Exploring Decision-Making Processes of Irregular Youth Migrants from West Africa to Germany through Practice Stories

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Abstract:

I explore how young people from West Africa decide to undertake irregular migration to Europe, with a particular focus on those who reach Germany. Using a qualitative research design and grounded in Karen O'Reilly's practice stories framework, I conducted semi-structured interviews with youth migrants to better understand their lived experiences, motivations, and constraints. I complemented their views with those of one key informant, a migration practitioner. Rather than viewing migration as a single decision or event, I conceptualise it as an ongoing social practice shaped by both internal and external structures, ranging from personal motivation and family pressure to governance drivers and restricted legal pathways (O'Reilly, 2022). I moreover use contemporary sociological framework to examine the complexity of youth migrants decision making and provide a more grounded, empathetic understanding of irregular migration. What emerges are not simple narratives with clear beginnings or ends, but complex, open-ended stories of different practices. Some may be indicative of resilience which arises when negotiating difficult migration journeys. Other practices point to adaptation challenges, difficulty handling bureaucracy in a new country

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore how young people from West Africa decide to undertake irregular migration to Europe, with a particular focus on those who reach Germany. Using a qualitative research design and grounded in Karen O'Reilly's practice stories framework, I conducted semi-structured interviews with youth migrants to better understand their lived experiences, motivations, and constraints. I complemented their views with those of one key informant, a migration practitioner. Rather than viewing migration as a single decision or event, I conceptualise it as an ongoing social practice shaped by both internal and external structures, ranging from personal motivation and family pressure to governance drivers and restricted legal pathways (O'Reilly, 2022). I moreover use contemporary sociological framework to examine the complexity of youth migrants decision making and provide a more grounded, empathetic understanding of irregular migration.

What emerges are not simple narratives with clear beginnings or ends, but complex, open-ended stories of different practices. Some may be indicative of resilience which arises when negotiating difficult migration journeys. Other practices point to adaptation challenges, difficulty handling bureaucracy in a new country and a sense of isolation. In almost all instances, these practice stories challenge linear views of migration and a rational calculus behind decision making. They converge on complexity and the entangled mix of motivations, hope and constraint. I offer no finite conclusion, only reflections informed by practice theory and a call to remain attentive to the lived realities of youth migrants. Their journeys carry multiple meanings across the desert, sea, and the borders. I am hopeful that the theoretical approach to empirical data I gathered, despite inherent limitations, may offer some new angles on established insights in the study of irregular migration. I also offer tentative recommendations for the consideration of policymakers in Africa and Europe. They converge on the need to take seriously the voices and experiences of young migrants when designing "interventions". However, further research using diverse and contextualised tools and theories is needed to support grounded and context-specific policy responses. The ultimate aim of research and policy-making is to avoid the preventable loss of life that all too frequently occurs when young West Africans set out toward Europe, with full awareness of the risks.

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I extend my sincere gratitude to the migrants who participated in this research. Thank you for entrusting me with your stories, fears, and aspirations. While I cannot mention you, your words have left a lasting impact on me and are the foundation of this work. I also want to express my appreciation for Mr Nelson who facilitated my connections with participants, particularly those at CAPOA Freiburg Organisation. To my supervisors Prof. Dr. Gregor Dobler and Mr Carrascosa, for the support, candid feedback and patience. To my family and friends, thank you for being my pillars of support. Especially Nenad for inspiring me, as this thesis would not have been possible without you. Lastly, to those who are still on their journey—navigating uncertainty, borders, and the unknown—this work is dedicated to you.

George Shanyengana Kaliteke

Chapter 1: Introduction

On 10 July 2023, more than a hundred people boarded a fishing boat in Senegal hoping to reach Europe. About a month later, thirty-eight survivors were rescued after the vessel was found drifting off Cape Verde, with more than sixty people missing and presumed dead (Dione & Peyton, 2023). At the time when I conceptualised the idea for this study, I was in my second semester of Global Studies Programme (GSP) at FLASCO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales) in Argentina where I arrived on a student visa from Germany. I had since moved several times, between South Africa, Thailand and back to Germany as part of the GSP, each time going through the requisite processes to obtain study permits as a regular migrant from Africa. At the same time, dozens of boat sinkings occurred adding to an unacceptably long series of calamities experienced by the people of sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom are youth in their prime like myself. The contrast between my own experience and the ongoing perilous conditions and lack of safe migration routes, particularly on the Atlantic and Mediterranean migration routes could not be starker. Fifteen migrants who lost their lives were from a small fishing village of Fass Boye where the news caused anger and protests due to perceived inaction of the Senegalese authorities with respect to dwindling fish stocks and the challenges hampering the local economy. Around the same time, the Governments in Europe and the European Commission, in concert with the Governments of the Maghreb countries (such as Libya, Tunisia, etc.) have made the route even more perilous by striking deals and investing in heavy policing instead of seeking to address the root causes of migration.

This event encapsulates what I consider to be one of the central paradoxes of contemporary migration studies: Migration is one of the most studied yet seemingly least understood phenomena of our time. As routes become deadlier through ruthlessness of smugglers, migration policy shifts toward policing on both African and European shores, and the number of young people from Africa willing to risk their lives continues to rise; yet the answer to the question of how to effectively to avert the *preventable* loss of life in the Mediterranean and the southern Atlantic passages appears elusive. Migration is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon. Migration study as a field is approached from multiple, at times fragmented angles (Echeverría, 2020) and requires interdisciplinary research. Moreover, when it comes to migration governance and policy making, there appears to be a lack of historical perspective regarding the deeper causes of migration. There is also a greater bias toward the present-day interests of receiving countries (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014) where anti-

immigration sentiments shape the thinking of the political class. As a result, the voices of migrants coming from Africa to Europe, who are mostly young and black, tend to be de-centred from the media narratives and are under-represented in shaping the understanding of the migration phenomenon. The failure to include their voices contributes to the shortcomings in adequately addressing the challenges and complexities of irregular migration. The inherently limited and biased knowledge of what drives migration of young people in the first place (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014) has to be firstly challenged, and then better understood using a more nuanced sociological and anthropological toolkit. This study seeks to make a modest contribution to a growing body of knowledge by employing Karen O'Reilly's practice stories (O'Reilly, 2012) as a methodological and analytical lens to explore how irregular youth migration from West Africa to Europe unfolds in practice. Through this approach, I examine how external structures such as governance failures and economic exclusion intersect with internal structures such as familial obligations, social expectations, and personal motivations to shape the decision-making processes of irregular youth migrants.

The urgency of studying irregular youth migration becomes even more pressing considering evolving political responses to migration across the globe. From Central American minors fleeing gang violence in Colombia to Rohingya adolescents traversing Southeast Asia, irregular youth migration defies easy nation-state solutions. The backdrop for this study is the regional dynamics of Africa to Europe migration. On the one side of this proverbial divide is my mother continent of Africa which despite many high-level commitments to youth, still does not do nearly enough to protect its young people who set out to seek a better future, at home or abroad. For example, the Gambia has one of the highest immigration rates in West Africa, but this issue “remains a politically relatively neutral topic” (Altrogge & Zanker, 2019). On the other side, in Europe, as recently as 9 April 2025, the incoming German Chancellor announced a coalition agreement at the heart of which was a pledge to "control and largely end irregular migration," including the reintroduction of strict border controls. These measures aim to address growing unease among the German public regarding illegal migration in the wake of February's election (BBC News, 2025). Germany is a key destination country and political heavyweight within the European Union. Germany’s policies reverberate transnationally, influencing EU border externalization in the Sahel or funding deals with transit states like Tunisia (Toaldo & Barrana, 2016). Caponio, Scholten, & Zapata-Barrero (2019) argue for a shift away from methodological nationalism and toward more multilevel approaches with diverse actors. I argue based on this research that the migrating youth have to be one of the

central actors in this approach, both those migrating regularly and irregularly. Moreover, this "local turn" in migration studies emphasises how migration governance unfolds in practice, across seas, deserts and state borders. It also calls for interdisciplinary attention to the role of non-state actors such as smugglers, non-governmental organisations, and diaspora networks who often hold more sway in shaping migrants' daily lives than distant bureaucracies. My research aimed to respond to that call by focusing on the disjuncture between top-down policies and the everyday strategies of young migrants navigating these systems. This is why we need practice stories. When we reduce migration to statistics or security threats, we tend to forget the 16-year-old who chose to set out from Cameroon via Serbia on a fake gymnastics event to Germany because her village was burned. Germany's hardening stance is therefore more than a policy shift, it is a bet against the irregular migrants' desperation. And as this study argues, understanding that desperation requires looking beyond borders, to the global inequalities and fractured dreams that propel young migrants forward, no matter the cost.

1.1 Problem Statement

Historically, the public discourse on migration has revolved around the expectation that millions of African migrants would be coming to the European shores (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2006). Media reporting often reinforces this narrative and fuels political debates over border control. At the same time, the impact of policies remains poorly understood as they mix deterrence with developmental aid. Both are rooted in the assumption that migration stems solely from economic desperation or institutional failure. While important, these approaches overlook how culture intersects with social or family expectations, and crucially, with the aspirational worldmaking of West African youth undertaking the journey.

The migration of young people from West Africa to Europe follows one of the two types of routes: the irregular and regular. The irregular route entails the migrants crossing the Mediterranean and the Southern Atlantic, which are fraught with dangers such as overcrowded boats, treacherous sea conditions, and the involvement of smugglers and human traffickers. For young migrants who decide to migrate in this way, the journey may often pose greater physical and psychological harm than the predicament from which they are trying to escape. Nonetheless, they reached a decision to embark on this journey. Importantly, it is crucial to understand "what is their real role and weight in the decision-making process? What are their expectations and motivations when they undertake these journeys?" (Samuel Hall, 2022). On

the other hand, other African youth may be better educated, more employable or have more means to fund their migration along a regular migration route. The same questions of expectations, motivations and ways of arriving at a decision must be asked of them, too. Nevertheless, both types of youth migrants are excluded from decision-making that influences their lives due to "barriers that prevent full-fledged recognition of youth as active members of their societies" (IOM, 2024). And while both regular and irregular migration of African youth is usually seen as the path to economic success as well as greater social mobility (Carling, 2006), it remains understudied in terms of youth agency, decision-making processes, and lived experiences. The gap between these reductive frameworks and migrants' lived realities is both empirical and epistemological. Karen O'Reilly's practice stories framework offers a way to bridge this divide by centring the narratives of migrants themselves-not as case studies to be used for policy solutions, but as active interpreters of their own trajectories. As the price of this separation is often measured in the loss of lives, insights gained have the potential to improve our understanding of migration decision making in a contextualised and responsive manner.

1.2 Thesis Structure

In the first chapter, I introduce the problem statement and outline the three overarching research objectives, and the research questions associated with them. I outline personal motivations for studying decision making of migrating youth from Africa to Europe along irregular routes as well as its significance in global studies. The initial intention was to consider the migration dynamics against the backdrop of the relevant policy frameworks of the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU). In the process of reviewing the literature, I narrowed the focus on the motivations, family expectations and local governance initiatives as determinants of migration along clearly defined geographical corridors, from West Africa to Germany along Atlantic and/or Mediterranean routes. Chapter two explains the qualitative research design I followed in this research. It comprised the semi-structured interview with young migrants from West Africa who completed the journey to Germany, a key informant interview with an experienced practitioner in the field of (irregular) migration and the rationale for the purposive sampling procedure. Crucially, I explain why the chosen theoretical approach of applying practice stories is foundational to my analysis of findings stemming from the interviews. In Chapter three, I summarise the results of the extensive literature review I undertook of a vast migration field, focusing on three key themes: historical and geographical perspective of migration, migration in African context, and specifically within West African

sub-region, and lastly narrowing down the focus of literature review on the issue of youth irregular migration. Within the last topical issue, I briefly review the relevant policy frameworks. In chapter four, I provide an overview of migration theories and outline the key methodological and theoretical approach I used in this research which is to apply contemporary sociological framework for understanding irregular migration through practice stories, which, based on my literature review, was not done previously. As mentioned, this chapter therefore details the theoretical underpinning since my reading of the practice stories is foundational to framing the analysis. Chapter five presents the application of O'Reilly's practice stories framework to the overall findings and features two practice stories of two migrants' journeys. Chapter 6 explores the complexity of youth irregular migration through a synthesis of theory and empirical data, revealing how young West Africans migrants make situated decisions within uncertain contexts. In chapter seven I distil the conclusions in relation to research questions I asked at the outset, and I provide some tentative recommendations for policy-makers and researchers.

1.3 Research Objectives

Existing research rarely examines how familial and peer expectations shape migration choices and whether the youth exclusion from local governance may constitute a push factor (Alpes, 2017). In this study, I aim to address these gaps by centring youth motivations, decision-making autonomy and structural constraints in irregular migration from West Africa to Germany, a key destination country for many migrants including Africans. The gaps I mention leave policymakers and researchers alike with an incomplete understanding of why young West Africans risk dangerous journeys to Europe. Research objectives have therefore been reformulated in the course of data analysis and informed by both literature review and the theoretical framework, to read as follows:

- To analyse the motivations driving West African youth to pursue irregular migration to Europe as a lived and evolving practice.
- To examine how familial and community networks shape migration decisions as part of an ongoing, negotiated process.
- To explore how participation of youth in local governance influences the decision to migrate irregularly as a lived and evolving practice.

1.4 Research Questions

- What are the motivations that influence West African youth to pursue irregular migration routes to Europe?
- How do family or community expectations affect the migration decisions of West African youth, particularly regarding their choice to migrate irregularly?
- How does the local governance or community development initiatives in West Africa influence youth decisions to migrate irregularly?

1.4.1 Significance of the Study

In the course of data collection process itself, or rather the conversations with young migrants themselves, this thesis shifted away from merely documenting drivers behind migration decisions toward asking: “How do young Gambians and other West Africans explain their own migration choices?”. Crucially, the goal has evolved from filling an academic void to reframing the conversation entirely, and shifted from asking "how can we stop them?" to "what can we learn from them?" Only then can we begin to address the roots of this crisis instead of focusing on symptoms. The findings provide a basis for recommendations for possible future research avenues and tentative recommendations around governance.

