

# THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF IRREGULAR AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN EUROPE: QUESTIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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## Introduction

Irregular<sup>1</sup> african migrants in Europe have increased tremendously in the last few years. With the on-going Mediterranean crisis, migratory flows from Africa make up the largest share of migration into Europe<sup>2</sup>. They come in rickety ships and boats, and arrive almost every day at the Southern European shores, most of them fleeing genuine human crisis. The Migration Policy Institute believes there are between seven and eight million irregular African migrants living in the European Union (EU), an increasing number coming from Western Africa, mainly Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal<sup>3</sup>

Increased migration from Africa to Europe is the result of the inability of many families to provide for themselves. A good number of poor African countries are also states where the democratic process is so fragile, and the rule of law so weak that corruption is rife. From these countries citizens prefer to migrate to protect themselves and their families against the effect of weak economy and its attendant risks<sup>4</sup>. And so, crying out for liberation from such oppressive conditions of poverty, some African migrants leave without proper travel documents, cross bodies of waters, traverse large stretches of desert, face the relentless pursuit of authorities, and journey in hope toward a 'promised land'<sup>5</sup>. Mary Delorey in describing the factors that influence people's decision to migrate noted that nearly a third of all migrants move from developing countries to developed countries with advanced economy and stronger democratic institutions<sup>6</sup>. Here they hoped to find a secure environment, safe life and a better future for themselves and their families. No wonder many head toward rich countries in Europe which supposedly present such better opportunities.



In this article I examine the social and economic challenges of irregular African migrants in Europe against the background of poverty as a driving force. The paper attempts to relate the situations that confront these African migrants to that of Abraham as a migrant in Egypt. It will then offer questions for theological reflection on Abraham's struggle in Egypt, and how the God of Abraham, himself the migrant, followed Abraham as defender of and provider for him. I seek to show that, similarly, God appears to the migrants in many ways and leads them to find favor before their host. I approach the essay from my personal experience among African migrants in Germany as a minister of the gospel and a pastor. I was in Germany as a regular migrant and had contacts with some irregular migrants from Ghana.

### **The Driving Force behind Irregular Migration**

To flee from poverty and to seek a better life for oneself and family has been the main driving force behind irregular African migration to Europe as the following statistics (facts and figures) show: The 2005 Human Development Index (HDI) declared many sub-Saharan African countries as poor countries.<sup>7</sup> The HDI figures measure and show the deteriorating human conditions and welfare with regards to income, health and education and exposes the ever widening poverty gap between the developed and the developing countries. The current surge of African migrants to Europe which is a huge problem to receiving countries is a clear indication of further deteriorating human conditions and welfare, and a sign that poverty has worsened across Africa since 2005.

According to the report of the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM)<sup>8</sup>, job and income/wage disparities, unemployment rate, differentials in life expectancy and education gaps between rich and poor countries are critical issues that inform people's decision to migrate in search of better opportunities. Whilst more than 45.7% of people earn less than \$1 per day in sub-Saharan Africa, only less than 10.4% in Europe may earn \$20 per day. Migrants moving from Africa can earn 20 to 30 times as much when they find job in Europe, where unemployment rate could also be as low as 6.6% compared to 12.2% in Africa<sup>9</sup>. Although life expectancy may largely depend on people's lifestyle and not necessarily on economic factors, research has shown that people living in high income countries tend to live



longer than in low income countries, where over 90% of the people may live below subsistence levels.<sup>10</sup> And whilst literacy rate may be as low as 58% with only 76% primary school enrolment, there is almost full (100%) literacy and enrolment in high income countries.

People from poor African countries choose to migrate because the potential benefits are perceived to outweigh the investment, hardship, risk to life, and potential rejection or exploitation in the destination country. For example, the best recorded Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per Capita in Ghana since 1960 was 775.46 USD in 2014, compared to 39,717.70 USD in Germany in the same year<sup>11</sup>. That implies while a skilled laborer in Ghana takes home 775.46 USD for a year's income, an unskilled day laborer, perhaps an irregular migrant in Germany can earn that much in less than one month. Even if income increases in the country of origin, continuing wage disparities would exert a considerable influence on the decision to migrate, and hence the 'exodus'<sup>12</sup>.

