they will find them."

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report set out to study the impact of COVID-19 on migration intentions, and with that, perceived changes to smuggling services and human trafficking among a sample of potential migrants and family members in Benin City, Nigeria. It highlighted key areas of change resulting from the global pandemic and related movement restrictions that donors in the migration, human trafficking and protection realm should take into account for future programming in order to better support potential migrants and work towards preventing harmful migration practices.

1. Engage the most vulnerable potential migrants and their families to change migration behaviours

There is agreement that irregular migration from Benin City has taken place – and will continue to take place – despite COVID-19. Because of the severe economic consequences of the global pandemic, key informants foresee an increase in migration intentions that may undermine years of awareness raising. This is despite a decrease in migration flows from Nigeria and Benin City in early 2020 and reported delays in existing plans in response to movement restrictions.

At the same time, potential migrants did not see themselves as at risk during irregular migration journeys – or they considered that these risks were outweighed by risks at home – and none thought they may fall victim to human trafficking. This suggests that there is a high likelihood that those who plan on leaving Nigeria will end up in exploitative and harmful conditions, including as victims of human trafficking.

International donors and key stakeholders **should consider investing in new or existing migration communications initiatives** to engage the most vulnerable potential migrants and their families, with an emphasis on changing their migration behaviours. These were not only explicitly requested by some key informants but can help the large number of potential migrants who feel a much higher level of urgency to migrate and a much lower level of understanding of the magnitude of risks to make better informed migration decisions.

Specifically, migration communications activities should:

- Provide a detailed and balanced portrayal of life abroad to address high expectations of migration outcomes (such as the perception that there are job opportunities resulting from a reduced workforce in Europe because of COVID-19 fatalities);
- Focus on helping potential migrants to consider whether increased economic distress should lead to more investment in risky migration, compared to other options they may have;
- Place emphasis on internalising the risks of irregular migration – especially human trafficking – and understanding that higher payment does not mean lower risks;
- Include individual/personalised messaging to help potential migrants think critically about their own migration plans and risks to human trafficking.⁶⁷ This can also provide opportunities to clarify legal migration options;

⁶⁷ See Seefar, European Commission. 'Study on best practices in irregular migration awareness campaigns.' October 2020, available upon request.

- Target young men who are often unaware of forms of TIP not involving women and trafficking for the purpose of sex work. Explain risks associated with debt bondage, forced labour and deceptive recruitment practices;
- For those who decide they want to migrate, focus on messaging and skills that will allow people to travel legally rather than just telling them they should not migrate (see also recommendation 2 below).

2. Link potential migrants, returnees and victims of trafficking to viable livelihood opportunities

The primary reason for potential migrants wanting to leave Nigeria irregularly – and wanting to do so more urgently than prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 – was connected to the severe decline in economic opportunities and income.

What is more, the economic impact of COVID-19 on returnees and victims of trafficking, including those who had received some form of reintegration support, was crucial in re-migration aspirations. This makes potential gains achieved as part of the existing return and reintegration programmes less likely to have a medium-term impact on its beneficiaries.

Donors and humanitarian organisations should consider **providing ongoing support to beneficiaries of assistance upon return – and returnees in general** – ideally through individualised coaching on how to maintain their businesses or income streams as ripple effects of the pandemic continue to harm and encourage them to instead invest in another irregular migration journey.

- ➔ Seefar's Livelihoods Initiative for Transformation (LIFT), for example, provides training to access the global freelance economy and adaptive counselling for survivors of violence and trafficking. The programme focuses on supporting returnees and human trafficking survivors in becoming more self-starting, confident of overcoming barriers, and targeting a future oriented beyond a one-off engagement with them.

Business development programmes for returnees and TIP survivors should include **coaching on new market opportunities and support to pivot business models in response to new market demands**, such as those brought by COVID-19. Examples from key informants include supporting returnees and TIP survivors to adapt their businesses to be viable during the pandemic by moving to mobile or remote services, or to create and sell products in high demand, such as soap or hand sanitiser. This will help returnees and TIP survivors strengthen their economic position and reintegrate more fully in Nigeria.