1.4.2 Scope and Limitations

Studying irregular migration to Europe from West Africa as a whole would be extremely demanding in terms of the scope of work, the required literature review and data collection to back up the relevant analyses. It would also be impossible to complete the research on time. Therefore, the study is limited to the study of irregular migrants from The Gambia as the key origin country in West Africa and Germany as a key destination country in Europe, and a country where I currently reside. With one of the highest emigration rates relative to population size (UNHCR, 2016), the Gambia exemplifies the relevant gaps in data which are identified in literature review (see Chapter 3). Moreover, finding willing participants from West Africa to take part in the research proved challenging. Most of them thought it had something to do with deportation. Therefore, and due to the snowballing approach to sampling (see Chapter 2.2), most of the key respondents ended up being from the Gambia; however, there were respondents from Nigeria and Cameroon too, which is why the scope of the study is inclusive of the West Africa subregion. Some migrants also had challenges understanding certain questions during

the interview which required translation into the local dialect for them to understand what was being asked.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Qualitative approach

In the present thesis I used a qualitative research design to study the decision-making processes of West African youth coming to Germany through irregular migration routes. Semi-structured interviews were the chosen data collection method since the goal of my research was to better understand the participant's unique perspectives and lived experiences rather than a generalised understanding of the phenomenon being studied (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019). Furthermore, it allowed interviews to be focused while giving the interviewer autonomy to explore relevant ideas that may emerge during the interview (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019). The first layer of data analysis was done using MAXQDA, a leading qualitative data analysis (QDA) which helped me in identifying and analysing themes emerging from the data (Kuckartz, 2014). The practice stories analysis followed O'Reilly's contemporary sociological approaches and grounded specifically in the practice stories approach (see Chapter 4.2).

2.2 Sampling procedure

For my empirical data, the information presented in this thesis was obtained through nine semi-structured interviews with migrating youth (1 female, 8 male respondents)) as well as one key informant from a Non-Governmental Organization in Freiburg CaPoA, Freiburg e.V. through a semi-structured, expert interview. The data was collected between August and December 2024 in Bremen and Freiburg. I largely used my own contacts following a purposive sampling approach. The key sampling criterion in the selection process was the West African origin of the interview partners. In Bremen, I used personal contacts with immigrants from the West African community residing in Hansestadt Bremen to reach the potential respondents. In Freiburg, the participants were jointly recruited with the help of the non-profit association CaPoA Freiburg eV. Participants were selected if they successfully made it to their destination in Germany. The participants were young people aged 18–35, an age group that is likely to undertake irregular migration (Thorsen, 2013).

International organizations such as the IOM broadly define youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 or up to 34 (IOM, 2022). However, the upper limit is often extended in African contexts due to prolonged transitions into adulthood caused by structural challenges such as incomplete education and unemployment (ILO, 2012; Thorsen, 2013). Thorsen (2013)

further argues that categories of ‘child’ and ‘youth’ overlap significantly, and that youth experience is shaped less by rigid age brackets and more by social roles and life situations. These are known to vary widely between adolescence and early adulthood. It is important to note that some participants in my study may have initiated migration in their teens and completed their journey and continued practicing their migration well into their twenties or early thirties.

It should be noted that the preponderance of male participants is due to the fact that Gambian men are more likely than women to risk irregular migration (Auer et al., 2023). However, access to participants was not easy as most of them were concerned that such research could affect their status or rights in Germany. Acknowledging their fear of deportation, I anonymised their responses completely. Although for most participants from West African countries English is not their mother tongue, they were free to use the language they were most comfortable with, and all interviews were conducted in English (with occasional translation to local dialect when exact meaning had to be conveyed).

2.3 Methodological Limitations

This study employed qualitative methods, namely in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, to capture migrants' subjective experiences and practices. Recognising that migration decisions are shaped by a range of individual, social, economic, and political forces, the research drew on both theoretical perspectives and grounded empirical inquiry. However, as a single researcher I cannot capture the full complexity of irregular migration through a practice story approach alone. Studying external structures requires deeper engagement with migrants' lived contexts to understand the social norms as well as the power dynamics that constrain or enable their choices. Understanding internal structures required me to go back to the raw data and interview recordings and repeated retrospective inquiry into how migrants' perceptions worked and how they make meaning. I had to consider the interplay between external and internal structures highlights the need to contextualise findings within both historical frameworks (African history) and contemporary sociological theory.

I, therefore, acknowledge gaps in the data and the need for further empirical research to build a more complete practice story of irregular migration. Future studies could benefit

from ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, to capture the nuanced interplay of agency and structure in migration journeys. Although participant observation as part of a broader ethnographic approach would have been ideal for understanding the nuanced interactions within migrants' communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this method was not feasible due to time limitations and the sensitivities of probing for experiences of migrants who survived the perilous Mediterranean or Atlantic routes.

It is for that reason important to consider the need for future studies which would incorporate ethnographic methods allowing deeper analysis. Nonetheless, the chosen methodological approaches allowed this study to link individual narratives to broader structural analyses, providing a holistic understanding of irregular migration as “a structured and structuring process” (O'Reilly, 2012).

2.3.1 Challenges building rapport

Navigating the journey of connecting with potential respondents and earning their trust was not without its hurdles. Initially, as I approached the interviewees, I encountered a wave of reluctance and scepticism. To address their hesitations, I adopted a transparent and open approach, clearly explaining the purpose of the study and how it might benefit them. Despite my efforts, many expressed concerns that sharing their stories could expose them to the risk of deportation. Fear loomed large; they were understandably anxious about the possibility that their personal information might be shared with authorities or lead to legal repercussions.

As a migrant to Germany, and having lived in Bremen and Freiburg myself, I had the opportunity to interact with some migrants who were initially hesitant, but through persistent reassurance of confidentiality and the promise of anonymity, I managed to gather valuable insights. I made it clear that they could share only what they felt comfortable discussing, allowing them to determine their level of engagement. Initially, the number of interviews I conducted fell short of my target, signalling that I needed a new strategy. That’s when I reached out to CaPaO, a dedicated NGO in Freiburg focused on assisting irregular migrants with a range of challenges. Partnering with this migrant "gatekeeper" organization proved valuable. The trust they had established with the NGO made it easier for me to connect with migrants, who were more willing to engage in this familiar environment. Conducting interviews at the

very organization where these individuals sought help created a sense of comfort, breaking down barriers that initially hindered our conversations.

The more I built rapport with the NGO, the more individuals began to walk in and express their willingness to participate in interviews. This was especially thanks to Mr. Nelson Momoh, who informed many of the migrants about the opportunity to share their stories. I learned a crucial methodological lesson: building rapport with irregular migrants is a complex process that demands ethical awareness, cultural sensitivity, and, above all, patience.
It is not something that can be assumed; it has to be nurtured.

2.3.2 Positionality of researcher

Growing up in Namibia, I experienced migration in a way that has profoundly shaped my perspective. My journey across borders for education opened my eyes to diverse narratives, but it wasn't until I moved to Germany that I truly began to understand the complexities of migration. While I haven't personally migrated in the same way many others have, I've engaged deeply with migrants in my community, and their stories of resilience, loss, and adaptation have left a lasting impact on me. When I arrived in Germany and met fellow Africans, a common question arose: "How did you get here?" As I shared my story of arriving through legal means, I became acutely aware of the stark differences in our experiences. Practice story approach requires "a meso level of conceptualisation and a micro level of analysis and data collection" (O'Reilly, 2012).

This moment highlighted not just the personal aspects of migration, but also the structural forces at play that shape the journeys of many Africans to Europe. Through these conversations, I developed a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the motivations and challenges faced by migrants. In my work, I prioritised critical self-awareness, recognising how my background may influence my interactions with participants. Although we may share the same origins, I understand that my circumstances may come across as privileged. With my academic credentials, I might unintentionally be viewed as part of a system of power. My professional experiences in Germany can be vastly different from the struggles of irregular migrants, which adds another layer of complexity to my role in this sensitive field. It was essential for me to reflect on my positionality and remain mindful of these dynamics as I conducted my research, ensuring that I approached each story with empathy and understanding.

2.3.4 Time limitations

I conducted this research over a period of just five months starting from the first round of fieldwork to the final submission. The prescribed time frame made it challenging to fully capture the complex realities of irregular migration. The issue calls for deep sociological and anthropological exploration, but the tight timeline meant that I had to clearly limit the scope and depth of exploration. While O'Reilly's practice stories framework helped make sense of the qualitative data, the depth of analysis was inevitably shaped by practical constraints. Moreover, building trust with vulnerable participants took time and care.

Adding to the challenge were seasonal interruptions since the data collection spanned the Christmas season, and the unpredictable lives of the migrants themselves. They have ongoing commitments to find their way in a new country while still finding time to share their stories. Though my approach uncovered important insights into the interplay between systemic forces and migrant agency, a longer study would have allowed for richer ethnographic work. Ideally, this would have included possible travel to the Gambia which I had originally contemplated. Also, there would possibly be more time to refine key themes. In the end, my research delivered what was realistically possible within the allocated time frame and it is my hope that it lays the groundwork for deeper exploration in the future.

Chapter 3: Literature review

3.1 Migration in a human(e) perspective

> *"Like many birds, but unlike most other animals, humans are a migratory species. Indeed, migration is as old as humanity itself. … A careful examination of virtually any historical era reveals a consistent propensity towards geographic mobility among men and women, who are driven to wander by diverse motives, but nearly always with some idea of*
>
> *material improvement."*[1]

[1] Quoted in: Massey, D.S., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino and J.E. Taylor (2005). Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Migration[2] has been a continuous feature of human history. People have been moving from one country to another seeking opportunities for economic empowerment, or looking to escape devastation brought by wars, poverty, violence and persecution. Given that migration has been an absolute constant and a global process, it is interesting to note that the responses to migration continue to be inconsistent and patchy at best, testifying to the ongoing lack of a widely shared understanding consensus on the true meaning and purpose of migration. It is important to mention here that migration has contributed to the development in both origin and destination countries. IOM estimates that remittances which migrants send home outstrip development aid. All the while sociologists have introduced the notion of 'global care chains' (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001) to illustrate just how important migrants have become to destination countries which due to demographic challenges are unable to care for their elderly and the needy.

Today, human mobility is at record levels. According to the latest available estimates from United Nations, the number of international migration[3] grew from 173 million at the start of the century to approximately 281 million (IOM, 2024), a growth of 38 percent in only two and a half decades. The increase is attributable to interlinked factors ranging from demographic changes that affect different parts of the globe differentially to technological advancements and changes in the labour market and the nature of work. At the same time, other significant constants of human societies, such as conflicts, resource scarcity, human rights violations, and the environmental degradation that is a concomitant of humankind's progress, continue to stimulate in great measure peoples' movements around the globe.

Even once acknowledged that migration is on the rise in our fast-evolving world, it is useful to scale the latest trends against the total world population: the number of 281 million represents only 3.6 percent, implying that only a fraction of the global population is on the move (IOM, 2024). Yet even a cursory look at the news in any part of the world would suggest that every other person is a migrant. This begs the question of why, despite movement being inherent to human societies (Massey, 2005), migrations attract so much emotional response including on the very negative end of the spectrum; which tends to influence not just reporting but also the thinking about migration. One possible reason is linked to irregular migration, and

[2] IOM defines migration as the "process of moving from one place to another". Whereas to migrate means to move, from a rural area to a city, one district or province within a given country, or from one country to a new country (IOM, 2024).

[3] In contrast, IOM defines a migrant as "a person described as such for one or more reasons, depending on the context". While in many cases "migrants" do undertake some form of migration, this is not always the case. (IOM, 2024).

again the numbers paint only a part of the picture. The UN estimates that 10-30% of the migrants travel irregularly, primarily due to the absence of legal channels (Routledge Handbook of Migration, 2022) but the uncertainty on estimates remains high. And while this percentage may appear high, what these numbers conceal, however, is that each world region has distinct patterns, and most of the migration actually takes place within the continents. The extremely hazardous journey which young people undertake from West Africa to Europe, is still a small portion of the overall migratory trend (Routledge Handbook of Migration, 2022). However, because they attract such media attention, irregular migration has practically become the hallmark of the 21st century in the popular perception. What gets less attention, however, is the fact that most migrants undertake such dangerous journeys because they are "locked out" of the legal ways i.e. regular migratory pathways (IOM, 2024). More recent data from the International Organization for Migration (2020) show young people are a major part of this outflow, with tens of thousands moving across borders for education, employment, or improved standards of living.

Migration studies have often conceptualised the migration outflows around the notions of the country of origin, country of transit, and country of destination. Global migratory trends show how these roles increasingly overlap, with the majority of countries now playing all three roles concurrently (IOM, 2024). This is particularly true when we zoom in on the regional and national trends and the extent of overlap becomes more discernible. Some major trends remain through, with Germany remaining one of the largest “corridor”[4] countries receiving migrants as well as one of the largest sources of remittances globally.

Globalization has facilitated legal migration by making existing channels easier, but it has also inadvertently fuelled greater illegal flows by creating disparities of access to legal channels. As such, migration governance remains one of the most critical and contested subjects of present-day international debates.

3.2 Africa and Migration

Africa is a continent with large-scale migration, with population mobility assuming numerous shapes and forms as a reaction to political, economic, religious, and security factors, as well as demographic factors (Bakewell, 2010). Directions, patterns, and motivations of the migration have been greatly determined by the colonial experience, which has been a primary

[4] Migration corridors represent an accumulation of migratory movements over time (IOM, 2024).

determinant of economic, sociocultural, political, and demographic development (Teye, 2022; Economic Commission for Africa [ECA], 1981). By considering the political and historical development of African societies, we can better appreciate the complexities of migration.

