



Understanding Integration Experience and Wellbeing of Economic-Asylum Seekers in Italy: the Case of Nigerian Immigrants

Chinedu Obi^{1,2} · Wannex Slosse¹ · Fabio Bartolini³ · Joost Dessein¹ · Marijke D'Haese¹

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Abstract

The literature on migrants' integration and wellbeing is ample, but the case of economic-asylum seekers in a protracted asylum application system is yet to receive sufficient attention. The economic-asylum seekers are a unique group who migrate with an economic motive but apply for asylum to achieve economic integration in the host country. We use the aspiration-capability framework and a mixed-method approach: participant observation, focus group discussion, and field survey, to study a group of economic-asylum seekers from Nigeria when they were waiting for their asylum decisions in Italy. We find that they evaluate their wellbeing by reflecting on their premigration aspirations, integration constraints, and capabilities. They report lower life satisfaction compared to their satisfaction in Nigeria, and were affected by several barriers including structural, psychological, economic, and social constraints. Our study generally describes what it is like to live in limbo and frustration, with a limited assurance for a better tomorrow. It gives voice to the economic-asylum seekers and contributes to the integration literature by examining their perceptions of integration constraints.

Keywords Irregular migrants · Subjective wellbeing · Capability approach · Aspiration gaps

✉ Chinedu Obi
chinedu.obi@agr.unipi.it

¹ Institutional, Socio-economic and political issues in rural-urban areas (INSPIRA) Research Group, Department of Agriculture Economics, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

² Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment, University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

³ Department of Chemical, Pharmaceutical and Agricultural Science, University of Ferrara, Ferrara, Italy

Introduction

According to the IOM (2020), more than 120,000 mixed migration flows arrived in the EU in 2019. This number represents a significant decline compared to the 390,000 migrants recorded in 2016 and over 1.4 million migrants in 2015. The majority of the migrants are refugees wishing to seek asylum in Europe. Nevertheless, a significant number from sub-Saharan Africa are economic migrants and victims of human trafficking (Estevens, 2018). These mixed flows move through unauthorized routes because they cannot meet the legal requirements for authorized migration (Castles et al., 2012). Although officially open to refugees, the migrants also apply for asylum, hence becoming “economic-asylum seekers.” This unique group often creates additional challenges for integration authorities. Due to the massive number of claims to process and the complicated process of the refugee status determination (RSD), the time needed for asylum decisions is often elongated, running into years (Pew Research Center, 2017). During the protracted RSD procedure, the economic-asylum seekers live in limbo with restricted access to public services and often receive lesser support from humanitarian organizations compared to refugees (Hartonen et al., 2020; Vickstrom, 2014). Considering that more than 80% of asylum application from this group are denied, the future outlook seems dire for economic-asylum applicants waiting for decision (Asylum Information Database (AIDA) (2019)).

Understanding the integration experience of the economic-asylum seekers should be of interest for two reasons. The first reason is that the economic-asylum seekers are a subtle group of migrants existing in many countries that accept refugees. However, they are often difficult to capture in academic research. In migration literature, the economic-asylum seekers are either classified as refugees or asylum seekers, but these terms are restrictive. Economic-asylum seekers are not refugees because they voluntarily leave their country to seek a better life. Should they seek to return to their country, they would still enjoy the protection of their government (Phillips, 2015). According to Mayblin (2019), they are disingenuous asylum seekers and economic migrants in disguise because they are pulled to a particular country by economic opportunities. Although the group’s initial motive for migration is based on economic reasons, they often circumvent the problems of documentation, e.g., residence and work permit, by attempting to assume the status of refugees. Many economic migrants from Africa, especially Nigeria, follow this procedure because of the strict immigration laws in Europe.

Second, their integration experience (here defined as the process by which economic-asylum seeking migrants become legally accepted into the society, mainly by access to legal permits, public services, and labor market)¹ and their perceived

¹ There is no consensus on the definition of migrant integration. The European Union defined it as a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all migrants and residents of EU Member States. Broadly, integration means the adaptation of migrants and host societies and applies considerably to migrants’ rights and access to services and the labor market. We have adopted our definition of integration from this broad perspective.

migration achievement (i.e., the level they meet their premigration motive) differ from that of refugees. This is because their migration achievement may not be measured solely by their experience of security like refugees or by engagement in economic activities like other economic migrants, but by both factors. For them, security may be in the form of having the proper documents like a work permit, working, and earning an income high enough to support people at home who sponsored their migration.

Indeed, a growing body of literature covers the questions on migrants' integration and wellbeing in their host countries (see Hendriks, 2015, for a comprehensive review). The academic interest in the wellbeing of refugees who are forcibly displaced from their homes is apparent (Aziz et al., 2014; Carswell et al., 2011; Chaaban et al., 2013; Hartonen et al., 2020; Lintner & Elsen, 2018). More so, most studies that center on economic migrants' integration focus on the differences in the wellbeing between the economic migrants' populations and the native populations (Chen et al., 2019; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010; Stillman et al., 2009, 2015). Results repeatedly show a significant gap that tends to narrow as the length of stay increases (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Backes & Hadjar, 2013), or when an economic immigrant is of similar ethnic origin as the natives (Amit, 2010; Bălătescu, 2007; Safi, 2010; Sand & Gruber, 2018).