## **THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF IRREGULAR AFRICAN MIGRANTS**

In discussing the challenges of African migrants in the destination countries, it is important to note that migration is usually handled more from the interest of states, employers, business owners, and the receiving communities, and less from the interest of migrants. This section of the paper looks at the economic and social challenges of irregular migration at the following levels:

### **In the Hands of Residents**

Naturally limited options for legal migration leads to an increase in the abuse and exploitation of particularly irregular migrants. On their arrival they often fall prey to unsuspecting people who may come to them for the purpose of offering genuine hospitality. In the process they may assist the migrants to have a place of abode and to secure a job, but at a higher price than what a regular migrant would have obtained. The vulnerable new comer, often with no knowledge at all of the new environment, would often have no option than to accept an offer on any condition. Thus at the end of the month an irregular migrant who manages to find job takes home not more than



900 Euros as unskilled laborer. They soon realize this amount is not enough to meet their basic needs. Thus begin their frustration and disappointment as they struggle to find daily bread.

The situation becomes worse for them when they are confronted with the reality of not being able to send money home to the family left behind nor call them regularly to keep in touch. This experience becomes, perhaps, their first cultural shock in the 'Promised Land' they had dreamt. They may realize too late that the picture of the 'Promised Land', as they saw before setting off, might not be real. Or even if it is as they saw, it is so only for the regular residents. And so in order to become a regular migrant to also enjoy the fruits of the 'Promised Land' on which they now live, they need to work towards transforming their resident status at any cost, no matter how high the price to pay.

The challenges come to them from two fronts. First is the harsh treatment that they experience from the host country as irregular migrants. The second group is the men and women from their home country who had come ahead of them as irregular migrants, and have managed to survive the challenges. For instance, the first thing irregular migrants from Ghana would do is to approach fellow Ghanaian irregular migrants who have graduated to the level of regular migrants for assistance. Sadly in most cases the old migrants tend to abuse and exploit their fellow Ghanaians instead of genuinely assisting them. The attitude that seems to fuel the chain of exploitation in the migrant communities is the saying, "as others did unto you, do unto others who arrive later".

For many irregular migrants in Europe, Hoeffner and Pistone's comment below makes regularization of status a mask:

For immigration in many countries, regularization of status, especially the grant of permanent status, constitutes a powerful legal incentive to migration. Conversely, the prospect of irregular status - with its attendant string of legal sanctions and disabilities (for example, the threat of deportation, ineligibility for many government programs, limited employment options and labor rights, and greatly circumscribed political rights) is a powerful legal disincentive<sup>13</sup>.



For the above reason irregular migrants would go to any extent to regularized their status and the processes involved present another set of challenges. The 'family process' for instance, usually take advantage of the family immigration laws of the host country. Yet, it can become so frustrating and in their desperation, the aiding parties often tend to exploit and abuse the needy migrants. But without regular status they may remain outside the protection and support of the authorities. And therefore, even in the midst of exploitation and abuse, they would still do everything to change their status.

### **In the Hands of Governing Authorities**

Michael Nausner mentioned the economic argument (the argument that migration benefits the receiving countries) as the only effective and legitimate argument for liberalizing immigration policies. "We are entitled to the wealth we have acquired, and we allow them to come in only insofar as they benefit our economy."<sup>14</sup> He explained that it is of economic reasons that the borders of EU are not sealed off entirely, opening portions to serve as tools to sort out desirable from undesirable migrants. But once the 'undesirables' also manage to sneak in, the unwelcomed guests are treated by the authorities as people who do not deserve a fair share of what the 'desirables' are given.

Attitude of governments toward irregular migrants may again be analyzed at the level of macroeconomic forces, which states that the key feature of modern migration consists of 'migration of labor, and not of people'<sup>15</sup>. A person with the desired economic skill is permitted to come in as a regular migrant and another without the required skill is rejected. In the destination countries, immigration policies of governments may only favor the 'skilled' migrant workers and not the irregular who are often categorized as 'unskilled' due to their economic and social circumstance. Such irregular migrants are often used cheaply by business men to maximize their profit. At this experience we take a look in the last section of the discussion - the challenges of irregular migrants in the hands of employers.

### **In the hands of employers**

Like the treatment of the Jews in captivities in Egypt, "policies of exclusion, based on maximizing the interest of all except the poor migrant, tend to get as much as possible out of migrants while giving



them the barest minimum<sup>16</sup>. Generally, the risk of exploitation and abuse increases with the employer in whose hands, it seems, the fate of the poor migrant lies.