It is beyond doubt that the economic policies of the colonial administrations, and the colonial impact on the demarcation of national borders, had a profound effect on migration flows from and across West Africa (Teye, 2022). During the colonial period, population mobility was limited to the agenda of the colonial administrations and economic strategies performed by the latter, which was for the export of foreign commodities (Sommers, Baker, and Aina 1997). In addition, the transatlantic slave trade involved millions of West Africans being forced to migrate to North America, Europe, and the Caribbean (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, n.d.). In particular, for mobility across the sub-region, the colonial administrations' construction of the railways and the roads helped facilitate large-scale, predominantly male, seasonal, and cross-border labour mobility across the sub-region (Teye, 2022). Several theorists have noted that due to the dependency of world systems, migration has been a byproduct of the macro-economic and Western-dominated world system, which is quite obviously linked to colonization. Consequently, damaging the African communities until present day. The effect of colonization and decolonization on the economy—and hence on migration—becomes clear when seen from the vantage point of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial period.

Migration has only become more complex and multidimensional on several levels in contemporary Africa. Hence, it is important to consider the regional migratory trends in conjunction with the demographic trends. Migration beyond the continent also increased during this period, growing from 17 million to over 19.5 million. Looking at long-term trends represented in Fig. 1, cross-border movement within Africa has surged since 2000, while migration outside the continent has more than doubled since 1990.

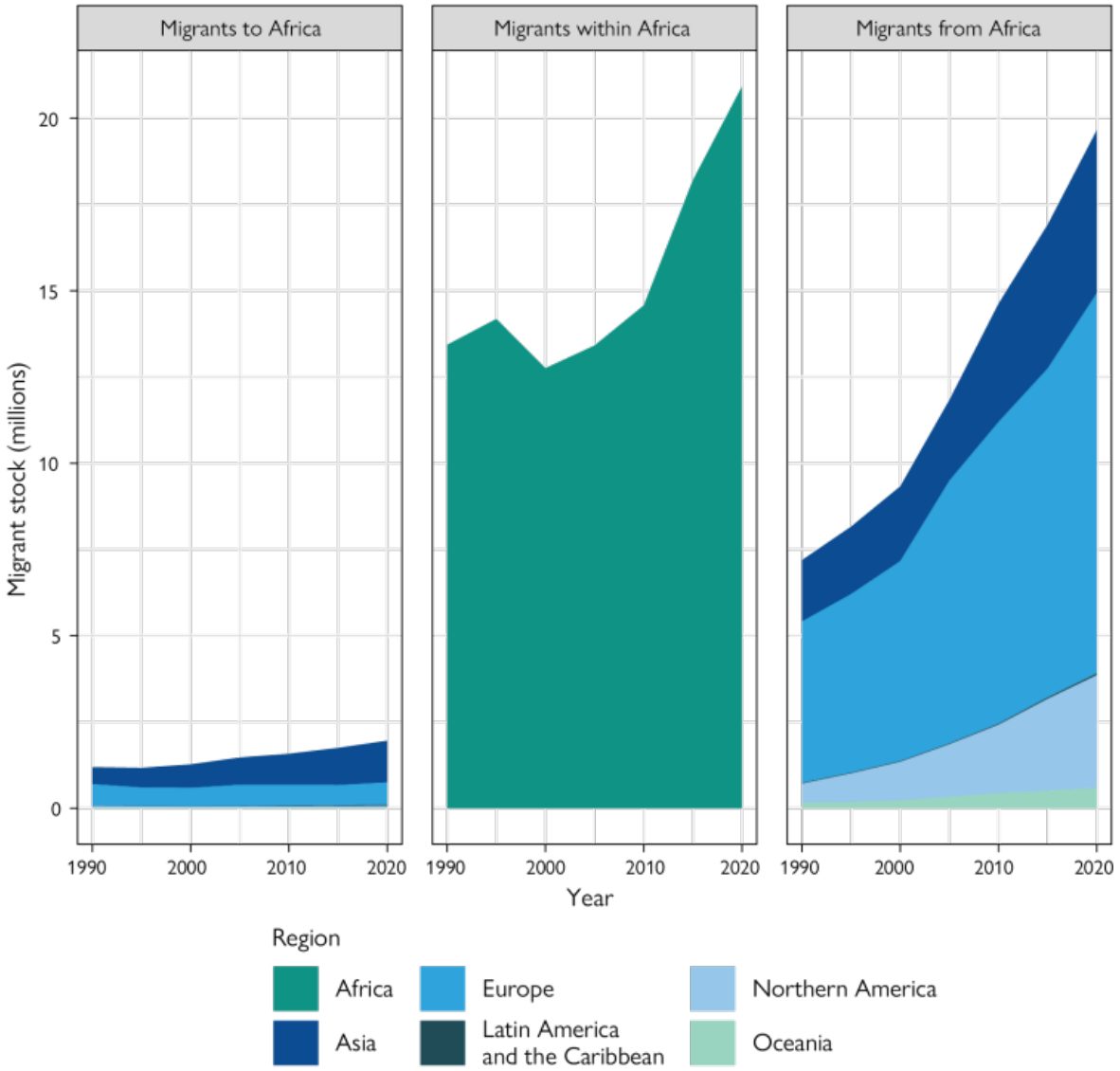

Figure 1: Migratory flows to, within and outside of Africa (Source: UN DESA, 2021.)

Outside of the African continent, Europe remains the number destination for African immigrants as Fig. 1 above clearly illustrates. The history of the two continents is historically interlinked and provides the backdrop for understanding this connection as well as the opportunity for migration, dating back to the colonial era. In the 1970s and 1980s, West Africa had economic instability and political instability, which led many individuals to seek better opportunities in Europe. Even now, this is still the situation, with qualified and unskilled immigrants seeking entry into Europe, either lawfully or otherwise. Europe remains the most common destination for African migrants, hosting 11 million in 2020, followed by Asia (nearly 5 million) and Northern America (around 3 million).

3.2.1 Unsafe routes out of West Africa and into Europe

Migration routes also vary widely with regard to their risks, with some being considerably more lethal for the migrants, as well as for the controlling authorities. These risks owe their origin to complex social, political, economic, environmental, and policy drivers that shape the means by which people migrate across borders. The elevated risks of migration were the subject of global attention after the shipwreck of October 2013, when over 360 people lost their lives when two boats sank off the Italian coast. In response, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched the Missing Migrants Project, systematically documenting migrant deaths and disappearances globally. The project gathers data from a wide variety of sources, from official reports (such as coastguard reports and medical examiner reports), media reports, reports from NGO and UN agencies, and eyewitness accounts from survivors. What IOM data shows is that globally, routes into Europe and from Africa are the deadliest in the world.

Figure 2: Since 2014, the Missing Migrants Project has recorded deaths during migration—regardless of legal status. These incomplete counts (with approximate locations) represent individuals and the loved ones left behind as recorded on 30 March 2025 (Source: Missing Migrants Project)

Tens of thousands of migrants from Central and West Africa undertake perilous journeys each year toward Europe, navigating some of the world's most dangerous migration corridors. These routes - including the Central Mediterranean passage linking North Africa to

Italy, the Western Mediterranean crossing between Morocco and Spain, and the notoriously treacherous West African Atlantic route to the Canary Islands - claim hundreds of lives annually. The recorded death toll of 2,800 migrants in 2022 is almost certainly an underestimate. Particularly along the Atlantic route where inadequate search and rescue capabilities and extended ocean voyages in unseaworthy vessels lead to disproportionate fatalities. While illegal migration from West Africa to Europe is not a new development, it has gained increasing media and policy attention. Data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicate that West Africans constitute a large percentage of the number of irregular arrivals in Italy, Spain, Greece, and Malta. In Europe, the sub-Saharan migrant population has been augmented by the influx of nearly one million asylum applicants (970,000) from 2010-2017, according to Pew Research Center analysis of data from Europe's statistical agency, Eurostat (Pew Research Center, 2018). In the absence of legal migratory routes, Immigrants end up entering countries with no legal permission. This may be because of the unavailability of channels for their entry or due to obstacles that hinder their ability to seek legal channels. As a result, they end up being categorised in several ways, for example, spontaneous, undocumented, unauthorised, irregular, or illegal immigrants (Franck, 2006 p.15). It is important to do justice here to efforts of ECOWAS on creating more employment opportunities for young West Africans within the region which appears to have yielded some results and helped decrease the outflows to Europe, especially along the deadly south Atlantic route (IOM, 2024).

3.3 Youth migration in global studies and policy-making

Migration and asylum-seeking have emerged as critical issues that demand attention within the global governance frameworks (Triandafyllidou, 2016). Migration presents opportunities for educational advancement, job prospects, and personal growth, with profound implications for individuals and societies in origin and destination countries. However, (youth) migration often occurs due to high unemployment, governance failures, gender inequality, social exclusion, and climate change concerns (Samuel Hall, 2022). In low- and middle-income countries, these contextual factors contribute to strong migration motivations, turning regions such as the AU into net senders. At the same time, related discussions around job security and the impacts of migrants on culture and identity in higher-income countries contribute to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments, particularly noticeable in a net-receiving region such as the EU (Agnieszka, Weinar, Bonjour, & Zhyznomirska, 2019). Over the past two decades, the ‘record

high' influx of migrants and refugees has significantly impacted the European debates on migration and highlighted the
'imperfect choices' the EU faces concerning African migration policymaking (Nogueira Pinto, 2023). The corresponding regional demographic trends play a significant role especially in shaping youth migration patterns. High-income countries in Europe are experiencing a decline in their working-age population. By contrast, many African countries could benefit from a demographic dividend, with a larger share of their population being of working age (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2017). This results in African countries often becoming net senders of international migrants, which has both positive impacts (for example, economic benefits of remittances) and negative ones (for example, loss of working population).

Moreover, to understand migration phenomena in today's globalised world, there is a strong need to adopt a transnational lens (Caglar, 2016) and go beyond the simplistic reading of country of origin or country of destination. Discourse and research on migration are shaped by complex political, economic and social factors (Samuel Hall, 2022), which influence individual policymaking in origin and destination countries. A significant problem, however, is that policy-making in origin and destination countries is not sufficiently interlinked; it often overlooks the specific challenges faced by transit countries and, crucially, does not consider drivers, needs and challenges specific to youth migrants. Therefore, it is fair to say that policymaking inadequately responds to the complex phenomenology which migration entails, especially when migration is analysed through a transnational lens.

As mentioned above, youth migration presents unique challenges and constitutes a central blind spot in migration research and policymaking (International Organization for Migration, 2020). Migrants are typically young, healthy and employable in the destination country, especially in the care sector (Kofman, 2016). The 2019 International Dialogue on Migration by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) emphasised the need to interrogate the complex challenges youth migration brings forth and their intersections with social, economic, and environmental well-being and development (IOM, 2020). Understanding the drivers of youth migration decision-making is therefore crucial for developing effective policy frameworks, in both development and humanitarian settings. For this reason, I review excerpts of the relevant literature about the existing policy frameworks and data informing policy making and factors influencing migration decisions among African youth.

The literature review reveals a range of policy approaches in both origin and destination countries, from restrictive measures focusing on strengthening border policies (and policing!) to more inclusive approaches that recognise the potential benefits of youth migration. The Global Compact on Migration (GCM, 2018) is a comprehensive framework that aims to address various aspects of international migration cooperatively and holistically. Importantly, GCM recognises youth's unique vulnerabilities and includes explicit policy objectives to support them. While generic commitments to the safety and well-being of migrants can be found in the relevant policy frameworks of the African Union (African Union Commission, 2018), the lived experiences of African migrants across the migratory route reveal a myriad of challenges they face. These include limited access to legal pathways (SOLIDAR, 2020), risk of death and injury along illegal routes (International Organization for Migration, 2023), vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation (Galos, Bartolini, Cook, & Grant, 2017), and inadequate support structures along the journey. The European Union (EU) has introduced various initiatives to address the root causes of migration in African countries through Migration Partnerships with countries from three specific geographical areas: Sahel and Lake Chad region, Horn of Africa, and northern Africa (Toaldo & Barrana, 2016). However, these regional approaches primarily aim to limit the influx of migrants to Europe from these specific regions. Furthermore, except with regard to heavy policing of the borders, it is difficult to talk of a converging policy framework common to all of the EU (Agnieszka,
Weinar, Bonjour, & Zhyznomirska, 2019). This raises several questions: firstly, do AU and EU possess a coherent migration policy framework that address the unique challenges of youth migration, regular and/or irregular? And secondly, are their approaches mutually harmonised? Preliminary critical examination suggests the answer is no to both questions. It could certainly be argued that the existing policy framework appears to offer few credible legal pathways for African migrants (SOLIDAR, 2020) and no tailored solutions for youth specifically. Moreover, where limited policy commitments to safety targeting the youth do exist, policymakers do not involve youth in decision-making (IOM, 2020).

In the case of West African migration, the process of leaving one’s country through irregular pathways has come to be ingrained in the social and economic fabric of youth populations over time. As much as migration policy and its enforcement remain concerns to states and international organizations, realities on the ground generally point to there being a disconnect between the goals and objectives embedded in migration policy and the way in

which those policies come to be put into place, or more often than not, evaded on the ground. Echeverría (2020) draws an important distinction between policy-making and policy implementation and points to the many 'gaps' that emerge between discourse, design, and implementation. Of particular importance in the West African context are implementation and discourse gaps where restrictive policies coexist with informal social conventions, lack of logistical capacity or simply arbitrary implementation. Not only do such gaps allow but in several cases enable irregular migration to be a routine occurrence rather than an anomaly. Migration from such a perspective demands closer attention to the way in which policy effects emerge not from the direct consequence of official state decisions but from an entangled web of actors, negotiation, and improvisations on the ground. Even though this is not the goal of my research, I briefly examine an instructive case of the policy approaches in the Canary Islands as an important corridor for West Africa migrants.