We noticed two gaps in the migrant integration literature. First, the case of economic-asylum seekers at the stage of waiting for asylum decisions is still not sufficiently addressed. The heterogeneity among these groups—some are irregular (economic) migrants, families sponsor some to travel, others are victims of human trafficking, yet some can be a combination of the above—means that different motives drive them, which could affect their perceived level of wellbeing achievement in host countries (Cortes, 2004). As such, there is a need to unbundle the literature and capture the unique case of economic-asylum seekers. We believe that focused research on this difficult-to-reach minority group is vital since their migration achievement significantly impacts their family's wellbeing. Moreover, at the point of waiting for asylum decision, the economic-asylum seekers may not have stayed long enough to start comparing their wellbeing with the host. They may, however, measure their wellbeing by comparing their present integration experience or standard of life with that of their expectations before migration. Therefore, we posit that a different framework that shows the gaps between present wellbeing level and expectations or aspirations before migration is best suited to examine the wellbeing of this group (Boccagni, 2017; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993).

This research is based on Nigerian economic-asylum seekers in Italy waiting for their asylum decisions. The UNHCR (2018) *Desperate Journey* publication showed that they have moved via the Mediterranean Sea to apply for asylum in Italy. We examined their integration experiences and wellbeing while waiting for the asylum results. The study contributes to the literature of migrants' wellbeing by highlighting this unique group at a critical period in their migration trajectory. We make a methodological contribution on how to reach the often difficult-to-reach migrant population by using a combination of focus group discussions and field surveys facilitated by someone of similar ethnical background and nationality with the respondents, enabling more access to them. Policy-wise, our

study achieves a vital function of giving voice to the economic-asylum seeking migrants and highlights the critical challenges they face when they are waiting for asylum results, which, when addressed, can help them live a meaningful life and contribute to societal gains.

The Conceptual Framework

We adopted the aspiration-capability framework to understand the integration experience and wellbeing of economic-asylum seekers (Obi, 2021). The first application of this framework was made by Carling (2002), who used the aspiration-ability model to explain involuntary immobility. He showed that migration functioning is achieved by those who aspire to migrate and overcome a series of barriers that may impede migration. Those who aspire to migrate but do not have the ability may remain in the origin country as an involuntary immobility group or search for other intermediaries such as networks and smugglers to assist them in migrating (Carling & Talleraas, 2016). The model was renamed as the aspiration-capability framework by Carling and Schewel (2018); De Haas (2014); and Schewel (2020), who linked it to Sen's capability approach. While the aspiration-capability framework mainly was used to study migration determinants and decisions (Carling & Collins, 2018; Suckall et al., 2017; van Heelsum, 2016), some researchers have also used the framework in studying migrants' and refugees' integration experiences and wellbeing (Boccagni, 2017; Borselli & van Meiji, 2020; Gosselin et al., 2018; Preibisch et al., 2016; van Heelsum, 2017).

Following the literature that links integration experiences with the aspiration-capability approach, we conceptualize that the wellbeing of migrants in the host countries is a function of their premigration expectations and the capability to overcome integration barriers. Secondly, migrants with insufficient capabilities to overcome integration constraints would experience an expectation gap (or aspiration gap) and low wellbeing. Unlike the literature that compares the wellbeing of migrants with the native population, the capability-based approach provides the opportunity to assess the migrants' wellbeing using the premigration expectations as a comparative entity.

The premigration expectations of irregular migrants may be divided into three broad categories: self-interest motives, altruism motives, or mixed motives (Rapoport & Docquier, 2006). We argue that the extent to which they meet these expectations would positively associate with their wellbeing levels in the host countries. Aspiration gaps are the difference in wellbeing attained compared to the expectations (Copestake & Camfield, 2010). A negative aspiration gap is crucial, meaning the wellbeing achieved is below expectation. Indeed, research has shown that asylum seekers face several integration barriers in the host country, impacting the wellbeing (Gosselin et al., 2018; Toma & Castagnone, 2015; UNDP, 2019). By checking these integration barriers and the expectations of the migrants, we can determine the perceived wellbeing of economic-asylum seekers.

Table 1 Applications and granting of protection status in Italy in 2019

	Number of applicants in 2019 only	Awarded refugee status, subsidiary or special protections	Total rejections	Rejection rate
Nigeria	1253	2471	13,840	83%
Pakistan	7305	710	10,272	85%
Bangladesh	1340	279	7663	93%
Italian Total	43,783	18,262	76798	81%

Source: AIDA (2019)

