

# Petrol Subsidy Removal and Migration in Nigeria: A Pathological Examination

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**Abstract:** This study examines the relationship between the removal of the petrol subsidy and migration in Nigeria. For over four decades, the issue of petrol subsidy has been at the center of public debate, with every government since the 1970s grappling with it. The subsidy has served a dual role, easing economic pressure on citizens while simultaneously straining government finances. The 2023 removal of the petrol subsidy represents a major shift toward a market-driven pricing structure, resulting in higher fuel costs and inflation that have significantly affected the cost of living. Although the policy was introduced to strengthen fiscal sustainability, it has also triggered social unrest, including protests over rising expenses. These economic challenges are shaping both internal and international migration patterns as Nigerians pursue better opportunities amid inflation and unemployment. The situation is further compounded by insecurity across various regions, particularly in the North. This study underscores how the removal of fuel subsidies intensifies existing migration pressures. It argues that effective policy responses are essential not only to cushion the adverse effects of subsidy removal but also to tackle the underlying drivers of migration, thereby safeguarding Nigeria's economic resilience.

**Keywords:** Subsidy, Migration, Migration crisis, Social Unrest

## I. INTRODUCTION

Recent developments indicate that the removal of the fuel subsidy has intensified migration crises in Nigeria, commonly referred to as the Japa syndrome. This phrase captures the trend of Nigerians seeking better opportunities abroad, particularly in Europe and the Americas (Okunade & Owosusi, 2023). Over the past three decades, many Nigerians have migrated from scarcity to regions perceived as more prosperous, as noted by Nwosu, Eteng, and Ekpechu (2022).

Despite Nigeria's abundant natural and human resources, the country faces widespread poverty primarily due to the mismanagement of these

resources (Sule & Sambo, 2020). It is currently labeled the "poverty capital of the world," with 46.5% of its population living below the extreme poverty line of \$1.90 per day, and the situation is deteriorating at an alarming rate of six individuals every minute (Ibrahim et al., 2022). As a result, migration is increasingly viewed as a survival strategy, with many seeking stability either in urban areas or abroad (Nwosu et al., 2022).

The IOM (2014) highlights a significant increase in the number of Nigerians living overseas, with the figure more than doubling from 465,932 in 1990 to over one million by 2013. By that time, about 61.4% of these emigrants were in developed regions, illustrating a shift in migration trends mainly influenced by employment opportunities. This pattern is particularly pronounced among educated and skilled professionals who are drawn to better economic prospects.

There has also been a notable rise in Nigerian asylum seekers, increasing from 8,294 in 2006 to 15,022 in 2008, with Europe as a primary destination (UNHCR). The ongoing crisis in Nigeria's northeastern region, exacerbated by the Boko Haram insurgency, has displaced over 800,000 people and contributed to this influx (IOM, 2014).

Projections indicate that by 2050, Nigeria's migration rate could reach -0.16 per 1,000 population, suggesting continued outmigration exceeding immigration. The economic hardships following the subsidy removal worsen conditions for many, leading citizens to see migration as an escape from extreme poverty and despair. This study explores the intricate relationship between the removal of fuel subsidies and migration in Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the relationship between fuel subsidy removal and migration patterns in Nigeria
2. To assess how rising living costs resulting from subsidy removal influence the decision of individuals to emigrate and the intended route

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Review

The issue of fuel subsidies has been a contentious and complex topic in Nigeria, with significant economic, social, and political implications. The country has a long history of providing fuel subsidies to its citizens, keeping fuel prices artificially low (Obasi, 2017). However, the removal of these subsidies has been a subject of debate due to its potential impact on the economy, inflation rates, and the welfare of the population.