The Canary Islands route across the Atlantic, one of the world's most deadly migration routes, killed around 10,000 individuals in 2024, with some boats drifting as far as 6,000 km across Central and South America. Initial EU response was focused on containment, keeping the migrants on the Canaries for longer, which created fear of the Canaries being transformed into an "open-air prison" following the EU's Hotspot model of Lesbos and Lampedusa. Spain, however, has taken a radically different approach for the past two years, with a focus on swift transfers from the Canaries to the mainland and the opening of new centres organised by vulnerability. By 2023-2024, Spain had regularised these transfers on a weekly basis, effectively ending overcrowding at key migration centres in the Canaries. In contrast, the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum, active from June 2024, is geared toward a more heavy-handed migrant policy with such activities as pre-entry filtering and containment at the point of entry, with the aim of categorising and ultimately expelling the irregular migrant. Spain appears to be breaking with this approach after the passing of Royal Decree 1155/2024, which is expected to come into effect in May 2025. That decree focuses on integration and regularization, rather than expulsion. The decree introduces simplified visa procedures and new regularization channels, with approximately 300,000 individuals estimated to be covered annually. Spain's departures from the EU's tight containment model appear clear, but the long-term trajectory is less than clear, with the interaction of Spain's policies with EU pressures determining if the Canary Islands remain nodes for identification and redistribution, or if the Canaries slip back into a function marked by detention and expulsion. However, I find this

approach quite insightful in terms of effectiveness as it appears to not only better dovetail with the motivations of irregular migrants but also be more effective in terms of managing the complex challenges of irregular migration.

Linked to policymaking is the question of whether it is evidence-based and what types of data are used to inform the formulation of policy. On the one hand, creating better evidence and gender/age-disaggregated data on youth migration is a critical priority for migration research (IOM, 2020). On the other hand, it is equally clear that countries do not follow mutually harmonised approaches to migration statistics (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014), which introduces significant variance in the data, making comparisons across countries difficult. The lack of complete and harmonised databases means that the AU and EU do not have a common starting point for policymaking that would be adequately regionalised and contextualised. However, the lack of sufficiently disaggregated data cannot be used to justify the lack of action in protecting youth migrants. Apart from challenges unique to quantitative data, more resources must be invested into complementing migration statistics with relevant qualitative data, especially for formulating a vision of youth migration policy. A 2017 study reported that the majority of the young migrants from West Africa were not aware of the actual situation in Libya, a key transition hub, before they reached the country (REACH, 2017). The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) identified several thematic gaps in the body of knowledge about youth migrant decision-making. I identified three thematic gaps as relevant for this research: (1) migration trajectories through the migration cycle, (2) youth migration corridors, and (3) young migrants as changemakers (Samuel Hall, 2022). All three could all be said to converge on the central question highlighted in the introduction: "what is the real role and weight of [young people] in the decision-making process […] and what are their expectations and motivations" (Samuel Hall, 2022).

Finally, it is vital to acknowledge the intrinsic challenges of studying migration in its full complexity. The scope of this study is enormous as it covers decision-making from both policy and individual points of view. I posit, however, that such a dual approach is necessary if we wish to understand why young people migrate, explain patterns of migration processes, and distinguish individual motivations from macro-level determinants of migration. Such an approach to migration study is further called for by the failure of policies to avert *preventable* loss of life in the Mediterranean and the southern Atlantic. From a positive angle, creating more governance structures for youth participation in migration decision making may fulfil many of

the demographic promises the African continent holds for itself and Europe. Therefore, this research embraces the urgent task of understanding the **s**imultaneous role of agency which youth intrinsically possess *within* the more comprehensive social structure that shapes migration decisions (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014).

Chapter 4: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

4.1 Overview of migration theories

Theories of migration open ways of understanding why people migrate, be it as individuals or groups. They also offer insights into the complex processes driving migration and the decision making connected with it. The purpose in this section is to provide an overview of the main theories such as push-pull theories, world-systems theory, migration systems and network theories, transnationalism, and feminist theories, and to critically appraise their merits and limitations. Subsequently, I will introduce my theoretical framework to study the decision-making processes of irregular migrants from West Africa to Germany and Europe.

The push-pull framework is one of the earliest and most widely recognised migration theories. It suggests that migration occurs due to disparities between origin and destination areas, where individuals are "pushed" out of their home countries by unfavourable conditions such as poverty and unemployment and "pulled" to receiving countries by better economic opportunities (Lee, 1966). However, critics argue that the model oversimplifies migration because it only accounts for economic factors and not historical, political, and social factors such as colonial ties, influence from relatives, and government policies on labour recruitment and asylum (Castles & Miller, 2009).

Expanding on the classical push-pull model, more recent economic theories of migration shift the focus from individual decision-making to the collective strategies of households. From this perspective, the new economics of labour migration (NELM) suggests that migration is not simply about individual migrants pursuing higher wages, but is a deliberate strategy undertaken at household level the objective of which is to diversify income streams and minimise economic vulnerability (Stark & Bloom, 1985). I find this approach particularly useful for understanding how families negotiate risk and opportunity in contexts where formal insurance or credit markets may be limited or unreliable. (Faist, 2010). However, this approach still attaches greater importance to economic factors compared to the emotional and cultural influences in shaping migration behaviour.

World-systems theory offers a macro-structural perspective, arguing that migration is inherently linked to the global capitalist economy. Wallerstein (1974) conceptualises the world as a single system divided into core, semi-periphery, and periphery regions, where wealthier

core nations exploit resources and labor from less developed periphery countries. In this context, migration serves as a mechanism that reinforces global inequalities by facilitating the movement of low-cost labour to stimulate economic growth in core countries. Gonzalez and Fernandez (2003) argue that world-systems theory gives too much importance to global economic forces, while at the same time downplaying migrants' agency and the social factors that influence their migration decisions. In other words, the economic determinism that underpins this theory fails to acknowledge the crucial roles of political and cultural processes in shaping migration patterns (Faist 2010), an oversight that I am particularly keen to avoid in my work.

In contrast to structuralist approaches, migration systems and network theories highlight the interconnected relationships among migrants, communities, and institutions. According to Castles and Miller (2009), migration systems emerge when networks of individuals, organizations, and policies facilitate repeated patterns of movement across borders. Through such networks migrants are able to access not only logistical resources and make informed decisions about migration, but also the emotional support through which they can overcome the attendant economic and legal challenges associated with (irregular) migration. Migration systems theory therefore stands in contrast to older, economically-centred theories and gives due recognition to migration as a dynamic and self-sustaining process, one which is linked to personal and national histor(ies) and social capital, and constrained by institutional frameworks.

Assimilation theory was initially used to analyse how migrants adapt to their new environments by gradually adopting the cultural norms and practices of the society they moved to. Early scholars assumed that successful integration required migrants to abandon their original cultural identities to fit into the dominant culture (Gordon, 1964). However, multiculturalism is an alternative framework, and emphasises the coexistence of disparate cultural identities within a shared social and political space. This was particularly consequential in the German political context during the Syrian refugee crisis and Angela Merkel's „Wir schaffen das!“ in 2015. The importance of this can hardly be overemphasised: On the one hand, Kymlicka (2012) pointed out the benefits of multicultural policies, which promote cultural pluralism within a framework of equal rights and responsibilities for all groups regardless of their ethnic or religious origin. However, the experience of multiculturalism as practices in Germany, France and many other European countries point to clear limitations of

multiculturalism which can sometimes reinforce social divisions under the guise of failed integration projects. Another important concept that offered fresh theoretical perspectives on migration is transnationalism. It recognised the fluid nature of migration, and the lived experience of migrants in which they maintain economic, social and cultural ties as they move across borders. Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1995) challenge the traditional view of migration as a one-way process, emphasising the ongoing exchanges and connections between migrants and their countries of origin. This approach calls for a departure from two types of errors: "methodological nationalism," which assumes that migration should be studied within the confines of nation-states (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), and "methodological dualism," which is based on a simplistic country of origin v. destination country dualism. I am keen to avoid both limitations in my framing of migration. Furthermore, Urry (2007) introduced the notion of mobilities, which is based on the idea that people, goods, and ideas are in constant flow across global networks. However, it has to be recognised that mobility is not universally accessible, as many migrants, regular and irregular alike, face significant structural barriers to migration (Kivisto, 2001; Faist, 2000).

Feminist perspectives on migration have challenged traditional male-centric narratives by examining the unique experiences of women migrants. Early migration studies often depicted women as passive dependents following male migrants, but recent research highlights the agency of female migrants in seeking employment, education, and independence (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Gendered migration patterns reveal that women face unique social expectations as well as a segmented labor market, which makes their experiences migrations different from that of men. It is important for a migration theory to explicitly acknowledge the complex interplay between gender, class, and race in migration decision-making processes.

The possibility of formulating a single, unified migration theory that would encompass the complexity of migration processes in their entirety remains subject to debate. On the one side of this debate is Massey et al. (1998) who argue against striving for one overarching theory and move in the direction of synthesising various approaches to arrive at a more holistic understanding of migration. However, such an approach may come at the expense of losing the unique insights offered by individual theories, as pointed out by Morawska (2001).

Another insightful approach comes from a critical-realist perspective (Bakewell, 2010) which emphasises the interaction between structure and agency to integrate different theoretical approaches. This is the approach I also take following in the footsteps of Karen O'Reilly's

(2012) whose practice stories offer a comprehensive framework that bridges structural and agency-centered explanations of migration. Drawing on strong structuration theory (Stones, 2005), practice stories highlight how migrants navigate social structures and constraints while exercising agency to shape their migration journeys.

4.2 Practice stories as a tool to study irregular migration

In this section, I outline a theoretical framework for applying practice stories to study the decision-making processes of irregular migrants from The Gambia/West Africa to Germany/Europe. Despite the numerous theories that have attempted to explain irregular migration, and the rich insights they continue to yield, there appears to be a portion of irregular migration that remains unexplained. As presented by Echeverría (2020), irregular migration theories fall somewhere between either structural accounts—offering irregularity as failure on the part of the state—or agency-based accounts emphasising the creativity and resourcefulness of the migrants themselves. While both provide insightful points to consider, the end result is a fractured body of theories which are compatible only to an extent (Echeverría, 2020). Or in some cases they tend toward mono-causality and undifferentiated application to varied contexts (Echeverría, 2020). For example, economic globalization or failure-based theories of irregularity, might successfully capture the drivers of migration at the system level but they fail to account for the way in which such drivers get filtered through local culture, history, and social networks (Echeverría, 2020). Agency-based theories, on the other hand, have the potential to overemphasise autonomy and overlook the larger structural limits within which youth migrants make their decisions.

Drawing on structuration theory by Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, my approach situates migration as a dynamic process embedded within the wider socio-structural contexts. Applying Giddens' structuration theory (1984), it is possible to understand how migrants might be dealing with the limits coming from the society at large while still making their own choices. His theory revolves around the notion that structure interacts with agency and that interaction makes up social life in a sense of a duality. While social systems can limit people’s actions, they also provide the means for action. For irregular migrants, their decisions are both influenced by and help shape the shifting social and political landscapes they move through as they cross borders. Giddens emphasises that individuals are not passive subjects of structural forces but actively engage with them in a continuous flow of action situated in historical time and geographical space.

Similarly, Bourdieu's (1990) notions of habitus and field offer critical additional dimensions to my understanding of migration decision-making. Habitus refers to the deeply rooted habits and ways of thinking that come from a person's background and experiences (Bourdiue, 1984). These patterns are shaped through socialization and when applied to migration, help us understand how irregular migrants see and react to the challenges and opportunities they face during migration. The field, on the other hand, represents broader social structures and is reflective of power dynamics and institutional or policy frameworks that condition the choices faced by irregular migrants. Migration decisions could be said to emerge from the interaction between migrants' internalised dispositions and the structural opportunities or limitations presented by their political and economic environment. Structuration and practice theories therefore provide a framework for conceptualising migration not just as an economic transaction or policy-driven process but as an ongoing negotiation between agency and structure that unfolds over time and is situated historically.

The original aims of my study were to address three interconnected objectives: (1) analysing socio-economic factors motivating irregular migration of the West African youth, (2) examining familial and community influences on their decision-making, and (3) investigating the role of governance and exclusion in shaping irregular migration choices. I aimed to examine each objective independently yet in relation to one another. For example, motivations focus on structural factors like poverty and political instability, while familial influences involve habitus shaped by cultural expectations. Governance issues require analysing systemic exclusions and their impact on youth agency (Stones, 2005; O'Reilly, 2012).

Having completed in-depth interviews, it became clear that situating the individual agencies of respondents within broader social structures required a more comprehensive frame for interpreting qualitative data along the lines of practice theory. I found that frame by drawing on theoretical perspectives elaborated by Karen O'Reilly as a guide to thinking about how irregular migration—and processes related to it—unfold in practice. Rather than positioning itself as a replacement for existing theories, O'Reilly sees it functioning as a generative background framework, one capable of integrating and informing diverse lines of inquiry (O'Reilly, 2012). What resonated with me is the focus on the structured improvisations of everyday life: how people actually "do" migration in practice. To the best of my knowledge, I have not found O'Reilly's approach being specifically implemented to understand irregular migration as such, nor in the West African context in particular. Echeverría goes in the direction

of building a systemic theory of irregular migration (Echeverría, 2020). I attempted in this study the practice story approach to move beyond framing migrants solely as rational actors or policy subjects, instead grounding them as social beings embedded in their own routines and worldviews. By treating migration as a social practice rather than merely a decision or outcome, this approach may point to how migration is socialised or reproduced whether through stories, peer influence, community or family expectations within specific West African locales. And how the migrant's practice story unfolds even, and perhaps especially, when it defies legal frameworks or formal policy objectives (which ultimately remain beyond the scope of this study).

Moreover, O'Reilly's concept of practice stories serves as the analytical lens, emphasising the chronological and narrative nature of structuration processes. These stories capture how individuals act within and upon social structures, contributing to the reproduction or transformation of norms, rules, and organisational arrangements over time (O'Reilly, 2012). O'Reilly's approach to migration studies draws on practice and structuration theories to tell practice stories about migration (O'Reilly 2012).

> "Practice stories direct us to investigate ongoing processes and the contexts that make them possible, such as with the initial decision to migrate, and then also to follow these narratives through as the initial practices then go on to shape general patterns, arrangements, rules, norms, and other structures in the destination locales in terms of the outcomes of migration. In doing so they put people's actions in the context of their historical and contemporary conditions." (O'Reilly 2012)

Methodologically, this entails conceptualising and analysing the external structures that shape the practices of a given community or group. Situating these practices within broader academic and policy discourses helps illuminate the structural and cultural dynamics influencing irregular migration from The Gambia and West Africa to Germany and Europe. Literature analysis provided the base for exploring the socio-economic and political factors driving irregular migration decision making with a focus on the interplay between agency and structure (O'Reilly, 2012). Moreover, it was also helpful to examine broad policy documents and frameworks governing migration from West Africa to the EU (which I briefly reviewed in the Literature Review chapter) since these reveal the systemic conditions shaping migration pathways. This aspect of the methodology addresses how governance structures, both in West Africa and Europe, impact decision-making processes and migrant outcomes in line with

structuration theory's emphasis on understanding external structures (Giddens, 1984). Moreover, in-depth interviews with migrants and one key informant provided rich narratives essential for telling practice stories. The interviews allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences, motivations, and constraints of irregular migrants within their socio-structural contexts (Stones, 2005).