Migration communications activities, too, should be connected to viable livelihood alternatives for those remaining in Nigeria. This could be achieved through opportunity monitoring and sharing, where coaches/mentors could help potential migrants access local opportunities. Existing livelihoods programming implemented by international donors should be linked to, advertised to, and opened specifically for, potential migrants, creating synergies between wider programming and migration/modern slavery/human trafficking programming more specifically.

3. Address increased signs of online trafficking schemes

Due to COVID-19, more and more recruitment by smugglers and human traffickers occurs online. Coupled with low awareness on what constitutes human trafficking, the higher reliance on smugglers/traffickers and lower involvement of personal networks, this constitutes a major risk for both male and female potential migrants in Benin City.

Key informants thought that increased COVID-19 related desperation means smugglers do not need to go out to recruit potential migrants, but that instead migrants will come to them. However more detailed and larger-scale research on the effects of online recruitment on potential migrants and demand for trafficking is needed.

Donors, international organisations and local agencies should **commission research to better understand the effects of increasing online recruitment on the recruitment chain and demand among potential migrants**. This could include a survey among potential migrants and in-depth interviews with smugglers and recruiters.

Law enforcement agencies should increase responses to online recruitment and prevent and respond to forms of TIP originating on social media platforms. Both technical equipment and training for online investigations could be beneficial for this.

Communications activities, as suggested previously, should **include an (online and offline) component of their messaging that focuses on addressing false information shared in online job advertisements**. This includes explaining the risks of these types of schemes and helping migrants clearly understand the dangers.

The comparatively low investment needed to strategically address people at risk of falling victim to online recruitment makes a specific online component viable. **Google AdWords and/or Facebook targeting** can be used to target, inform and divert people engaged in risky migration planning.

4. Explore the role of the Nigerian diaspora in influencing and informing migration plans

In this study, the Nigerian diaspora was a major source of (dis)information for potential migrants. As the urgency to migrate due to COVID-19 increases, the role of 'trusted' friends and family abroad – often a key linkage for fraudulent recruitment, recruitment linked to debt, and human trafficking – will become even more prominent. This, together with the role of social media in connecting migrants to irregular migration opportunities and portraying life abroad, represent important and under-researched areas regarding migration planning and intentions.

Further research can parse out the cognitive dissonance portrayed in the case study wherein the family member of a potential migrant felt that no one should risk irregular travel, and at the same time, was pushing for his brother to join him abroad.

It can also **identify key myths portrayed about life abroad, in order to inform the future design and implementation of migration and human trafficking awareness campaigns**. These, in turn, can be used to inform messaging directed at potential migrants, as direct engagement with this audience tends to be more effective in awareness raising and behaviour change than working through diaspora.

5. Counter risks of forced labour by fostering regular, ethical labour migration

Most respondents in Benin City planned on leaving Nigeria due to economic hardship, exacerbated by COVID-19. Many were looking for work opportunities abroad, sometimes relying on stories they heard about jobs abroad becoming available because of COVID-19.

A number of respondents suggested they were pursuing work opportunities in Gulf countries or football careers in Europe. When describing their plans, many showed signs of being highly vulnerable to forced labour, especially through debt-bondage.

Because underlying economic drivers of migration are difficult to address on a large-scale, **alternative (productive) migration options can help prevent dangerous irregular migration practices**. International donors should consider exploring avenues to foster regional and international labour migration.

Ethical recruitment initiatives that focus on enabling migrants to leave their home countries and gain meaningful and ethical employment abroad can be one way of addressing these economic drivers and the associated risks of forced labour.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ See for example, The Ethical Recruitment Agency. <https://supporters.ethicalrecruitmentagency.com/ec-businesses-stay-ahead/>

Annex 1

Methodology

Desk Review

A thorough literature review was conducted to ensure that existing research on migration intentions and the consequences of COVID-19 are taken into account. This was done through a tailored desk review methodology: 1) Seefar's thematic expert generated a list of key search terms; 2) Sources were identified through keyword searches in academic databases (e.g. ProQuest databases, Google Scholar), humanitarian and development reports and analysis (e.g. from IOM, UNHCR, UNODC, NGOs, Nigerian CSOs and others), Seefar's proprietary research and our existing reference database, as well as other online searches; 3) Sources were screened for quality and catalogued in Zotero. Each source achieving minimum quality was analysed for information relevant to the research questions specified above.