Data and Methods

The data was collected from Nigerian migrants, including economic migrants and human trafficked victims in Italy. It was collected at the stage when they were still waiting for their asylum results. Nigeria is among the top countries detected for irregular stays in Europe, and Nigerians are one of the largest groups crossing into Italy through the Mediterranean Sea (European Migration Network, 2018). In 2016, the number of Nigerian migrants crossing through the Mediterranean Sea to Italy was 7554 (ISTAT, 2019). In 2019, the number reduced to less than 2000 migrants because of strict border controls placed by Matteo Salvini, the then Italian Minister of Interior Affairs. A report from the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) (2019) showed that 2471 Nigerians had received either refugee status, subsidiary, or special protection status in Italy. In 2019, 1252 additional asylum applications were made by new arrivals from Nigerian, and 13,840 (83%) applications were rejected (Table 1). More so, since 2017, Nigerian migrants have been targeted for detention in case they fail to return after a failed asylum claim (*ibid*). The significant number of migrants from Nigeria applying for asylum in Italy despite the protracted RSD procedure, the limited possibilities of positive responses, and the increasing evidence of vulnerabilities they face are the reasons we selected Nigerian migrants for this study.

The data was collected in late 2018 in two cities in Italy: Jesi in the Marche region and Ragusa in the Sicily region. We selected the two cities because they have a sizeable Nigerian community. A mixed-method approach was adopted. The mixed-method approach integrates qualitative methods like informal interviews, personal observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a survey. The first author who conducted the field survey is a Nigerian citizen, which gave us access to the target population. He lived with them for 1 week, speaking with them in Nigerian pidgin. He organized one FGD in each city and several informal interviews. The participants' consent was obtained in all interviews, and their rights and the confidentiality clause were read.² All the study participants were then following the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) project, which provided shelter and some financial support as they were waiting for the decision of

² The field survey was done with strict adherence to the ethical regulation of the authors' institution and the guidelines provided by the SPRAR managers.

their asylum application. The managers of the SPRAR also assisted in mobilizing the FGD participants, although they (the managers) were not present during discussion sessions.

The total number of FGD participants in both cities was 24. The subjects covered include premigration expectations, current economic situations, and wellbeing. We first distributed the questionnaire to the FGD participants for the survey part. Secondly, using a snowball technique, we identified an extra 40 respondents who did not participate in the FGDs. These extra respondents were identified through the assistance of the FGD participants. In total, 64 respondents completed the questionnaire. The survey includes information about the respondents' characteristics, length of stay, economic activities, and Subjective Wellbeing (SWB). In particular, we operationalized the SWB of the respondents using the question: *how satisfied are you now compared to what you expected in Italy before migrating?* A 5-point Likert scale ranging from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied was used to retrieve the responses.

The mixed-method approach allowed us to conduct an in-depth case analysis of the group. The essence of the FGD and observations was to grasp the respondents' different perceptions. In contrast, the survey was used for triangulation, which reduces the human bias associated with observational studies. The data were analyzed using a hypothetico-deductive method. This method enables us to test our conceptual framework based on the a priori outlined hypothesis rather than developing a new concept from the analysis as done in grounded theory (Lawson, 2000). The idea behind the hypothetico-deductive method is similar to most scientific research to confirm or refute a theory or concept by making assumptions and hypotheses, and the hypothesis is tested by gathering and analyzing data (Sprenger, 2011). The qualitative data was generated from the transcripts of the FGDs and the informal interviews. We coded the transcripts, paying attention to the information related to the premigration experience, integration constraints, and capabilities. The quantitative data were analyzed using summary statistics. We know that the number of respondents to the survey is too small to calculate correlations or estimate econometric models.

Results

Respondents' Characteristics

Table 2 is a summary of the profile of the participants. It shows that the majority (78%) are male. Most of the respondents (72%) are between 25 and 34 years. About 57% have a secondary school education qualification. Most female participants were not working in Nigeria before migrating, while most males had some form of employment. Most of the respondents (85%) are from Edo State in Nigeria, a widely known hub for irregular migrants' departure. This profile shows that the respondents are young, able, and willing to work. They are not illiterates, and they have some job experience. They may be considered lucky, considering that

Table 2 Characteristics of respondents ($n = 64$)

	Frequency	%
Length of stay in Italy ($n = 63$)		
< 1 year	5	8
1–2 years	26	41
3–5 years	29	46
6–10 years	2	3
> 10 years	1	2
Age ($n = 57$)		
18–24 years old	9	16
25–34 years old	41	72
35–44 years old	7	12
Education ($n = 61$)		
None	4	7
Primary	6	10
Secondary	35	57
Higher	16	26
Sex ($n = 58$)		
Male	45	78
Female	13	22
State of origin ($n = 64$)		
Edo State	55	85
Others	9	15

some co-travelers died during the journey. More so, they are risk-takers and are determined. These features are considered assets that can be beneficial to Italy. However, they are trapped in the asylum application cycle, with limited opportunities to achieve their dreams.

A Gendered Perspective on Premigration Expectations

The FGDs showed that mixed motives drive the respondents to migrate. This includes a self-interest motive to improve their wellbeing and an altruistic purpose to help their family. However, some noticeable differences can be found along the gender dimension. The female migrants' motives primarily result from hardship and activities of human traffickers. Two female respondents explain that they were deprived of opportunities to continue their education in Nigeria because of poverty. One said that she could not make sufficient money from her vocations (e.g., hair-dressing business). Therefore, she expected that migration would bring new opportunities to further education and use her vocations to make money.