Oxford Online Dictionary defines subsidy as a sum of money granted by the state or a public body to help an industry or business keep the price of a commodity or service low. It can be given directly, such as cash payments, or indirectly, such as tax exemptions. The objective of a subsidy is to improve society's welfare and stabilize the economy. Okwonu and Awonyi (2024) define fuel subsidy as the financial assistance provided by the government to lower the cost of fuel for energy consumers. Also, Ogboru and Akinyotu (2024) describe the fuel subsidy as a government aid that makes the commodity available to consumers at a lower cost. According to the NESG (2023), Subsidies are direct or indirect payments made by the government to businesses or individuals. Direct subsidies involve cash payments from the government to the recipient. Indirect subsidies, on the other hand, benefit industries or households through government policies, such as tax breaks. Finally, subsidy has also been described as comprising all measures that keep prices for consumers below the market level, keep prices for producers above the market level, or reduce costs for consumers and producers by providing direct or indirect support (Sowa, nd).

### Migration

The concept of migration has attracted extensive scholarly debate, with definitions varying across disciplines and perspectives. The *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2002) defines migration as the movement

of an individual or group from one country, locality, or place of residence to another, with the intention of settlement.

Similarly, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2018) conceptualizes migration from multiple dimensions. From a geographical perspective, migration is the movement of people across national boundaries, temporary or permanent. Such movement, when voluntary and aligned with the labor demands of both sending and receiving countries, is considered mutually beneficial.

From an economic standpoint, migration is the movement of individuals across borders or within national territories for employment or other economic purposes (UNCTAD, 2018). Complementing this view, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC, 2014) defines labor migration as the movement of persons from one geographical area to another in search of gainful employment. International labor migration, specifically, involves crossing national borders to pursue employment opportunities.

Tataru (2019) adds dimension, positing that migration involves crossing an administrative boundary for a specified minimum duration. This definition encompasses diverse categories, including refugee migration, economic migration, and migration driven by social or familial factors, such as family reunification.

### Subsidy

The removal of petroleum subsidies has been a topic of considerable interest and debate worldwide. Public policy analysts and government officials who support removing subsidies often advance a particular narrative. As Terkimbi (2015) observed, Nigeria's fuel subsidy framework has long been plagued by elite manipulation and political intrigue. He argued that rampant corruption in the country's oil sector has been a major factor contributing to Nigeria's persistent economic underdevelopment, worsening the plight of ordinary citizens. While the nation's refineries remain largely non-functional, the subsidy system has instead provided opportunities for corrupt elites to divert public resources for personal gain. Furthermore, the government has shown little or no political will to address the decay in the oil sector, as evidenced by its

reluctance to prosecute oil thieves—many of whom are directly or indirectly linked to the state apparatus.

According to Oladeji and Akinlabi (2022), the removal of fuel subsidies indicates that the government has deliberately decided to eliminate price controls on crude oil and its derivatives. Under the subsidy system, the government reduced the cost of crude oil and its derivatives for consumers, but this placed a significant financial burden on the economy, diverting funds from critical sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education.

Similarly, Oluwabukola (2023) and Monsuru (2024) identified one of the major benefits of subsidy removal as the potential for government cost savings, which can be redirected to developmental projects. The funds saved from subsidies could be invested in key areas such as healthcare, education, and targeted infrastructure development.

In addition, subsidy removal can stimulate competition in the petroleum sector, leading to greater efficiency and improved service delivery (Civic & Keypoint, 2023). Furthermore, with the elimination of subsidies, there are increased opportunities for new investments across the upstream, midstream, and downstream sectors, as both local and international investors are likely to commit resources. This, in turn, will create employment opportunities and foster the development of local communities where such investments take place (Monsuru, 2024).

However, removing fuel subsidies can also adversely affect the economy and the general public. As noted by Ozili (2023), the removal of the fuel subsidy, without first providing palliatives, sparked controversy about its impact on the Nigerian economy and Nigerians, including its micro- and macroeconomic implications. According to Monsuru (2024), one of the main problems associated with subsidy removal is the potential for inflationary pressures, as the cost of essential goods and services may increase. It also revealed deep-seated challenges related to fraud, accountability, and equitable resource allocation across the three tiers of government (Awa, 2025). It also reduces households' purchasing power, particularly those with lower incomes (Ikena & Oluka, 2023; Francis & Lucas, 2023).