Social Media Content Analysis

Publicly available data was gathered from social media platforms, these included The Migrant Project Edo Facebook page, IOM Nigeria, and InfoMigrants. Additionally, migration opportunities targeting Nigerians, were identified by Seefar's Nigeria-based social media manager. Posts, comments and adverts were analysed to provide further context and insight on how potential migrants seek and gain information, particularly during the COVID-19 containment measures. These posts and public comments provide a snapshot of the conversations happening online regarding migration. This is relevant as according to previous research carried out by Seefar in Nigeria, more smugglers and human traffickers are recruiting potential migrants using online spaces. Additionally, as COVID-19 restrictions prevent in-person research to take place, the social media qualitative content analysis provided non-representative insights that informed and supplemented the desk review and qualitative interviews.

Remote Key Informant Interviews

Remote semi-structured qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) amongst 9 community informants and migration/human trafficking experts in Benin City took place in late November and early December 2020. Respondents were identified using a purposive sampling strategy targeting actors who can provide meaningful perspectives and commentary on the impact of COVID-19 on migration intentions and on behaviours surrounding access and use of smugglers and perspectives on human trafficking. Seefar's in-country coordinator provided a list of respondents and a Seefar researcher contacted the nine respondents and carried out the remote interviews. Each lasting approximately one hour. The KIIs included the founders of Nigerian-based organisations NAME Foundation, Pathfinders Justice Initiative, and Patriotic Citizens Initiative, as well as the Edo-based staff of The Migrant Project and NAPTIP.

Remote In-depth Interviews

The second phase of the study included 38 in-depth, semi-structured qualitative phone based IDIs using an interview guide informed by the first phase of data collection and adapted to two different target respondents: potential migrants (28) and families of potential migrants (10) in Benin City. The qualitative research design necessitated a purposive approach to sampling IDIs to ensure relevance and link to potential migration. Seefar leveraged its in-country network to identify potential migrants and families of potential migrants who reflect a variety of characteristics and experiences. Potential migrants were defined as those who plan to migrate in the next 12-months. Efforts were made to ensure gender parity, as such, 46% (13 out of 28) of potential migrants, and 60% (6 out of 10) of the families of potential migrants, identified as female. Of the potential migrants, 14 respondents were between 18 – 24 years of age, 11 were between 25 – 34 years old, and 3 were between 35 – 44 years old. Respondent family members of potential migrants included 3 aged 25 – 34, 5 aged 35 – 44, and 2 were over the age of 44. All IDIs are quoted anonymously in this report. All IDIs are quoted anonymously.

The interview guide was designed by (1) assembling all research questions, (2) removing research questions that are fully addressed in the desk review and (3) using Seefar's contextual knowledge, and knowledge gained from the desk review, SM content analysis and KIIs to construct targeted analytical questions. The qualitative research tool was developed in partnership with Seefar's country team for cultural sensitivity.

Limitations

The research is naturally limited by constraints of the number of people interviewed and access to, and amount of social media content analysed, thus the findings are not representative. Additionally, the remote nature of carrying out qualitative research in the context of COVID-19 meant the sample was even more purposeful as potential migrants had to be remotely identified and screened to fit the criteria. Seefar has accounted for this in the design of this research, namely, by including a social media analysis to gather additional insights from those who publicly engage with relevant migration pages, and by talking to key informants to engage a third perspective.

Due to the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study should be read in context, recognising that the situation is changing very quickly in Nigeria. For example, half-way through the data collection, new containment measures were announced in Nigeria. However, most respondents refer to the impacts of the first lockdown in April – May 2020 when discussing the impact of COVID-19 containment measures.

Respondents were primarily based in and around Benin City. This means that the perspectives represented are primarily from urban respondents. Thus the experiences of rural participants have not been captured. KIIs pointed out that it is likely that urban and rural participants are targeted differently by traffickers and smugglers, noting that rural participants have less internet access and have had less exposure to prevention and awareness campaigns. As such, KIIs anticipated that people living in rural areas are less likely to have access to false jobs advertised online, and are more likely to be presented with 'typical' trafficking scenarios when being recruited. Future research should include rural perspectives where possible.



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