Karen O'Reilly's concept of practice stories (2012) provides an overarching methodological approach that captures migration as a process rather than a one-time event.
In my conceptualization, a practice story about migration links four elements together:

1. External structures[5], "" (O'Reilly, 2012), which encompass broader socio-economic and political forces that shape migration decisions in The Gambian/West African context, such as economic deprivation, governance failures, and restrictive European migration policies. These structures influence the opportunities and constraints available to migrants in both their home and destination countries, but the analysis is not constrained by the origin vs. destination dualism as explained above. Classic examples of external structures shaping migration decision making are global inequalities and post-colonial contexts (O'Reilly, 2012). At the same time, it is important to consider what O'Reilly terms more "malleable" structures such as social norms and pressures that may be more challenging to clearly identify.
2. Internal structures[6] which include personal dispositions and perceptions shaped by cultural expectations, socialization, and life experiences. Internal structures help us to understand how individuals, in our case, make sense of the world and how they may respond to and what decision they may take in specific circumstances, for example, when facing provisions of a certain asylum policy. An individual's reaction to migration policies or community expectations is not simply a choice, but shaped by how those policies are understood and internalised through their personal and cultural habitus (O'Reilly, 2012). In my research, I framed migration decisions of those interviewed within a collective understanding of family obligations and motivations for educational and/or social mobility.
3. (Instances of) Practices which aim to tie together the strategic actions migrants take in response to external and internal structures simultaneously, such as gathering

[5] "[…] including those that are distant and more proximate, hard and more malleable." (O'Reilly, 2012). [6] "[…] including habitus, conjuncturally-specific internal structures, desire and projection." (O'Reilly, 2012).

information, engaging with intermediaries, and navigating complex border regimes. Here, a particularly poignant aspect of practice is the decision to migrate irregularly despite the attendant risks. And lastly,

4. Outcomes which manifest as the consequences of migration choices, including improved economic stability, social integration challenges, or precarious legal status upon arrival to Germany.

In applying this method, I aim to understand the lived experiences of irregular migration from West Africa to Germany by tracing how individuals navigate all four dimensions in their decision-making processes. It is important to stress, however, that the delineation between these four elements is not watertight when used to interpret the empirical data. As O'Reilly (2012) put it:

> "[…] there remains a difficulty in defining structures that are external to the agent and yet internalised, enacted and embodied."

In the introduction, I mentioned two dimensions in which O'Reilly's framework may prove to add additional explanatory power for qualitative research of irregular migration. Epistemologically, practice stories offer a corrective to the sedentarist and state-centric biases (Echeverría, 2020) that have long influenced migration research. They offer a lens through which structure and agency are not competing explanations but mutually enriching perspectives. In my view, this allows migration researchers to ask not just *what* people do, but *how* their actions reproduce or contest broader systems of power and meaning. Empirically, this approach opens space for narrative and ethnographic work that uncover key aspects of irregular migration that frequently remain hidden. The burdens of frustrations, the creativity of improvisations, and lastly, the weight of decisions taken. That said, I have to emphasise the very real limitations I encountered in my own approach. Gathering sufficiently granular qualitative data for the kind of inquiry I was striving for proved inherently messy, from an ethical, methodological and logistical point of view. Indeed, what I aimed to achieve was, in O'Reilly's (2012) words, a "r*eflex reflexivity* based on a sociological "feel" or "eye"".

Moreover, my inquiry clearly took me from purely sociological toward anthropological research for which I felt I was insufficiently equipped. In O'Reilly (2012) words:

"It would be impossible for one lone researcher to study all interrelated aspects of a phenomenon through a practice theory"

In summary, when done carefully, it is my belief that practice theory provided me with the conceptual scaffolding I needed to reframe irregular migration not just as a policy problem or economic calculation, but as a deeply social process.

Chapter 5: Findings and Practice Stories Analysis

5.1 Respondents' background information

First and foremost, understanding the biographical background of our respondents is important to set the scope for analyses. Eight male and one female interviews were conducted with the respondents' description of which is provided below.

Respondent 1 is a male from Gambia and 30 years old. Arrived in Germany in 2022. He studied at an "English school" in Gambia before making the journey, and he currently holds a Duldung residence permit which he needs to renew each year.

Respondent 2 is a male, 22 years from Gambia. He used to assist his father at the market stall to generate income. He currently has a Duldung as well and has been living in Germany since 2019.

Respondent 3 is male and from Gambia, he states his age is 17. However, this has been legally disputed by the German authorities since he is assumed to be 23. He attended a "Quran school" to obtain religious education. He currently has Duldung and lives in a camp, however, he is also enrolled in a school for "integration" in Germany.

Respondent 4 is a 30-year-old male from Nigeria. He came to Germany in 2015 having gone to school and learnt some "trading". Thereafter, he became a driver in Germany earning his "Aufenthaltstitel" in the process which granted him residence in the country.

Respondent 5 is an unemployed, married 30-year-old from Gambia. He worked as a truck driver back home. Arrived in Germany in 2015 and currently holds a Duldung. He has in the meantime brought his wife to Germany to live with him.

Respondent 6 is a 30-years-old Gambian male who has been in Germany since 2015, prior to arriving in Germany he was a Taxi driver and hess currently holds a Duldung.

Respondent 7 is a Nigerian male who has been in Germany for the last five years and he has a Duldung as a status.

Respondent 8 is a 35-year-old male who studied food and beverage in the Gambia and worked in the hospitality sector before he arrived in Germany. Having arrived in Germany in 2014, he only received his Aufenthaltstitel a year ago**.**

Respondent 9 is a 27-years-old female who left Cameroon (English part) before arriving in Germany. She was a university student studying and working in an automobile company before war started. She is currently unemployed as she is a mother to a 2-year-old. She has been in Germany for 3 years and she currently holds a Duldung.

Moreover, in the next section I use two stories to illustrate and give a fuller scope of experiences of two irregular migrants from West Africa with the hope to capture their lived experiences in a dignified and fulfilled manner as much as possible.

5.2 Ruben's Journey told as Practice Story

Ruben[6] arrived in Germany from Gambia when he was only seventeen and had been in the country for six months at the time of interview. He was born and raised in rural Gambia, a post-colonial, economically fragile state. The Gambia is characterised by limited access to formal education, high youth unemployment, and constrained livelihood opportunities for young people (Suso, 2019). These are examples of external structures which heavily shape life trajectories of irregular migrants and Ruben is no exception. From a life course perspective (Elder, 1994), Ruben's early life was marked by a disrupted transition into adulthood. Under Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian rule (1994–2017), The Gambia became a site of widespread political repression, leading some Gambians to flee not only economic hardship but also fear of persecution and state violence (Uggla, 2015; Zanker & Altrogge, 2017). Furthermore, the limited institutional support was limited and there were few pathways for upward mobility. Overcrowded classrooms and a curriculum with limited relevance to local economic realities (Altrogge & Zanker, 2019) have led many Gambian youths to perceive formal education as unproductive. Having only formally attended what is called Quran School in the Gambia which he never finished, he never felt like he was not learning much in high school. Therefore, education opportunities were unsatisfying and the sense I get from talking with him, quite stifling. Ruben's early life was shaped by a combination of family and educational neglect. At the same time, economic precarity structured everyday life. Rural Gambia has few employment options for young people beyond subsistence farming and petty trade, or informal migration-related hustles. These structural barriers limit the scope of action for youth like Ruben. In addition, family tensions, specifically conflict with his uncle who "used to fight [him] a lot" added interpersonal strain. But the deeper issue lies in how such family dynamics are intensified by economic hardship and the absence of social safety nets. In line with Elder's concept of "linked lives," Ruben's decision to migrate cannot be disentangled from intergenerational expectations and obligations, nor from the broader socio-economic landscape that constrained both his and his family's prospects.

[6] Pseudonym.

His decision to leave ranged from seeking a better education for his future to the economic outlook in Europe *("life is better over there")*. Ruben declared that his decision was made *"overnight"*; while this may appear as a moment of rupture, it has to be balanced against his recognition *"that many Gambians have already migrated"*. Implying his own understanding that there are limited alternatives to leaving Gambia if he is to pursue a better life. His decision to migrate is therefore shaped by how he understands and internalises his personal beliefs and those around him. Ruben set off on his journey from the Gambia to Spain, with Spain being his first point of arrival. "The journey was seven days straight on the Mediterranean Sea". He did not want to go into the details of his journey due to fears of revealing too much information. Also, he further stated that the boat was small and overcrowded, carrying 72 people which was scary as he recalls this journey with a sad expression on his face. It is in this journey that the practice of migration comes out in stark terms. Ruben undertook this journey with his brother who never made it to Germany because he was one of the people who lost their lives at sea. He states that he has never told anyone this, not even his family because they never knew that he undertook this journey with his brother abroad. His motivation was seeking a better life at any cost even if that may cost his life. When asked if it's a norm for people in his community to take this dangerous route he states that he is not aware, but there were no information campaigns to stop them from taking this journey. Ruben's silence about the brother's death to his family could itself be understood as a practice, a survival strategy to shield others, and perhaps himself, from unbearable pain. The journey was not only a geographical crossing but an embodied, emotional ordeal, filled with risk, loss, and unspeakable memories.

Arrival in Germany is "complicated". Recalling that he does not have legal documents to have certain benefits from the German system such as Bargeld or proper housing. *"Everything here is very bureaucratic",* he says, shaking his head. He faces different obstacles especially with this German status as he finds it challenging to meet his lawyer who can assist him in this regard. Additionally, the camp he lives in is overcrowded as he shares it with a lot of other migrants which makes it impossible to sleep at night. *"There's just not enough food for everyone"*, therefore he also feels malnourished and occasionally depends on friends for food which makes things "very hard". Residing in this camp with other migrants is not easy. *And the camp is not good. We are sharing the house so I cannot sleep, you know, even studying. I couldn't do it so that really [bothers] me."*

Although he is in high school, where he learns basic numeracy skills, sciences and most importantly, German, he still feels the system is discriminating against him. When Ruben looks back at the journey he made and everything that he anticipated when arriving in Germany, it is not aligned: *"No happiness since I came here."* His underlying expectations are far from reached; he has faced racism more or less in his everyday life not only systematically but feels constantly insecure about his status in Germany as he fears deportation. Moreover, financial constraints were also a main factor that forced him to take this journey. Noting again that when he made this decision to come it was like an overnight decision and he was happy he made it, notwithstanding the challenges.

Reflecting on the last months of his journey, Ruben strongly feels that life in Germany is complicated, however he sees it as his final destination, his dream is to become a bus driver: *"Yeah, so I'm going to be here and land you know like I told you I wanna be a bus driver."* His framing of his own journey is inspiring and reveals a high degree of autonomy in his decision making. Even as the systems marginalise him, he navigates them, drawing on peer networks *("black people")* for survival. Wenger's (1999) "mutual constitution" of structure and agency is evident here; Ruben's actions are acts of agency within "fields of force" (Giddens, 1984). And even though these fields constrain, they do not fully determine the outcome.

5.3 Sanama's journey told as Practice Story

"I am a single mother, and I find life here challenging but I do not wish to go back" Sanama[7] has a little beautiful two-year-old girl who she is raising on her own. She left the Anglophone part of Cameroon with her daughter at the age of 27. Her country was at the time engulfed in civil conflict. Prior to coming to Germany, she was a university student studying at the Sciences Faculty.

The Anglophone crisis[8] set the stage for Sanama's departure: armed conflict, frequent school shutdowns and lack of basic services. *"We come from the English part of Cameroon because of the war". "Life in The Gambia was hard. I finished school but had no job. My family depended on me, and there were no opportunities. Every day, I saw friends leaving for Europe, sending money back, building houses. I felt useless staying.* As a woman, she faced additional

[7] Pseudonym.

[8] Refers to a long-standing Anglophone problem with ongoing armed conflict in the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, between the Cameroonian government and Amazonian separatist groups.

risks including sexual violence which forces the movement of many young people, especially women. *"I have some people that influenced me to come to Germany."* There is an element of family influence but throughout the interview, it does not appear as decisive in Sanama's case. Her work trajectory is particularly revealing in terms of internal motivations: she started off as a science student revealing strong motivations to be educated but then moved on to odd jobs, from working at an automobile company to being a hairdresser. This also speaks to issues of structural marginalization felt by women even when education or employment are available to them.

However, the decision to leave Cameroon was not easy or straightforward. It was influenced by the fact of her womanhood which carries with it the habitus of responsibility and care, especially after becoming a mother. *"Apart from the war, also, there's this problem of taking care of a child"*, she says. This life event or transition as Elder (1994) refers to it, shows how and why her frame of reference had shifted. The way she juxtaposes maternal duty to war and violence, and frames it as a push factor is telling. I have not encountered that dimension in other stories. Moreover, Sanama interpreted her world not merely through material scarcity, but also through the care for others. The inability to care for her daughter became the tipping point. Her reference to others' choices reinforces this context: *"Yeah. Not the same process. Others sometimes have [the right] documents"*, indicating how decision-making is relational and unique to each and every one, and particularly for women who have to navigate multiple roles sometimes in opposition to their personal ambitions.