The main thing that made me leave Nigeria was suffering, no good life.[...], After my secondary education, my dream was to attend a university. However,

there was no money to further my education; also during that period, I lost my dad, I was frustrated (F, 19y, Ragusa).

While these challenges are sufficient to consider them economic migrants, they are also victims of human trafficking. The quest to lift their families out of poverty pushed many girls into the hands of traffickers, who recruited them to engage in prostitution in Italy. Some girls lacked sufficient knowledge about the journey and what would be obtainable in the destination countries. The so-called madams arranged their migration, and even before obtaining their asylum documents, they were already forced into prostitution by these madams.

[...] I came here with the help of my madam. I decided to come here because of my family issues; we were not living fine. I was advised that Europe is good and can make money with my hairstylist business. My madam told me that I could work and go to school with my handwork. I swore an oath that I would pay her 30,000 Euros. I never knew the value of that money as at that time, and I was thinking that it is a small amount in Nigerian currency, not knowing that it runs in millions of Naira (F, 20y, Ragusa).

We gathered that the desire to improve life prospects is the main factor driving the migration of most men. Male migrants are more likely to migrate due to economic reasons than due to the activities of human traffickers. Most already had jobs in Nigeria from which they raised the money to pay smugglers. Some are financed by their family and friends and get information from these informal sources—friends and families. Although they were relatively informed of the risk in the journey, they are still willing to take the risk for a perceived better life in Italy, not fully knowing the realities of irregular immigrants in Italy.

I worked in Nigeria....before migrating. I followed my friend to Libya, and on getting to Libya, I had to source help from my friends to come here (Italy). You know that this journey is either life or death. Therefore, it is a personal decision. For me, risking the life to migrate is better than struggling in Nigeria (M, 28y, Jesi).

The Integration Barriers of Respondents

The integration barriers faced by the respondents can be summarised into structural, psychological, and social constraints. With structural constraints, they wait for a long time for their asylum result. Many of the respondents have been in Italy for up to 3 years but are yet to receive their final asylum decision. Usually, there is no standard timeframe for asylum applications in Italy. The flow chart of the procedure is found in Fig. 1. According to AIDA (2019), asylum seekers have a deadline of 8 days after arrival to register for asylum with the authorities, such as the border police office, the provincial immigration office (*Uffici immigrazione*) of the police (*Questura*). Fingerprinting and photographing (*fotosegnalamento*) are carried out by Questura, who also initiates the Dublin regulation and lodges the applicants' story (*verbalizzazione*). The formal applications are then sent to

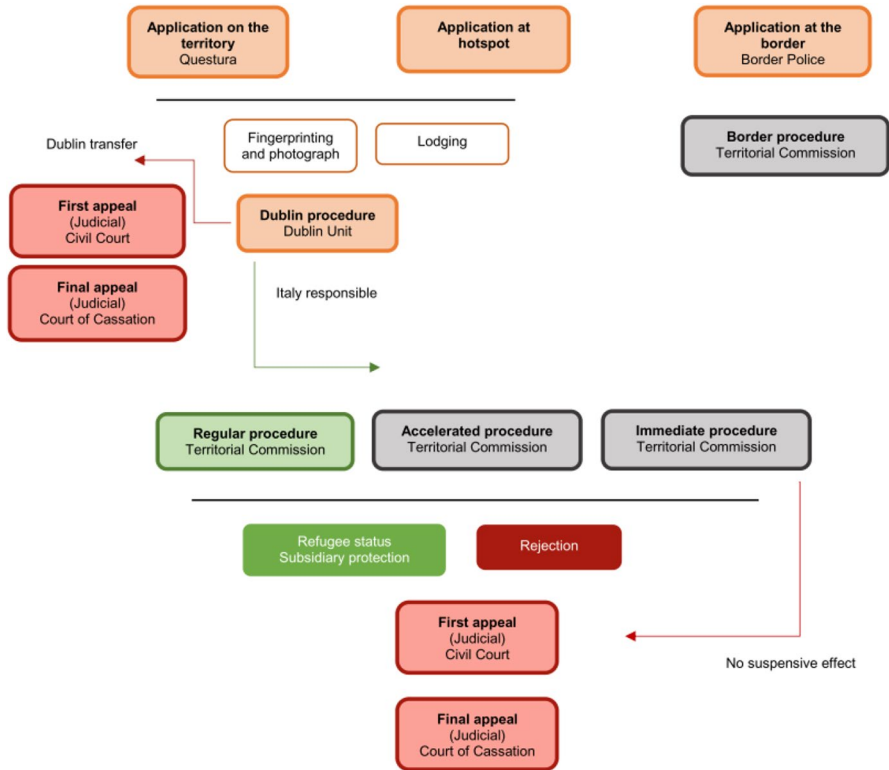


Fig. 1 Flow chart of the asylum procedure in Italy. Source: AIDA (2019)

the Territorial Commissions, who should contact the applicant for interviews within 30 days. According to the procedure degree, the decision needs to be made between 3 days and 6 months, and exceptionally for a maximum of 18 months. According to AIDA (2019), this procedure takes more time than expected due to many simultaneous applications. Moreover, the applicants can appeal the decision after receiving a negative decision, further elongating the asylum process.