Scholars and policy experts outlining the negative effect of fuel subsidy removal in the Nigerian economy, concluded that the removal of fuel subsidy has led to job loss in the informal sector that relies mostly on petrol (Orluchukwu and Thank God, 2024; Houeland, 2022; Shagali & Yusuf, 2022; Mohammed, Ahmed, and Adedeji, 2020). The formal sector primarily uses diesel for its operations, while the informal sector relies mostly on petrol (Ozili & Obiora, 2023). The rise in petrol prices would lead to the shutdown of small businesses that cannot afford the rising cost of petrol and whose profit margins have been completely eroded by fuel subsidy removal in the formal sector (Orluchukwu and Thank God, 2024; Houeland, 2022; Shagali & Yusuf, 2022; Adedeji et al., 2020).

Migration generally has economic, demographic, and social effects both for the nation of origin and the nation of destination (Divisha, 2017; Reips & Buffardi, 2012). Migrations occur due to a combination of factors. Grouped by Lee (1966) into two segments, and called them push and pull factors. Push factors are usually conditions/situations that are uncomfortable to a person in the environment in which he/she resides. In contrast, the pull factors are conditions/situations that lure an individual to other environments. The push factors include insufficient job opportunities, unsafe environment, poor crop harvest, insufficient rainfall, desertification, flooding, persecution, slavery, natural disaster, death threats, poverty, and war (Lee, 1966). On the other hand, the pull factors include better job opportunities, higher wages, greater wealth, better services, an attractive climate, lower crime rates, political stability, security, higher crop yields, and a lower rate of natural disasters (Nanzip, 2020; Lee, 1966).

Economic and labour conditions are important push factors for emigration. According to the latest Gallup survey (2023), 51% of Nigerians express a desire to migrate, ranking Nigeria among the top 10 countries worldwide in terms of migration desire. While the largest share of Nigerian migrants still moves within the African continent, migration to the EU and the US has increased in the past decades. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom are among the most sought-after destinations. Currently, over 260,000 Nigerians reside

in the EU, with Italy, Germany, and Spain being the top host countries.

Afrobarometer highlighted the search for better opportunities, work opportunities, and escaping economic hardship or poverty as the motivations behind Nigerians' desire for migration, noting that "the most common reasons cited for potential emigration are finding work opportunities (42%) and escaping economic hardship or poverty (39%)." The most popular destinations among Nigerians with this desire are North America, Europe, and the Middle East. According to the report, two-thirds (66%) of the unemployed and job-seeking population have considered leaving Nigeria. In comparison, many full-time (58%) and part-time workers (56%) have also considered emigration. Nigeria has recorded a surge in migration in recent years. Between January and September 2023, 1,574,357 people left Nigeria, bringing the total to 3,679,496 over the last two years.

Another survey published by the African Polling Institute in 2022 revealed that 69% of Nigerians aged 18–35 would relocate if given the opportunity. The surge in migration has contributed to brain drain, particularly in the health sector, as many health professionals are migrating for better working conditions in other countries. Aside from brain drain, the wave of migration is tearing many families apart (Soaga, 2024).

Additionally, a study by Onwuegbuchi (2024), published in *Communication Weekly*, found that nearly half of Nigeria's population is interested in relocating abroad.

In a detailed argument, Ikyator et al. (2023) highlighted Nigeria's persistent double-digit inflation rates over the past two decades, referencing the NBS report from 2017 as a key factor driving migration. Ikyator additionally contended that the negative impact of high unemployment and inflation, which is often measured by the cost of living, could be mitigated through effective public policies and good governance. In sheer contrast, Nigeria is characterized by weak institutions and poor governance (Asue, Ijirshar, Ikyator, 2021).

The World Bank (2021), as cited by Ikyator, Abati, and Doki (2023), reported that Nigeria ranks poorly across all six indicators of good governance, ranging

from -2.25 (low) to 2.25 (high). These indicators encompass aspects such as the control of corruption, government effectiveness, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, regulatory quality, rule of law, and voice and accountability. Worryingly, Nigeria has consistently scored well below zero in these areas, highlighting the country's struggles with governance.