The practices through which she enacted her journey are also revealing when it comes to unique challenges female irregular migration brings. She left Cameroon under the pretence of a gymnastic tournament via a visa from Nigeria to Serbia, and from there slowly moved toward Europe. *"The whole journey took two years, even though Greece is not that far"*. This prolonged duration again underscored the structural and gendered delays many women face, from waiting for smugglers, to relying on unreliable networks whose motifs she was right to question. Migration here is not a single decision but a protracted performance of agency under constraint. Sanama's journey unfortunately has "invisible" corridors, shaped not only by physical borders separating countries but also by safety concerns and childcare needs. She did have some minimal assistance along the journey which proved just enough for her to be able to reach her goal. Also, along the way she communicated with some members of her family

but not everyone. *"I talk with […] them mostly on the phone. But so many of them are in, maybe, the interior of the village, so I don't have contacts to them."*

Sanama arrived in Germany in 2022. The outcome of her journey is a mixed bag, as she herself perceives it: one the one hand, at least and at long last, she is physically safe. On the other, she does not have a formal status yet, but only asylum status which to her surprise only allows her to take up certain types of jobs with her level of education. She therefore feels the frustrations of living in Germany "*"I was hoping to further my education or gain certain skills… but I don't feel integrated."*. What in her motivations was meant to be liberating, the journey conclusion ended up feeling immobilising. Sanama's motivations stem from the political turmoil that led to the war in Cameroon, consequently, also affecting her financial stability and ability to take care of her daughter. Moreover, her worries for her daughter have not eased as she moved to Germany. If anything it made it more complicated as she cannot even find a placement for her to start school, most of her day is around her daughter , and she cannot afford a babysitter, even though she tried getting support from the government.

This contradiction becomes most tangible in her daily caregiving. *"I can't even find a placement for her to start school… I cannot afford a babysitter."* She still is awaiting feedback from the authorities. Sadly, she does not feel assisted by her community here in Germany, even though it is common for people from Cameroon to come to Germany, the African diaspora is present but not helpful. Moreover, uncertainty around her asylum complicates matters further. *"I don't yet have any status." "It's not easy to be in an asylum... It's difficult for me to find a place for the kinder[garden] for her to go to school."*

Despite the hardships she experienced, Sanama showed no desire to return to Cameroon: *"Life here is challenging, but I do not wish to go back."* This plane assertion complicates the narratives of great expectations, followed by disappointed dreams. Instead, it points to an ongoing practice of persistence as a form of everyday agency that is neither about victimhood nor triumphalism. Her narrative is well explained by O'Reilly (2012) who contends that practice stories must account not only for movement, but for dwelling, coping, and enduring.

5.4 Elaborating practice stories of West African irregular migration

Using the qualitative data collected during the interviews, I aimed to capture migration decision making and experiences through the lens of practice stories and structuration theory.

The analysis is based on four primary elements: external and internal structures, practice stories and outcomes. Each narrative is explored through available empirical data and grounded in broader structural and theoretical insights conceptualised in Chapter 4. In this section, I aim to generalise the findings stemming from combined practice stories of all the migrants I interviewed. I organised the findings pertaining to different practices around external structures, internal structures and outcomes. The analysis is structured in a way that responds to the three broad sets of objectives of the research as originally formulated, namely personal motivations, family and community influences, and youth participation in governance. The outcomes also include reflective practices which speak to adaptation challenges and resilience of migrants. Lastly. and as mentioned in Chapter two, I also conducted an expert interview with Mr. Nelson Momoh, a Nigerian-born social worker with over three decades of experience supporting West African migrants in Germany. His NGO CaPoA has become a vital support system for refugees and irregular migrants. Mr Momoh's insights offer valuable contextualization of the structural and practical dynamics explored in the chapters below.

5.4.1 External structures shaping West African youth migration to Germany

Applying Karen O'Reilly's theoretical framework, the following section explores the external structures that shape the migration experiences of the West African youth. These external structures act as both enabling and constraining factors, framing individual agency and migration decisions. The analysis is organised around key external forces derived from the empirical data and literature review.

Economic hardship in The Gambia is one of the most cited reasons for irregular migration (Suso, 2019). In line with literature which emphasises that limited access to formal employment perpetuates economic instability (IOM, 2021), my research confirms that lack of economic prospects, together with widespread poverty and unemployment, is partly what drives young Gambians to seek better opportunities abroad. Our expert spoke candidly about why so many young Africans take the risk to leave. There is deep inequality and corruption that stifles opportunity which youth are acutely aware of. Governments overlook their youth. *"Back home, if you're under 25, chances are you're unemployed—and that kind of desperation drives people to migrate,"* Nelson said. Social media only adds to the pull, presenting Europe as a place where success comes easily, while relatives and friends who have already left often say, *"Come, life's better here."*

Economic insecurity intensifies the pressure the young Gambians feel from their families who look to them for financial support. The stage is set for the decision to migrate as a means of securing not just hers, but the future of her family. Moreover, The Gambian economy is quite reliant on agriculture and remittances (Altrogge & Zanker, 2019). Such trends imply that there are not many opportunities for the youth to improve their socio-economic status, further incentivising irregular migration as an attractive alternative. The perception of Europe, and especially Germany, as a land of opportunity where education and jobs are more accessible, acts as an external structure motivating migration.

Moreover, the migration policy frameworks in countries of origin and especially destination countries determine the governance of migration at national and international levels as well as the structural conditions that decisively shape migration flows (Caponio, Scholten, & Zapata-Barrero, 2019). My research confirms the difficulties which young West Africans face in obtaining legal pathways to Europe, including restrictive visa policies and border controls which present major obstacles. One respondent noted:

> *"I looked and then I saw that it's something that's not gonna be possible because you need to have plenty of money in your account, and I don't have that money, so going to the sea was the only possible way."*

The EU has in place bilateral agreements with The Gambia which centre on deportation and readmission agreements. When applied in practice they lead to border externalization and serve as another crucial constraining factor (Carling & Talleraas, 2016) shaping irregular migratory outflows from Africa to Europe. These policies on the one side deter legal migration while pushing migrants towards irregular and precarious routes through Libya and the Mediterranean. As revealed in literature review, it has to be acknowledged here that ECOWAS (The Economic Community of West African States) migration policy has made some progress in regulating intra-regional mobility and improving migrant protection framework (IOM, 2024). This includes more options for regular migration within the West Africa region. However, its impact on irregular outflows to the EU has been mixed at best. It is constrained by economic realities, challenges implementing the policy, and perhaps most importantly, competing external interests particularly with respect to EU's migration containment agendas.

Another prominent external structure influencing migratory pathways in the Gambia is its educational system, which operates in a resource-constrained environment. Furthermore, it is not aligned with labour market demands as is the case with many education systems in Africa.

This predicament has the undesired effect of channelling the youth away from their home countries and toward migration as an alternative pathway for advancement (Suso, 2019). My research is replete with frustration which young people in Africa experience when it comes to the lack of educational opportunities and career prospects:

> *"I don't think people have [a] future there you know, yeah, because even the education you have to pay, bro. If you don't have money to pay [for] your grade 9 exam they will drive you out of the school, yeah, you know they will drive you out of the classroom...".*

This powerful account reflects several broader and very consequential patterns for West African youth. Instead of fulfilling its promise as an engine of mobility, education becomes a push factor for migration. The Gambian system, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary resource limitations, struggles to equip students with competitive skills in a globalised economy (Mamdani, 1993). At the same time, education is strongly linked to the ability to pay for either school fees or exam fees, substance or very often, any combination thereof. Consequently, many young Gambians perceive migration not merely as an economic decision but as an informal continuation of education—one where experiential learning in European or neighbouring African labour markets substitutes for formal instruction. This dynamic moreover illustrates how institutional shortcomings can reconfigure migration into a form of *pragmatic upskilling* (Bourdieu, 1990), albeit with high risks. Anthropologically, these journeys reveal an adaptive recalibration of life courses, where youth navigate structural constraints by repurposing migration as a formative process (Johnson-Hanks, 2002). What emerges is not just a "brain drain" but a complex negotiation of opportunity, where motivations outpace local systems' capacity to sustain them.

The analysis so far clearly points to migration decision making as irreducible to economic and opportunity calculus alone. It therefore has to be understood as deeply embedded within intersecting social structures (Bourdieu, 1990) and cultural logic (Geertz, 1973) that shape, and are reshaped by, mobility. As in many postcolonial contexts, migration in the Gambian context operates as both a stratification mechanism (Massey et al., 1993) and a cultural practice, where familial and communal expectations act as both a coercive and an aspirational force. The imperative to migrate could be said to have its roots in kinship obligations (Carling, 2014) but also intergenerational contracts, as seen in one respondent's account:

“My parents expect me to provide for everybody, so that was one of the reasons why I decided to find a way to come to Europe.”

The migrant's sense of moral obligation binds him to redistributive duties, while at the same time migration acts a rite of passage in a liminal process (Turner, 1969) wherein successful upward mobility confers symbolic capital. This is why families and communities collectively invest in young men’s journeys, reflecting fictive kinship networks (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000) and shared risk economies (Vigh, 2009). In O’Reilly’s framework, the role of family and community influences can also be considered as an external influence albeit at an meso-level. It extends beyond shaping initial migration decisions to influencing experiences throughout the journey. For some, familial blessings were a source of motivation, as one respondent shared:

"My father gave me his blessings even though he was scared... he knew it was a fight for the strong."

Migration here appears to be motivated by the sacrifice the respondent is making on behalf of the family, and in the process, links his personal agency with goals of his community (Fiedler, 2019). Migration research, including in many West African contexts, points to young people embarking on migration as a moral and economic project intended to secure the livelihood of those left behind (Carling, 2008; Åkesson, Carling, & Drotbohm, 2012). Migration becomes a way of fulfilling intergenerational obligations, linking personal agency to collective goals. Communities, too, play a critical role in normalising migration as a viable choice. One respondent observed:

"In Africa, it's always exciting when we ometimes hear someone is going to Europe."

This reflects how shared cultural narratives reinforce migration as an expected life trajectory within certain social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Yet, the journey itself often disrupts familial bonds. In that same statement, the social production of desire (Appadurai, 1996) is apparent, where Eurocentric imaginaries intersect with the Gambian prestige systems. Yet these very narratives also entrap migrants (Alpes, 2017) and transform their hopes and dreams into a disciplinary regime that demands perpetual remittances. The result is a paradox: migration sustains communal structures while atomising the burdens of their reproduction. Migration’s familial and social networks act in complex ways: they simultaneously open movement

pathways and impose restrictions. In the case of the Gambian migrants, kinship ties often persist fast across continents, with some bonds surviving while others dissolve:

"I still talk with my family on the phone, but friends I don't communicate with anymore."

Finally, governance, as the most pervasive yet intangible of O'Reilly's external structures, shapes migration motivations through what it fails to provide as much as through what it imposes. Across West Africa, political systems that marginalise youth participation generate a pervasive climate of instability, one where migration emerges not just as an opportunity but as a rational response to institutional precarity (Carling, 2002). Frustration with governance systems in the West African context is a frequent theme identified in the data. One responded gave voice to a common sentiment:

> *"These African country[ies]... we complain too much but we are not doing nothing about it. The government… the government is just there. If you have the power and you are in position you care only about yourself and your family."*

The perception here is not just one of corruption but of abandonment. The state instead of acting as a guardian of collective well-being, is perceived as a platform for personal gain accessible only to the powerful. In such a context, young people do not see themselves as political subjects with a stake in the development of their nation or community. Rather, they are mostly spectators to a show that is closed off to them. Governance therefore becomes a barrier rather than a channel for mobility or dignity. Respondents often linked their decisions to leave with systemic corruption, inadequate youth policies and a lack of opportunity. One respondent captured this sentiment:

> *"The problem of Nigeria is just bad governance... the old cabbages are killing the country."*

The sense of disillusionment also included perceptions of systemic barriers that inhibit social mobility. Another respondent lamented:

> *"Even with education, you can't achieve anything in Gambia unless you have money to pay for exams. It's all about the system."*

Governance failures thus emerge as structural forces that constrain agency and exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. Attempts to address migration through local initiatives were

viewed as ineffectual. A respondent commented: *"In Gambia, you cannot stop a lion when it's hungry."*

This lack of faith extends beyond national politics to the everyday realities of community life. *"Not that they don't want to come to Europe, but when they look at the environment… There's nothing, nothing is there. There is no other way,"* said another respondent. The 'environment' here refers not only to the physical surroundings but to a broader developmental vacuum. When localities offer no meaningful opportunities for education, employment, or training, the decision to leave becomes a rational response to structural predicament (Altrogge & Zanker, 2019). What is very telling is how these sentiments circulate socially and become common knowledge through a shared experience.

"Even those who go and come back say it is still better over there," one youth remarked. Migration becomes normalised, its dangers eclipsed by its perceived inevitability and its comparative advantage. In this way, narratives of failed governance and peer validation feed into each other. They also reinforce a habitus in which departure becomes the most viable life plan.

In summary, applying O'Reilly's framework allows us to see how these external structures operate dialectically: weak governance *enables* migration by undermining local opportunities even as it *constrains* through border regimes that criminalise movement. The resulting dynamic exemplifies what migration scholars call 'regime shopping' (Scheel 2019), where youth navigate between failing domestic institutions and extractive global systems, leveraging the contradictions of each in the narrow path that gave toward self-actualization. Echoing the voices of the youth on the optic of governance, the key informant was equally critical of Europe's approach to migration, calling the policies outdated and still influenced by a colonial mindset.

> *"Africa and Europe aren't speaking the same language,"* Nelson said. *"Europe talks about democracy, but for most African youth, that word doesn't mean much—they've never seen it work for them."*

5.4.2 Internal structures shaping West African youth migration to Germany

Further drawing on O'Reilly's theoretical framework and the empirical data available, this chapter aims to identify and theorise the internal structures shaping the West African youth migration to Germany. What I have learned through engaging closely with their testimonies is that choices about moving to a new continent rarely emerge in isolation. They are shaped over time by a mix of ingrained dispositions and immediate interpretations of context. Following O'Reilly's interpretation of the notions of habitus and conjuncturally-specific internal structures (Stones, 2005; O'Reilly, 2012), I have come to think differently about how migrants act. Not only in response to structural constraint, but also through how they come to think about the world slowly, over the course of their young lives, and are then put to work in fast-moving, uncertain circumstances. Migration, seen from this perspective, is not a one-time act but a deeply situated practice (O'Reilly, 2012). It reflects lifelong socialisation, and at the same time, an imagination of possible futures. That being said, I have to emphasise that this is where I encountered considerable limitations and important gaps in the empirical data. Those are the areas where additional insights, arrived at using more diverse approaches, would enhance our understanding of the West African migrants' decision-making processes. However, these were not easy to probe for given the sensitivities involved in unpacking those experiences and the hardships the respondents endured on their journeys. I consciously opted to respect those during data collection, also because I did not feel sufficiently equipped to probe deeper.