Most of the respondents, especially those who have stayed up to 3 years, have appealed the negative decision once or twice. They explained that they face severe difficulties regarding finding a job or traveling. They could not travel to another European country, even if they had a social network, nor go back to Nigeria unless deported. With the increasing stress of not knowing if their asylum claim would be positive or negative, they are stuck. One of the migrants summarized their feeling of limbo and absolute denial of personal liberty in Italy. She said:

I have been staying in the camp for several months since my arrival. We do not even go outside. Always indoors, 24 hours a day (F, 23, Jesi)

They complained about the strict and bureaucratic integration system, which made the process of getting residence permits increasingly tricky, despite applying on the ground of humanitarian regulations. According to the FGD participants in Jesi, they were first placed in camps upon arrival in Italy, where they stayed between 2 months and 2 years, waiting for asylum completion. After 2 years, there were expected to leave the camp even if their asylum decision was unknown. They had to tell a convincing story that reminded them of the horrors they passed through to come to Italy. Those whose stories were found wanting were denied the permit. Some of the participants of the FGD have appealed against a negative decision at the time of the survey. Although the process from the first application to receiving a final reply took up to 2 years, the challenge was that most of the migrants hardly secure jobs, as employers are skeptical of hiring a person without permit. Ironically, a quicker way to get residence permit is if the migrants have a job contract. However, this policy has been questioned by the migrants considering that a residence permit is an essential requirement to be offered a contract by employers. One of the respondents captures this dilemma as follows:

I went to Questura to process my permit; the woman asked if I was working. How does she expect me to work when they do not give me a permit? What will I use to do the work when I do not have a document? (M, 32, Jesi).

Secondly, the harrowing journey experiences resulted in mental or psychological challenges to the respondents. They were always reminiscing with bitterness about the traumatic journey experiences, which sometimes nearly claimed their lives. They posit that the journey was so bad that they would not recommend it to others. Trauma and anxiety sometimes lead to mental breakdowns. However, their deplorable living condition in Italy aggravated the mental situation. These mental traumas were captured from the comments of two participants.

Libya road is just a journey of no return: once you enter, there is no going back. [...]. Many people have lost their lives in the sea; you will see dead bodies everywhere. Sometimes, demons pursue and possess people, while some turn into vampires. I will not even advise my worst enemy to follow through Libya road (F, 20, Ragusa).

During our journey, people died, but when I came to Europe, I saw that Europe does not worth the suffering we got from Libya; it does not worth dying for (M, 34, Jesi).

Thirdly, they also reported that they felt discriminated against in Italy. About 56% of the participants answered that they had been discriminated against in the camp, street, and supermarket (Table 3). They believed they were discriminated against when denied a residence permit, unfairly charged in the supermarket, did not receive equal treatment as white migrants, and strategically denied work. The challenge of a lack of public acceptance exposes them to various forms of vulnerabilities and exploitations. Two of the participants summarised this different manifestation of discriminations:

Table 3 Economic activities of respondents

	Frequency	%
Worked in Europe (<i>n</i> = 63)		
Yes	42	67
No	21	33
Wage (€/hour) (<i>n</i> = 21)		
< 5	16	76
5–10	5	24
> 10	0	0
Sector (<i>n</i> = 39)		
Agriculture	15	38
Street hawking	15	38
Other	9	23
Job satisfaction (<i>n</i> = 13)		
Extremely dissatisfied	6	46
Rather dissatisfied	4	31
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	2	15
Rather satisfied	1	8
Extremely satisfied	0	0
Invited for interview (<i>n</i> = 63)		
Yes	53	84
No	10	16
Job security (<i>n</i> = 27)		
Not job secure	3	11
Little job secure	4	15
Neither job secure nor insecure	14	52
Job secure	5	19
Very job secure	1	4
Type of contract (<i>n</i> = 23)		
Permanent	6	26
Temporary/seasonal	17	74
Discrimination at work (<i>n</i> = 18)		
Yes	10	56
No	8	44

If you have to be in camp or you have not been given any document yet, that is discrimination. Secondly, although we may not be taxed directly, they (Italians) make sure they squeeze out money from every individual. They often extract money from foreigners, especially when we go to the supermarket to buy something. They seem to charge you an extra amount of money once they see you are black. [...] Also, when you are working, [...] what we are being paid is not what our colleagues who are white receive (M, 30, Jesi).

Girls sell their body, and they are priced like biscuits sold in the market. It is embarrassing to the extent that the whites take us for granted, and they do not want us again because they see every girl as prostitutes (F, 19, Ragusa).