The International Society of Human Rights (2025) noted that severe economic conditions and a lack of job opportunities have led to a situation in which even university graduates are compelled to accept menial jobs for survival. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, 53.4% of young people in Nigeria were unemployed as of 2020. Many families of four can barely afford to eat once a day, with the prospect of three meals a distant fantasy. The price of a bag of rice has surged threefold in just three years, often costing the equivalent of half a year's salary for a minimum wage worker. These dire circumstances are driving many to consider emigration, even if it means undertaking perilous and illegal journeys.

The analysis here indicates that economic factors have been the primary drivers of the skyrocketing migration in Nigeria, with several empirical studies citing heightened economic woes as the main driver. For instance, the removal of the fuel subsidy in 2023 has increased economic pressure on Nigerians due to high inflation in the purchase of goods and services.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Some theories have been proposed to explain human migration, including the Neoclassical economic theory. Originally introduced by Thorstein Veblen in his 1900 article "Preconceptions of Economic Science," this theory connects the ideas of marginalists like Alfred Marshall to those in the Austrian School. It was further developed by figures such as John Hicks and George Stigler, incorporating insights from economists like Carl Menger and Léon Walras.

Today, the theory is typically associated with mainstream economics, though it also serves as an umbrella term for various schools of thought suggesting that wage differences across regions drive migration. These wage disparities are often linked to labor supply and demand across different geographical contexts. Migration, in fact, remains a fundamental

issue in classical anthropological studies. Despite criticism, these studies have provided a nuanced understanding of how migration interacts with changes in traditional societies (Bakewell, 2007).

In applying the theory to this study, the removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has led to economic issues, including inflation, which has driven up the prices of goods and services, significantly impacting wages. The impact on wages has lowered the standard of living of the average Nigerian worker, whose minimum wage is still below \$ 100, despite the recent increase to \$ 70,000. Hence, fueling a cost-of-living crisis. This has continued to fuel most Nigerians' quest to migrate abroad to places with better economic conditions.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed-methods approach. Documentary sources were used for data collection. Thus, data were derived from annual reports and

statistical bulletins of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in conjunction with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as other published materials such as books, journal articles, and internet documents. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

#### V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

However, the empirical report by the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) shows the reasons for travelling/migration and the reasons for the intended risk. Meanwhile, the graph below details the following.

Examining the effect of fuel subsidy removal on migration in Nigeria

##### Reasons for Travelling

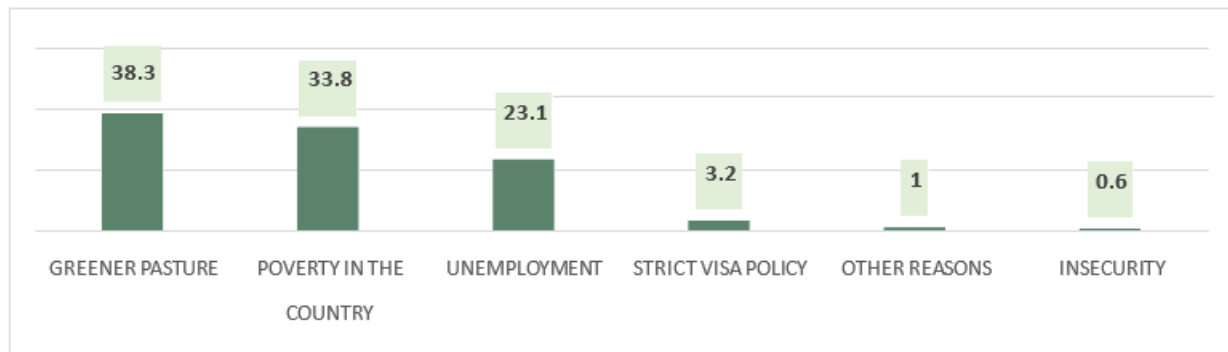
Although the reasons why migrants travelled vary across states, data from Figure 1 revealed that, on aggregate, business was the most common reason at 24.2 per cent, while marriage was the least common at 4.1 per cent.