For instance, with the increased number of Germany's unskilled and semi-skilled migrants competing for the same job offers, the irregular stand the risk of getting no job at all, rendering them unemployed and chattering their dreams of the 'promised land'. If they find job at all, it may be menial, mini and temporal with no working conditions at all, and the employer may terminate the appointment at his whim and caprice. Perhaps, we may compare their working conditions, if they have any at all, to the migrants who worked in the Nazi war economy in Germany as described by Fritz Sauckel, the Plenipotentiary for Labor in Hitler's government: "All the men must be fed, sheltered and treated in such a way as to exploit them to the highest possible extent at the lowest conceivable degree of expenditure."<sup>17</sup> By that statement, Sauckel meant housing workers in barracks under military control, the lowest possible wages (or none at all), appalling social and health conditions, and complete deprivation of civil rights. Sauckel is reported to have said in a speech to employers, "I don't care about them (foreign workers) one bit. If they commit the most minor offence at work, report them to the police, hang them, and shoot them. I don't care. If they are dangerous, they must be liquidated"<sup>18</sup>.

Today, many foreign workers in Europe, especially the irregular migrants, earn so little that they are not able to meet their expenses for the month. Migrant workers may not be housed in Barracks under military control, and yet all they may afford for housing is no better than an abandoned Barrack. Sometimes, to avoid the possibility for migrants to grow in their jobs, gain much experience in their skills for better economic opportunities, employers limit the duration of contracts<sup>19</sup>. As governments continue to apply strict state control of labor recruitment to ensure that irregular migrants are not illegally employed, and sanctioning employers who may flout this regulation, life becomes more and more unbearable for them.

But do we blame African migrants for their predicaments in the destination countries? The answer, for me, lies in the conditions of the originating countries as described below:



“[Many] have no possibility of acquiring the basic knowledge which would enable them to express their creativity and develop their potential. They have no way of entering the network of knowledge and intercommunication which would enable them to see their qualities appreciated and utilized. Thus, if not actually exploited, they are to a great extent marginalized; economic development takes place over their heads, so to speak.”<sup>20</sup>

Hence their bitter experience in foreign lands where they seek sustenance.

### **THE GOD OF THE MIGRANT – SOME THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

The Story of Abraham in Egypt raises some questions for theological reflection on migration (Genesis 12: 10-20). Abraham was promised a land with great blessings by God (Gen 12:1f.), and in obedience to God’s directives he left Haran with the entire family and arrived in Canaan (12: 5-7). What is fascinating is that even though Abraham was on the Promised Land he had some challenges. There was severe famine that threatened his livelihood (Gen. 12:10). According to Daniel Carroll the climatic conditions in that part of the land of Canaan where the family had earlier settled was precarious, and nomads were particularly at risk there<sup>21</sup>. Abraham being a nomad, might have felt that he had to abandon Canaan and looked for sustenance in Egypt. Was Abraham’s decision to migrate to Egypt indicative of his lack of faith in God’s ability to provide for his economic needs in the Promised Land? Was the migration to Egypt contrary to God’s original plan for Abraham? Did Abraham seek to hear God’s voice or direction in the midst of his crises, particularly the famine? So could Abraham have migrated to Egypt purely for economic and security reasons just as many modern migrants do? To put it differently, could genuine human needs which compel many migrants to embark on perilous journey have also compelled Abraham and family to travel to Egypt? As a result of hunger for basic necessities of life, many people travel in search for sustenance - economic and social security. Yet, economic and social security are not easily obtained without challenges.



In his attempt to seek more favorable conditions of life in Egypt, Abraham faced challenges which could have endangered his marriage to Sarah and for that matter the promise of progeny<sup>22</sup>, but for God's timely intervention (Genesis 12:17). Being worried about his own safety and that of his family due to the exceptional beauty of his wife, Abraham lied when he asked Sarah to present herself to Pharaoh as his sister<sup>23</sup> (cf. Genesis 12: 13). His motive was certainly to ensure the safety of the entire family. But is this deception justified? What were the immediate consequences of Abraham's decision on Pharaoh and his household? We are told that Abraham was well received as a result of the false information that was provided. To some extent Abraham's fears were real (Gen. 12:14-16). To what extent is deception permissible when migrants are considering their safety and that of their family?

Indeed, many migrants would do something similar to what Abraham did. They may choose any action that will provide them safety in the destination country, especially if they consider that such an action will ultimately yield economic benefits for themselves and their families left at home.