The Economic and SWB of Respondents

Table 3 presents the results of the respondents' economic wellbeing analysis. It shows that 10 out of 63 respondents who have applied for asylum are yet to be interviewed. A third of the respondents are unemployed, and those who are employed work in informal settings and are often exploited. About one in three of the migrants had not yet held a job in Italy after an average of 3 years of stay. Those working had jobs predominantly in agriculture or were involved in street hawking. About 74% of those working had temporary employment, implying a lack of job security. The majority of the tasks done by the migrants were the sort of functions that the natives would not do and what they would not do in Nigeria either. These jobs included sweeping the street, street vending, house cleaning, and assisting in house relocation. These types of employment often require physical abilities. Those who could not find these informal jobs either begged on the street or worked as prostitutes. Hence, they were compelled to work in jobs that undervalue their skills, and many of the employers were reported to be unfriendly and exploitative.

The consequences of lack of employment among the economic-asylum seekers include frustration and fear for the future. Even when they had jobs, they still faced several challenges resulting in job dissatisfaction. About 76% of the respondents working on farms received about €3 per hour, well below the €7 average paid to others. Only 8% of the working respondents indicated they were satisfied with their job, and 77% answered extremely dissatisfied. The participants of the FGD spoke about job exploitation. They reported not being paid well or paid lower wages than other workers doing a similar job. Three participants explained this situation.

There are usually no known jobs for us. Most guys here beg before they eat. They sit with their bowls at the supermarket, begging the white for money while the girls take up prostitution as their job. They wear a mini skirt and bum shorts; they light fire close to them (M, 28, Jesi).

Sometimes we do community work like street sweeping and trimming the flowers, but often we do not get paid to do such volunteer works. Sometimes when they pay, we do not get the money (F, 20, Ragusa).

Most times, we are paid less than what those bosses who are in charge receive on our behalf. Like 80% of them (our bosses) are not friendly. At the same time, when you do something for them, they do not usually want to pay (M, 29, Jesi).

You work all the time, like 8,12, 15 hours, and at the end of the day, they pay you not more than 20 Euros per day. If she or he is white, he can be paid between 50 to 100 Euros for the same work, but because we are black, they give us a small amount of money (M, 28, Jesi).

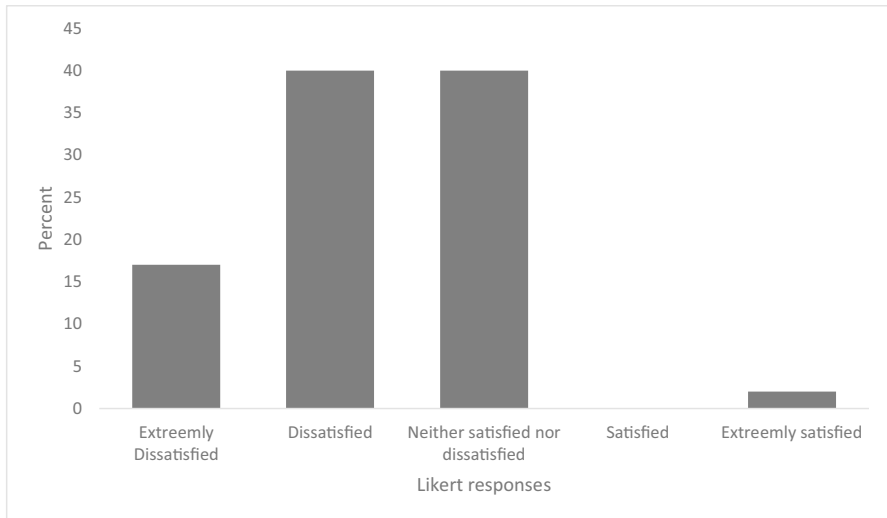


Fig. 2 How satisfied are you in Italy compared to your expectation before migrating (% of respondents) ($n = 64$)

The result of the Subjective wellbeing (SWB) analysis of the respondents is presented in Fig. 2. The results show that most of the respondents were dissatisfied with their migration experience in Italy. More than 95% of the total respondents were not satisfied with their quality of life in Italy compared to their premigration expectations. The poor SWB among the respondents indicates negative expectation gaps—meaning that the migration to Italy is yet to lead to improved SWB for the respondents.

The Expectation Gaps Among the Respondents

The issue of negative expectation gaps was discussed in the FGDs. Most participants feel that their premigration aspirations were not met and that irregular migration was not worth the risk. For instance, instead of going to school or working, most women found themselves in the sex business. On the other hand, the men had their expectations cut short as they could not find jobs but instead begged on the street or engaged in some economic activities below their qualifications.

Generally, the participants of the FGD acknowledge that only a few of their colleagues were happy in Italy. According to them, only about 30% of those waiting for asylum results could be said to be happy. Most of the FGD participants explained that expectation gaps exist when they do not find a job, earn less, or engage in different economic activities contrary to expectations. Although they could make some money from informal activities (begging, sex business, and other informal activities), this income is often below expectations. The comment of one of the participants captured these issues:

Like 70% of the people would say their expectations were not met, especially the ladies who when leaving the country had no knowledge of the type of job they would be doing. Some were told they would find a job when they arrive, but that is not the case; therefore, they opt to go to the street to sell their bodies [...]. This is the false information they get from Nigeria. However, some are aware of what they are coming to do, maybe 20% of them, and feel they should do this and help their families. The boys beg on the street from one supermarket to another. People in Nigeria make more money than them [...]; their expectations push them to the road (migrate irregularly). In the end, they get frustrated, [...] when you come here, and your expectations are not met, you have mental poverty, even if you work and earn money. (M, 30, Ragusa).