Source: National Bureau of Statistics report (2023)

##### Reason for Intended Risks

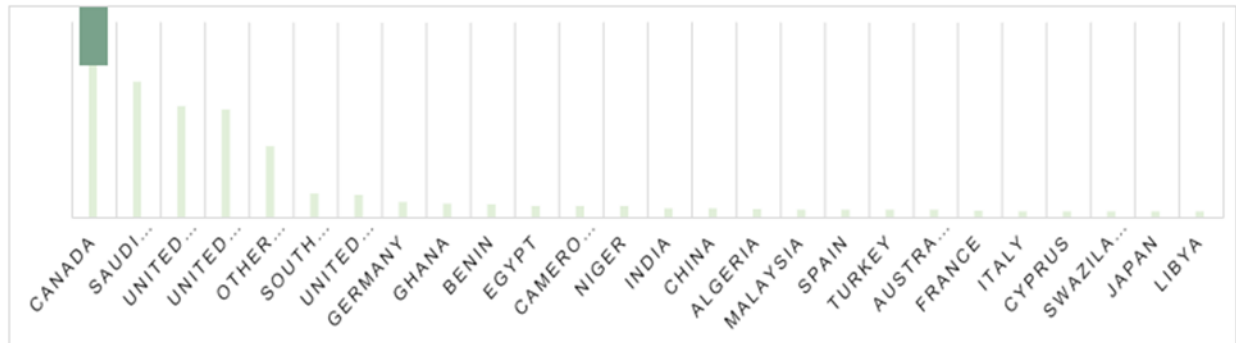
Data from Figure 2 reveal that most intending migrants, representing 38.3 percent and 33.3 percent, respectively, have indicated poverty and greener pastures as the major factors that informed their decision to leave the country. Only 0.6 percent indicated insecurity, as shown in Fig.10:



Source: National Bureau of Statistics report (2023)

Intending route

Analysis of Figure 3 indicates that Canada is the most preferred destination among the twenty-five top countries, with 19.5 per cent, while Libya is the least preferred, with 0.7 per cent. However, this varies by state, as shown in Figure 4.9.



Source: National Bureau of Statistics report (2023)

Overall, the study shows that Nigerian citizens continue to be brazen about their desire to go abroad, including irregularly, despite knowledge of the consequences. Both the preceding and current surveys showed that growing knowledge and perceptions of migration risks have little or no deterrent effect on its prevalence in the country. From the inception of the survey in 2020 to date, it is apparent that the economic factor is the most pressing drive for actual and potential migration, including the House Help phenomenon, except

Summary of finding

1. Evidence from the graph shows a strong relationship between fuel subsidy removal and migration patterns in Nigeria. The graph shows that business, work, and greener pastures are the primary reasons for migration in Nigeria.

2. The desire for better economic opportunities has become the primary reason people have migrated, alongside insecurity. The intended route has been Canada, united state and, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in Europe.

VI.CONCLUSION

Socio-economic problems continue to be the dominant reason for embarking on migration, and even the choice of routes, from the perspectives of both returned and potential migrants. More than 30 per cent of all intended migrants in 2022 wanted to travel out in search of a job, with a slightly larger share in 2023.

To show how much economic factors drive migration, both the 2022 and 2023 surveys found that 51.8 per cent and 51 per cent of intending migrants, respectively, are without means of livelihood. However, the elimination of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has had a significant impact, particularly on migration patterns within and outside the country. The government's removal of the fuel subsidy is intended to encourage economic transformation and reduce budgetary constraints. However, it has also led to several socioeconomic problems, such as inflation, rising cost of living, and restricted access to basic services. These issues have disproportionately impacted rural and low-income communities, leading many to migrate in pursuit of improved living standards and opportunities. As people move from rural to urban regions in search of work and social amenities, internal migration has increased, further taxing already overburdened urban infrastructures. Externally, Nigerians are increasingly migrating irregularly in search of opportunities overseas due to the economic uncertainty associated with the elimination of these subsidies.

VII.RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government should establish robust social safety nets, including targeted cash transfers, food subsidies, and support for vulnerable groups most affected by the subsidy removal. These measures can reduce economic pressure and limit the push factors of migration.

- Reducing dependency on oil revenue through investment in other sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and technology can create sustainable employment opportunities and reduce economic shocks linked to fuel price volatility.

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