Many of the respondents I listened to did not describe a conscious decision to migrate as much as a continuity of life paths already imagined long before departure. One told me plainly,

"I am 22 years old and I come from Gambia," and as the conversation unfolded, the assumption that migration was part of the life trajectory became increasingly evident.

Another said, *"Late 2014 I moved to Germany,"* but did not frame this as an extraordinary act. It was not rebellion, nor a radical ambition, but more of a continuation.

These accounts could be understood as expressions of a migration habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) i.e. a set of dispositions shaped through repetitions between generations and community storytelling. Migration, in this reading, is not only practiced; it is also expected.

Yet habitus alone does not account for the specificity of actions within unfamiliar institutional spaces. This is where Stones' (2005) notion of conjuncturally-specific internal

structures allows me to see how individuals interpret new terrains with knowledge accumulated not over generations, but often in the last few days or months. One young man explained,

"Yah, before they just gave me [a] six months paper. Then I went to another office and said I want to study. Then they say okay, wait. Then I bring my paper."

There is no grand strategy here, just the quiet intelligence of trial, error, and adjustment. He is reading the field. He has learned what counts as legitimacy in that space. Studying becomes not only a means of learning but a claim to belonging, a way to prolong legal presence. Moreover, I was particularly struck by how many respondents had begun to reorient their activities not because of personal desire but because of what they perceived as institutionally desirable.

"Now I go to school because they say that [will] help with the case." In this case, school becomes a kind of performance, not something insincere, but strategic. It is a way of signaling integration, a way of becoming legible. Firstly, habitus makes it possible for the migrant to imagine the movement. Then, conjuncturally-specific internal structures make survival possible once that movement has happened.

Internal structures are also crafted in relation to others. In shelters, classrooms, waiting rooms, and WhatsApp groups, migrants swap strategies, evaluate each other's decisions, and refine their own. These are not formal communities, but what Wenger (1999) would call *communities of practice.* One man told me,

"My friend say, wait before you apply again. They can cancel [...] if too fast."
Another said, *"They tell me don't go like that, go this way. Police will check you there."*

When *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) interacts with external structures, socio-cultural expectations push individual migrants to seek opportunities abroad. Moreover, the desire for personal growth and financial independence also emerged as a recurring theme. One respondent highlighted:

"What pushed me to Germany is to find a better living... and to experience the world."

Giddens' (1984) concept of agency within structural constraints is evident here. Irregular migration becomes a calculated risk in the face of limited local opportunities. Respondents appear to have internalised the systemic inadequacy which surrounds them while at the same

time asserting their motivations for better futures. Migration, in this context, is both a response to external constraints and a proactive effort to realise personal goals. This resonates with Giddens' (1984) view of agency within structural limitations. Cultural expectations, deeply embedded in societal norms (as theorised by Bourdieu, 1990), influence such decisions, linking migration to the pursuit of collective family welfare. Alongside these expectations, personal ambitions also shaped migration trajectories.

Media representations and success stories from returning migrants make other prospective migrants want to migrate themselves. In addition, social media platforms often portray Europe as a land of success, influencing young people's perceptions of life abroad. The allure of Europe is not merely imported through screens; it is metabolised into personal ambition. Social media's curated success narratives and returnees' performative displays of wealth (real or imagined) crystallise into what Appadurai (1996) might call "cellular modernity" which might refer to individuals or communities in very specific contexts such as a neighbourhood in The Gambia, form aspirations and imaginaries about life elsewhere—typically in the Global North.

"I want a greater future... I want a better tomorrow."

However, migration among West African youth is not simply a rational economic decision: it is in fact deeply rooted in their lived experiences and personal motivations. It could be said that social norms get internalised and, in the process, construct mobility as an inherent part of their life trajectory. Through practice, young Gambians I spoke with have internalised migration as an expected and legitimate pathway to a better future, where economic and existential motivations blend and become difficult to disentangle. Findings such as this:

"Many people are graduating from schools but no job."

point to there being an internalised belief that formal education alone does not guarantee success, fostering motivations for alternative paths abroad. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus helps decode why formal education's broken promises accelerate migration. Where diplomas once signalled mobility, they now mark time in stagnant economies and reveal how structural failures get reinterpreted as personal imperatives. If institutions in the origin country do not honour the social contract and provide youth with opportunities, irregular migration becomes an alternative credentialing system. This aligns with O'Reilly's emphasis on lived

migration as practice, not just decision-making but worldmaking, where youth reconfigure their life courses through embodied action.

> *"My plan was to come here because Germany has good education and good life."*

It is evident that exposure to external narratives through media, returnee stories, and social networks shape internal expectations of migration. Irregular migration could therefore be understood as an embodied aspiration, cultivated through cultural exposure, social narratives, and personal imagination. However, the empirical data I was able to gather do not provide sufficient depth for exploring how these motivations are formed over time within the local socio-cultural context.

Beyond their external logistical functions which I explored in the previous section, social networks operate as internalised structures that shape migration decision-making through emotional anchoring. They provide pointers for taking decisions but also validation for decisions taken. Migrants rely on pre-existing connections whether in real or digital spaces to navigate their journeys. An important aspect to this is that migrants do not only perceive these relationships in real terms, as they are but also as they are imagined or remembered. In other words, it is a kind of cognitive scaffolding that shapes decisions in ways that transcend mere material support.

> *"Yeah, since I've travelled my first target is to bring my girlfriend and marry here... build our own family here."*

Here, the respondent projects future ties onto an imagined European life, revealing how networks function as an internal blueprint long before materialising. This aligns with Appadurai's (1996) concept of *"social futures,"* where migration is prefigured by imagining a relation with some distant, better world and organises one's sense of possibility. Social networks furthermore play a crucial role in adaptation:

> *"I met good people like good Africans. They call me and tell me I can come to their side to eat some delicious food, or they help me with some things I don't understand."*

The simple act of sharing a meal takes on profound resonance in the respondent's description of encountering "good Africans" who offer both nourishment and guidance. This response also reveals how social networks in diaspora work to support survival not only in material terms but as a way to recreate home in an otherwise alien landscape. The emphasis on "good Africans"

subtly delineates an internal moral judgement which helps the migrant to distinguish supportive actors from others who might exploit or disappoint them. Similarly, the reference to “delicious food” is not a judgment about the quality of food. It signals emotional restoration. The sensory nature of memories of shared dishes reconstructs a fragmented sense of home and transforms pragmatic assistance into something approaching kinship. However, it is less clear from the data how young Gambian migrants navigate conflicting influences within their networks. Further in-depth qualitative studies focusing on interpersonal influences during different migration stages are needed.

A particularly striking finding is that for many Gambian migrants, the journey to Europe involves significant risks, yet the internalised belief in eventual success completely seems to override concerns about potential failure. This comes at complete willingness to risk one's life in order to reach the goal. Migration becomes a calculated gamble, rather than a mere response to hardship.

"I decided to risk my life in the good babylon ship."

But this calculus is not mathematical in nature and points to deeper, irrational forces which are difficult to model in a rational way. The phrasing itself is revelatory: the vessel is "good" despite its lethal potential, framing danger as a conduit rather than a barrier. This mirrors other youth migrant who spoke of migration in near-mythic terms, and compared his journey to a lion’s hunger:

"You cannot stop a lion when it's hungry."

This is perhaps invoking an instinctual drive that again transcends rational cost-benefit analysis. What I found striking is that youth migrants are neither minimising nor denying the risks, but somehow subsuming them into a narrative of transformation and where suffering becomes a rite of passage (Turner, 1969) rather than a deterrent. At the same time, this striking risk-taking appetite finds its counterpoint which I did not anticipate and which both respondents and the expert interview brought forth. The realities migrants face on the ground are tough. Many who arrive in Europe face many difficulties from complicated asylum processes to financial insecurity. As a result, one key aspect Nelson stressed is the profound loneliness migrants feel upon arriving in Germany.

“They’re not ready for how hard it actually is,” Nelson admitted. *“Between the stress of dealing with immigration systems and the guilt of leaving family behind, a lot of them fall into*

depression. And still, their families back home urge them to stay [in Germany] and send money."

Moreover, linked to the high-risk taking appetite is willingness to endure hardships. *"I am alone and they put me in a place where I could not have my independent food and it was very hard and very challenging."* Despite hardships, persistence to remain en route points to expectations for future rewards. Risk becomes an internalised structure, where young Gambians weigh uncertainty against potential long-term gains. Here it is important to again caveat that the data I collected does not permit me to delve into the psychological dimensions of risk calculus. More in-depth interviews would be required to explore and nuance further their risk perception and the associated coping strategies.

5.4.3 Living the outcomes: migration as practice

The institutionalised smuggling networks which may initially be mediated through friends of migrants expose some of the cruellest aspects of migration. Smugglers constitute a shadow system which at exorbitant fee, that is often measured in human lives and not just money, offer a pathway toward realising the migrants' deepest motivations. One respondent said:

> *"Coming to Germany was not that easy... I came from Gambia to Senegal, Mali, Niger, and from there to Libya for a year, and then to Italy."*

Such accounts expose the double-edged nature of transit networks: they circumvent state barriers while subjecting migrants to new regimes of predation. Far from ad hoc operations, these systems have crystallised into entrenched infrastructures (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014), mirroring formal institutions in their complexity even as they operate outside legal frameworks. This results in a paradoxical symbiosis where restrictive policies inadvertently fuel the very informal systems they seek to eliminate. This is achieved–at the expense of youth migrants whose motivations are exploited ruthlessly. One respondent recounted a devastating personal loss:

> *"I didn't tell anybody I was leaving... my brother passed away in the river."*

In this lived experience we see just how high the cost is which West African youth and wider communities bear in connection with their decision to migrate irregularly.

Migration does not end with the migrant crossing the border. It evolves across space and time. Arriving in Germany starts the process of acknowledging some harsh realities that clash with the picture-perfect image of Germany and Europe from the media. Instead, the migrants find themselves in a labyrinth of waiting rooms, where they have to interpret dense legal jargon, and over time experience a quiet but intense erosion of themselves as human. The dream of reinvention collides with the reality of asylum camps Jugendamts[9] and NGOs offering first legal aid.

> *"The first year was hard,"* one young Gambian man recalls, his voice fraying at the edges. *"No parents. No control. They put me in a place where I couldn't even choose my own food."*

In Gambia, meals for this migrant were acts of kinship while in Germany, they are part of a surveillance apparatus which drastically reduces his autonomy. In Bourdieu's terms we can refer to this rupture a *disrupted habitus,* and it feels quite visceral unravelling of something that once felt natural. However, migrants do not just endure, they adapt to these circumstances.

> *"Yah, before they just gave me 6 months paper because my age is not taken, so I had to go to court. I had to fight"*

The court hearing is not just a legal formality; it is also a place where the migrant has to reassert their identity and sense of self. Because of the demands of the asylum system which demands proof, migrants start to act: collect documents, attend hearings, stand before judges. These acts also constitute practices which open routes to new possibilities. Their "fight" is not some major revolutionary act. It consists of a huge amount of paperwork, and it is in such acts that their perseverance and stubborn insistence on existing, comes to life. The same insistence that helped them cross the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. And another instance of what O'Reilly might frame as *practice*: the daily labour of bending systems that refuse to bend.

"I don't know if I'll stay here forever, but obviously my goal is to start working in Germany." and *"Even my life has not changed the way I wanted, but it's better than the past years."*

[9] The Jugendamt in Germany is the Youth Welfare Office, a local government authority responsible for child and youth welfare services. For migrants, the Jugendamt can be both a safety net and a site of tension.

For Gambian youth, this means finding pride in a bus driver's license, solace in a friend's smuggled spices, or the fleeting dignity of a court victory. Initial dreams of permanence—a career, a home—soften into smaller feats: a German class completed, a friend's borrowed stove to cook a meal, the relief of a three-year residency permit. Or *"situated actions"* as Giddens referred to them. These are not endpoints but waystations in a longer journey. Underneath it all is a quiet kind of pragmatism and a recalibration of expectations.

"As far as you are an immigrant you are illegal, unless you are German."

His understanding of his own status was not legalistic but experiential. Illegality, in this sense, is not just a fact but a feeling, a sense of being always suspect, always provisional. This form of internal structure is context-specific, shaped by repeated encounters with institutional suspicion. It is a practical consciousness, to borrow Giddens' term (Giddens, 1984), but it is not passive. Moreover, this statement is not a legal argument; it is a diagnosis of social perception and racism that sadly still pervades German society. Even as migrants acquire the legal paperwork, the gazes on buses and in parks do not go away. The imprint of suspicion remains. And yet, stability is not entirely out of reach. *"Yes, I got my Aufenthaltstitel 3 years ago.* And he said it with a sense of pride at this accomplishment.

"My life isn't what I wanted, but it's better."

Certainly, better than threats of sexual violence she faced back home, frustration at not having to pay for Grade 9 exam fees, the camp mattress at a Libyan desert, the cold waves of boat in the middle of Mediterranean, or most brutally, the brother lost at sea. Better, and still brittle. Outcomes here defy neat classifications on the scale between success or failure. And through it all, these stories carry the truth that is often lost in policy (and police) debates: migration is not a problem to solve. It's a human condition, a pain to be witnessed, a potential to be realised. And while migration offers the promise of new opportunities, the reality of integration in Germany presented significant challenges for respondents. Language barriers, bureaucratic hurdles, and experiences of discrimination were common. One respondent recounted:

> *"The first year I arrived was very hard, with a lot of challenges... the social system was tough on me."*

At CAPOA, Nelson and his team do far more than just provide first legal and paperwork aid. They help rebuild lives. They place young migrants in language Intensiv Sprachkurs, linking them with job training or vocational opportunities. These are the kind of opportunities that transform basic survival into a real chance at stability. But insights from our key informant strongly suggest that integration goes beyond jobs and documents. *"Each migrant carries a different dream,"* he told me. *"For some, it's escaping poverty. For others, it's about learning a trade or finishing school. But Europe rarely opens its doors easily."*

Echoing these sentiments, another respondent pointed out his experience of racial biases that made it difficult for him to find a home:

"Because of your color, they don't want to give you apartments."