While the expectation gap is negative, we gather from the FGD participants that a future access to residence permits and public services could improve their well-being. According to the respondents, the consequences of this negative expectation gap include frustrations and deprived capabilities. They are deprived of adequate housing, especially when they are asked to leave the camp. They also face food insecurity and financial deprivation. In many cases, they lacked the capabilities to make vital life decisions. Indeed, they are not considering returning to Nigeria because they lack the proper documentation. One of the respondents summarized the consequences of capability deprivation:

I cannot pay my house rent, feed myself, and help my family back home. The documents are not easy to get, not getting a job or earning money to travel home. You can even be arrested at the airport for leaving the country (Italy) (F, 20, Ragusa).

Discussion

We identified seven critical issues that are worth discussing from the result. The first is the concept of economic-asylum seekers, which has not received much attention in migration literature. This group is distinct from refugees because they have the free will to move and could be accepted by their home countries if they return. They are also different from mainstream economic migrants because they ask for asylum. They exist within the intersection of refugee and economic migrants because of their economic motivation and asylum application, which would offer them international protection and refugee status if accepted. Although this group is difficult to reach, as our study shows, they can be found through the framework and methods we applied. In our study, mainstream neoclassical models such as the new economic theory of migration and push and pull theories may be too rigid to explain the case of economic-asylum migrants since they do not consider the migrants' experiences but focus on the migrants' economic achievements. Indeed the aspiration-capability framework is well suited in exploring the peculiar challenges of this group. The proponents of the aspiration-capability framework such as Carling (2002), Schewel (2020), and de Haas (2021) have elaborated the potentials of the framework to

accommodate the complexities of different migration dynamics including the motivations and decisions, intentions, and achievements.

The second issue is that migration expectations are mixed and gendered; it could occur due to capabilities deprivation for the female migrants or enhancement for the male migrants. Men are mostly driven to migrate by the possibilities to achieve higher wellbeing; they had some information and were supported to migrate by close ties such as friends. As such, they fall within the agency of economic and irregular migrants. The female migrants were more likely to report lack livelihood opportunities and domestic abuse as factors motivating them to migrate. However, they are also victims of human trafficking and are less likely than men to have accurate migration information. As such, they are economic migrants but also victims of human trafficking. Literature has captured this mixed migration flow where refugees, trafficked persons, and economic-irregular immigrants move together (Castles et al., 2012). Our results suggest that there may be a gendered pattern within the mixed migration flow and that individual migrants may take more than one agency. For instance, the women we interviewed are economic migrants because they desire to work and help their families; they were also trafficked because human traffickers sponsored their journeys.

Thirdly, the migrants enter the host country with some capabilities, which remain untapped. The first finding shows that the respondents possess some assets that the host country has yet to be tapped. The majority of the respondents interviewed were young, literate, lucky, and are willing to work. Although they may not have had the capabilities to migrate through legitimate means, they achieved the goal to migrate through the help of smugglers and friends. They were lucky not to have died, willing to work, and had some form of determination that could be an asset. They, therefore, possess some abilities, which the host country can utilize. Fokkema and de Haas (2015) showed that irregular African migrants' premigration profiles, such as education level and age, are dominant factors explaining their sociocultural integration level. However, the long waiting period for asylum decisions and the limited possibilities during this time means that their assets are wasted.

Fourthly, as the economic-asylum seekers have mostly economic motives, the several integration barriers prevent them from maximizing their capabilities for achieving their migration expectations. The immigrants face several integration barriers that reduce the freedoms they have to use the capabilities with which they enter the host country. These constraints include structural constraints relating to the long waiting time for the asylum result. They are also affected by psychological constraints due to the harrowing journey experience. They had economic constraints because most did not have jobs. Those who had job lack job security, earn a relatively lower wage than fellow employees, and are dissatisfied with their job. They also experience social constraints because of discrimination and exploitation. Most of these constraints have been reported in the literature of irregular migrants' integration in Europe (Busetta et al., 2019; Rustenbach, 2010; Urzi & Williams, 2016). Because of these constraints, the respondents' time to acquire sufficient capabilities such as having accommodation, earning income, sending remittances, and making long-term decisions is elongated. These results align with Gosselin et al. (2018), who showed that it takes about 7 years for Senegalese migrants to settle down to

possess documentation and housing in France. In Italy, Bimonte et al. (2019) associated these constraints with decreasing happiness for irregular migrants.