Abraham's story poses several other questions when we consider the long term consequences of Abraham's sojourn to Egypt after they had returned to the Promised Land? In Genesis chapter sixteen, Abraham and Sarah had taken Hagar as maidservant from Egypt. Unable to bear children at this time, Sarah suggests that Abraham takes Hagar as mistress and build a family through her. Perhaps, she had thought God's promise would come true this way (Gen. 15:4). It is particularly insightful when one considers the message of the angel of God to Hagar, part of which reads: "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count" (Gen 16:10). Abraham agrees to the proposal and Ishmael is eventually born to him. What are some of the relevant contemporary challenges that the birth of Ishmael and his ancestry have brought to the whole issue of global migration today?



## Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the problems of irregular migration with reference to Africans in Europe. In the face of myriads of challenges, many would do everything possible to regularize their status and secure the better life they seek. Due to limited options, they mostly take advantage of the family immigration laws of host countries. More often than not, even in the untrue stories they tell, migrants succeed in getting protection, security, social welfare support, and other assistance from the host state for the wellbeing of their families. In any case cannot we argue that God in his mercy protects and provides for the needy and vulnerable migrants, and saves them from harm?<sup>24</sup> In the midst of all the challenges that confronted Abraham, God did not abandoned him and his family. The Lord stood with them and ensured that Pharaoh sent them out in a dignified manner<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, Abraham left Egypt a wealthy man (Genesis 12: 16, 20). No wonder that there are some migrants today, when reflecting on Abraham's story acknowledge God as the architect of their success stories.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term "irregular" is used to refer to people who travel from one country to another without proper travel authorization. Hence the term "irregular migrants." Others may prefer to use the terms "undocumented" and "illegal" to refer to the same people.
- <sup>2</sup> Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action (Report of the Global Commission on International Migration), October 2005. 13 (Source: [www.gcim.org](http://www.gcim.org).)
- <sup>3</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_immigration\\_to\\_Europe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_immigration_to_Europe). (Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Koser, K. *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Groody, D. G. „Dying to Live: *The Undocumented Immigrant and the Paschal Mystery*“, in *Migration in a Global World – 2008/5* edition of Concilium, Solange Lefebvre and Luiz Carlos Susin (eds). London: SCM Press, 2008, 116



- <sup>6</sup> Delorey, M. "International Migration: Social, Economic, and Humanitarian Considerations" in *And You Welcomed Me – Migration and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Donald Kerwin and Jill Marie Gerschutz. United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2009, 31. She also notes that out of the almost 200 million worldwide international migrants, the vast majority are economic migrants, many with few options to escape grinding poverty and to remain in their countries of origin.
- <sup>7</sup> Koser, 29.
- <sup>8</sup> Report of the GCIM, 84.
- <sup>9</sup> Report of the GCIM, 12. Compare, <http://www.kansascityfed.org/PUBLICAT/SYMPOS/2004/pdf>;
- <sup>10</sup> Hoeffner, J. J. and Pistone, M. R., "But the Laborers Are ... Many? Catholic Social Teaching on Business, Labor, and Economic Migration" in *And You Welcomed Me: Migration and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Donald Kerwin and Jill Marie Gerschutz. United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2009, 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Source: [www.tradingeconomics.com/ghana/gdp-per-capita](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ghana/gdp-per-capita) (accessed on 16th May 2015).
- <sup>12</sup> By Exodus I refer to the situation where people leave one place of difficulty for a land believed to be flowing with milk and honey. Refer to Exodus 1; 12: 31-42.
- <sup>13</sup> Hoeffner and Pistone, 68-69.
- <sup>14</sup> Nausner, M. Migration, "Faith and Action: Shifting the Discourse" A paper delivered at Oxford University, May 8, 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> Trager, L (ed). *Migration and Economy: Global and Local Dynamics*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005, 13.
- <sup>16</sup> Battistella, G. „Migration and Human Dignity: From Policies of Exclusion to Policies Based on Human Rights “in a Promised Land, A Perilous Journey-Theological Perspectives on Migration, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2008, 180.
- <sup>17</sup> Castle, S., De Haas, H and Miller, M. J. *The Age of Migration*



- *International Population Movements in the Modern World*. Palgrave Macmillan (5<sup>th</sup> edition), 2014, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>19</sup> Battistella, 179.

<sup>20</sup> Hoeffner and Pistone, 88.

<sup>21</sup> M. Daniel Carroll, R. M. D. *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*. Brazos Press, 2013

<sup>22</sup> Barton, J and Muddiman, J (eds). *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Barton and Muddiman, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Towner, 142.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 49.