Despite racial barriers, community support networks can play a key role in adapting to life in Germany. Such communities constitute a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to help migrants navigate structural constraints and establish a sense of belonging in their new environments. In the words of one respondent: *"Nelson from CAPOA helped me with papers and showed me the way."*

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that many narratives of resilience exist beneath the surface. These undoubtedly highlight the migrants' ability to not only adapt but also endure despite the challenges.

"Life is a risk... if you want something, you must do something."

I return often to the quietest quote I recorded:

"How to drive."

It was offered in response to a question about goals, but the tone was not aspirational. It was observational. It struck me because of its ordinariness. Learning to drive, in much the same way as learning to wait, to fill out forms, to speak German, to find loopholes—is one of the many micro-practices through which migrants begin to inhabit new fields. Not all of them succeed. But all of them learn.

Practice story frameworks enable seeing the Gambian youth experiences of migration as not merely an escape from hardship but a proactive redefinition of their individual as well as West Africa's collective future. The iterative nature of structuration emerges clearly, as migrants actively reshape their socio-structural realities in both home and host countries

(Giddens, 1984). When it comes to long term outcomes, my key informant sees a future driven by Africans themselves.

> *"Africa is the future." "But we need leaders who invest in young people, not just in their own power." Until that happens, he remains committed to his work at CAPOA where he changes one life at a time.*

Chapter 6: Embodying Complexity: A Reflective Synthesis of Migration Practices

The interviews I conducted in this study, and all the theoretical work carried out to understand the phenomenon of irregular migration, converge onto one word: complexity. With all the theoretical insights and empirical evidence generated in the research process, there remains a significant portion of the phenomenology of decision making in the context of youth irregular migration which is unexplained. In this chapter I explore that very complexity by drawing on Echeverría's (2020) systemic theory of irregular migration and combining it with empirical insights from narrative interviews with Gambian youth in Germany, which I analysed through O'Reilly's practice story approach. The aim is to bring to light the situational nature of migration decisions and practices, and to move away from trying to posit cause-and-effect determinism toward a relational understanding.

Firstly, appreciating the complexity of the phenomenon I chose to study got me to problematise the very descriptor "irregular" when placed next to migration. The way states handle irregular migration reveals quite a lot about how power operates in modern societies. Drawing on Foucault's idea of governmentality[10], migration researchers such as De Genova (2002) and Broeders & Engbersen (2007) show us that irregular status is not an accident or oversight. Rather, it is a deliberate feature of how governments manage movement across borders. Through carefully calibrated policies, depending on whether the policies are implemented strictly or loosely, states create a grey zone where migrants exist in permanent uncertainty. They become what Foucault might call "governable subjects" who are needed for their labour yet always at risk of deportation. They can be rendered visible when convenient for authorities and especially when the elections are approaching and the Governments need to show they are "tough on migrants. Or they can be made invisible when it comes to enforcing their own rights and protections as inscribed in the relevant UN charters and national or supra-national laws. I believe this changes how we should understand irregular migration entirely. It is not that migrants are breaking rules so much as they are navigating rules that keep changing. Their legal status often depends not only on their own actions but even more so on shifting political priorities and administrative arbitrariness. For young migrants making difficult choices, this reality creates next to impossible calculations. How can you plan your life when the rules themselves are unstable?

[10] It could broadly be defined as a set of techniques which states use to shape populations through subtle controls (Foucault, 1979).

In some West African states, there is an assumption that providing economic opportunities within the country will be enough to prevent migration. Some of the interviewees acknowledged that such efforts could be beneficial to an extent, as corruption and governance failures remain significant challenges. However, there are two main challenges with this assumption: firstly, it is not nearly well enough being implemented in practice as the youth have clearly pointed to lack of meaningful participation, either in governance or entrepreneurship. Secondly, and this is an even more complex challenge: the motivations for irregular migrations are not only economical. They are also existential. Therefore, there is a portion of youth migrants who will continue to decide to migrate abroad even when economic opportunities are provided at home. Despite these nuances, Government initiatives and donor-funded programs, primarily those supported by the EU are being implemented without explicit link to in-depth qualitative research. Moreover, they remain largely unknown and inaccessible to the wider community.

Furthermore, as I emphasised throughout the practice stories analysis, simple cause and effect relations cannot explain irregular migration in its entirety. Instead, the complexity of decision making that makes up irregular migration ought to be the starting point in any explanatory attempt. This of course may mean different things depending on the chosen theoretical framework. But it should certainly be seen as an outcome that emerges when different, interrelated elements interact, starting with governance and policies, how well policies are implemented, family expectations, state of economy, social influences, and of course, migrants' own adaptive strategies.

In his theoretical elaborations, Echeverría also critiques the dichotomy between structure and agency. His systemic approach seeks to integrate the structural determinism and migrants' own motivations and agency without reducing either one of them. He achieves this by recognising how migrants navigate constraints while also generating novel practices in response to them. A similar insight emerges using O'Reilly's approach. Practice stories tell us not only about decisions but how those decisions unfolded in real life, often replete with contradictions and quick adjustments. As one respondent put it, *"Coming to Germany was not that easy; it was a process."*

Some left home dreaming of adventure, others running from dead-end lives. Along the way, those reasons often changed. One of the most striking things for me was how little certainty there was at every step. Nobody had the full picture at the outset, not about smuggling

routes, nor about how to get asylum laws, or the basic things about what follows after their arrival to Germany. One respondent admitted: *"I didn't even know what asylum was... they just told me to go to the office."* In almost every choice and every decision, there was a leap of faith.

To tackle the challenge of decision-making, some argue that it is crucial to focus on why people should remain rather than leave, emphasising the benefits of staying (Zanker & Altrogge, 2017). However, the findings of this study reveal that the aspiration to migrate is deeply ingrained in the social fabric of most, if not all, West African societies. Furthermore, migrants' narratives sometimes rationalise their decision after they have migrated or when they are forced into a reflection during an interview process. During that time they may align their decisions with external determinants (e.g., job search, education). The data, however, does not sufficiently capture how exactly migrants process conflicting desires and fears before making the decision to leave. My research simply leaves some aspects unclarified. Deeper ethnographic studies around decision-making timelines and influences would be required to clarify this aspect, however, this is an extremely sensitive interview process and it was not always possible to get to the "bottom line".

What becomes clear from these practice stories is that migration is rarely about one major high-stake decision. It is better understood as a thousand small choices made in impossible circumstances which require the person moving to weigh risks with incomplete information and balance their hopes against harsh realities. These young people are not following some master plan; they're making it up as they go, responding to what the system throws at them while trying to hold onto their dignity. The beauty of listening to their actual experiences is how it shatters our neat categories. One cannot divide their journeys into "forced" or "voluntary" when someone might flee poverty one day and choose a smuggling route the next. And the idea of "rational" decision-making falls apart when you're choosing between starvation at home and possible death at sea. By embracing the complexity of their situation, I came to understand that migrants are neither victims nor heroes. They are everyday people figuring things out within constantly shifting, often complicated realities. The "practice story" approach helps bring this messiness or complexity to light. It centers lived experience, reflection, and the practical wisdom people use to get by day to day. When read through the thick narratives of youth practice stories, migration decisions appear as moments when people become embodied, situated, and always remain unfinished. Understanding them requires not necessarily more data, but deeper appreciation of their lived complexity.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

In this thesis, I aimed to contribute to the field of irregular migration studies through improved understanding of the lived decision-making processes of West African youth migrating irregularly to Germany. Drawing on O'Reilly's practice stories framework and systemic theory, I showed that migration is not a once off decision but a changing set of practices shaped intersecting structures, motivations, and experiences. By centering the perspectives of youth themselves, I aimed to show not only how migrants act, but how they continually adapt to and reshape the contexts through which they move.

Conclusion one:

Motivations for migration among West African youth are revealed to be multifaceted and dynamic. Economic hardship and unemployment are confirmed to be at the heart of migrants' concerns. However, these drivers act in complex ways with more existential motivations, for example, the desire for self-actualization. One thing is clear: youth migrants do not follow linear or rational models of decision-making. Rather, they respond to shifting constraints and hopes, and often adjust their motivations throughout the migration journey. Migration, in this sense, is a lived and evolving practice shaped by context.

Conclusion two:

Family and community networks emerged as powerful forces in shaping West African migration decisions. These are not simply external influences; rather, they form part of the internalised structures through which young people make sense of their place in the world. Migration decisions are often taken not just for individual gain, but in service of family and collective aspirations and obligations. These expectations can be both supportive and pressurising. They create emotional tensions for the migrants which they continue to carry throughout their journey and even influence decisions as they settle in Germany.

Conclusion three:

Youth respondents as well as the key informant conveyed a clear message: the West African youth are excluded from political and civic participation in their countries of origin. They generally do not trust in public institutions and believe there is widespread corruption.

Moreover youth policies tend to be performative which contributes to a sense of disempowerment. Irregular migration emerged as a response to this structural abandonment of West African youth.

Across all narratives, the migration journey emerged not as a singular high-stakes decision but as an accumulation of small, situated acts. Crossing borders, finding accommodation, navigating complex family dynamics, contesting asylum decisions, or simply getting through each day in a new legal and cultural system. The experience of risk is not abstract but embodied in everyday uncertainties. The uncertainty of precarious transit persists into the unstable legal and social status in Germany. Loneliness is a recurrent theme alongside an incredible risk appetite which makes rational assessment very challenging.

Yet the data also revealed a remarkable capacity for adaptation. Migrants develop practical strategies that encompass learning new languages, joining community groups, accessing informal networks and sometimes relying on other Africans or black people. That allows them to assert a degree of control and agency within constrained environments. These are not acts of resistance in the traditional sense but are better understood as quiet, persistent practices of everyday survival and reinvention.

Tentative recommendations

Even though a much more structured policy analysis would be required to back up policy recommendations, I tentatively offer the following suggestions based on empirical and theoretical analysis.

Firstly, migration policies should move beyond risk messaging to create tangible alternatives. This includes investing in meaningful employment and education opportunities on both sides of the Mediterranean. Secondly, policymakers should recognise migration as shaped by collective dynamics which span kinship obligations, social norms and community pressures and something that is the product of individual cost-benefit calculation. Thirdly, genuine youth participation must be built into national and local development programs. This means enabling young people to co-design solutions that affect their futures, with real decision-making power. Both AU and EU ought to give this serious consideration. And lastly, integration programs should go beyond legal aid and language courses to foster belonging and inclusion. Support for grassroots and diaspora organisations can offer culturally sensitive, trust-based pathways to stability.

While this research has generated insights into irregular migration as a lived practice, there remain notable gaps in the domain of data. More research is needed to understand how migrants reconcile conflicting motivations before departure, how digital media ecosystems shape migration knowledge, and how micro-level decisions are made during transit. These questions require deeper ethnographic engagement, particularly around decision-making timelines, social pressures and gendered experiences. A female co-researcher would better understand the experiences of female respondents.

Future studies, which I myself hope to undertake, should embrace the complexity of migration stories rather than seeking to reduce them to generalisable variables. I am especially keen to explore diverse methodologies to be able to capture all the complexity of youth migration from Africa to Europe.

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CV

EDUCATION

Albert-Ludwigs- Universität Freiburg — Freiburg, DE

Masters of Arts in Sociology (Global Studies) — 2023 – 2025

The University of Namibia — Windhoek, NA

Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) & Honours majoring in Management & Sustainable Development — 2022

Diploma in Lifelong Learning and Community Education — 2019

Certificate in HIV/AIDS Education and Counselling — 2017

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Hope Foundation e.V. — October 25 - till present

- Conducting workshops on Sustainable development Goals
- Implementation and preparation of a Panel discussion
- Social media uptake
- Other related activities

Kontak und Bertungsstelle (KuB) — January 25 – August 25

Erste Kontakt

- Legal Advice (Residence law) for migrants
- Connect migrants and providing them with counselling services
- Assisting with outreach activities

DeZIM Institute Berlin

Consensus and Conflict department — May 2024 – August 24

- Editing publications
- Assisting in the design of questionnaires for qualitative interviews.
- Participating in an on-site protest-survey.
- Assisting in data preparation.
- Contributing to literature research and summaries

Society for Family Health Namibia February 2021 to 2022

Project Lead Feb – April 2021

- Led the National Youth Consultation on Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) Commitment on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Namibia, in partnership with UNESCO
- Participated in proposal development for "Skills for Girls" in response to call for proposal from UNICEF
- Collected and analyzed data on ARV uptake among community members in Windhoek township of Katutura as part of community-led monitoring of service delivery in HIV and public health.

The Solidarity Community Care Organisation July '19 – Aug '19 Intern • Conceptualized and delivered innovative, community-centered approaches to raising

HIV/AIDS awareness using adult pedagogy

- Raised funds and delivered two feeding drives for ca. 100 children and youth in marginalized communities.
- Wrote project proposals and reports and managed the organisation's social media page for two months.

Physically Active Youth Namibia Feb '14 – Dec '16 Intern Feb to Dec '14

Executive Assistant to Managing Director Jan '14 to Dec '15

- Assisted with programme planning, development and delivery, external relations, and communication.
- Managed internal database on learners, volunteers and employees and the organisation's website.
- Taught English and Afrikaans to learners in senior secondary phase of schooling.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- Conceptualized and implemented a comparative study on socio-cultural factors that determine utilization of sanitation services in Namibia. 2020
- Conceptualized and implemented a qualitative study on social and behavioral drivers of vaccination in disadvantaged communities in Namibia. 2021

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Proficient in Microsoft Office (Excel, PowerPoint, Word) and intermediate experience in CMS Joomla.

Languages: English (fluent), Afrikaans (fluent), Spanish (Level A2), German (Level B1).
Writing opinion pieces for leading daily newspapers on topical issues and social change in Namibia.

Modelled for the annual Fashion Week in Namibia in 2014 and 2015.