Fifth, their inadequate capabilities result in low subjective wellbeing. The immigrants have low SWB due to the constraints explained above and their inability to meet their premigration expectations. The asylum seekers had expected to have a better life for themselves and their families and migrated to escape the hardships at home and use their skills to enjoy a better life in Europe. However, after an average of 3 years in Italy, about 95% could not achieve their premigration expectations. The long waiting period for asylum decisions denied them documents to live a meaningful life. In line with the literature (Chen et al., 2019; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010; Mähönen et al., 2013; Stillman et al., 2015), we opined that the expectation gap is also associated with the low SWB they reported. Intuitively, considering that many of these economic-asylum seekers migrate from Nigeria due to their perceived capability deprivation and low life satisfaction in the country, coupled with the challenges they face on transit, they should have had higher life satisfaction in Italy, even when living in institutional limbo (Brzozowski & Coniglio, 2021). Besides the barriers they face, two additional factors may explain the low life satisfaction the economic-asylum seekers perceive in Italy: a priming effect and bounded rationality. In terms of priming effect, while the decision to leave Nigeria and come to Italy could be seen as an achievement, which may project a feeling of relief and incremental life satisfaction, this was not found in our case. The high expectations of a better life in Europe made the respondents see economic advancement and social inclusion as achievements. Hence, they feel disappointed about not reaching these and report lower life satisfaction as they are faced with initial problems with bureaucracy, which deprive them of opportunities for achieving their objectives. Secondly, in terms of bounded rationality, it is possible that the challenge of incomplete information and misinformation about the realities in Europe, which make most Nigerians overestimate the economic opportunities and living conditions in Italy and Europe (Brunarska, 2019; Obi et al., 2020), causes them to report lower SWB when they are confronted with realities. However, we cannot single out these effects with the cross-sectional data.

Six, there are various consequences of integration barriers peculiar to the economic-asylum seekers. First, the economic-asylum seekers face untapped capabilities since they are judged by the extent of how horrible their stories are during the RSD procedure and not by their capabilities. Economic exclusions and feelings of discrimination often set in when asylum requests are denied. These factors could lead to job dissatisfactions if they happen to work under the table and then to low productivity. We saw in this study that they often work in areas undervaluing their skills, beg on the street, or work as sex workers. These informal activities rarely bring benefits to destination countries. Another consequence is that poor integration could lead to the inability to improve the premigration issues that drive migrations. Migration has been seen as a development process that can improve poor people's capabilities in low-income countries (van Heelsum, 2016), but the constraints that these migrants suffer deprive them of these capabilities. It made them frustrated, living in continual misery, which results in minimal benefits for themselves and their

families (Becchetti & Rossetti, 2009; Genicot & Ray, 2017; Murphy & Mahalingam, 2006).

Although we do not have data to show this, it is expected that migrants whose trips were financed by their families and friends would be more frustrated and report lower SWB than others because they are failing to fulfill their social contracts with their relatives. Since the migrants' ability to send remittances and help their families depends on their economic achievements, when the economic-asylum seekers do not work, their families suffer, and there are possibilities that their social relationships and contacts with their families would suffer as well. Studies have suggested that the absence of remittances will make migrant families fall into poverty, motivating more migration (Delpierre & Verheyden, 2014; Ivlevs, Nikolova, & Graham, 2019). Poor interaction and low wellbeing may prevent immigrants from making the right post-migration decision, such as returning to Nigeria. A UNDP study (2019) showed that self-returning is more likely to occur when migrants are successful and have achieved sufficient income and economic status. Our study shows that economic-asylum seekers are reluctant to return even after their asylum applications have been rejected because of shame, fear of persecution, or lack of financial and legal means. Therefore, creating a hostile environment and expecting the economic-asylum seekers migrants to return home are counterintuitive policies that could lead to more irregular stays (De Haas, 2008). Toma and Castagnone (2015) show that rather than going back to their countries, asylum seekers and irregular migrants facing integration constraints would instead relocate to other European countries.

Seven, there seems to be a mismatch of objectives between the government's humanitarian systems and that of the economic-asylum seekers. While the governments via international treaties would admit genuine refugees and has set up the RSD procedure to select the few that qualify for humanitarian protection based on coming from countries in conflicts, the economic-asylum seekers believe they can contribute to the societies and should be given a chance. Most of the respondents claimed untapped capabilities, wasted human capital, possible contributions to Italy, limited ability to send remittances back to Nigeria, and impaired self-returning chances, among other consequences of integration barriers as shown above. However, these factors are marginally relevant to the efficacy of the RSD procedure of determining whether an asylum applicant is qualified for refugee, subsidiary, or special protection status.

Although we have elaborated on the integration barriers faced by the economic-asylum seekers, which contributes to their low SWB, and have discussed the consequences, our study does not come without limitations. The main limitation of our study is the lack of premigration data. We use cross-sectional data that studied the SWB of the respondents at one point in time while referring to another point in the past. Therefore, there is a selection bias as we do not have counterfactual data to compare. One consequence of this method is that some of our explanations, such as migration motives, are based on a nominal elaboration from a literature review. The ideal solution to this shortcoming would have been to trace the respondents from when they were deciding to migrate right in Nigeria, evaluate their SWB for several years, and survey them at each point in their migration trajectory, even many years after arrival in Italy. As such, we could control for a premigration SWB that might

have contributed to the migration decision itself. This method is costly and may take many years to complete. Although future research may design their studies to capture the changing level of migrants' SWB over time using the proposed method, our study has laid the foundation for these studies.

Conclusion

This paper is motivated by studying the integration situation and wellbeing of irregular economic migrants and trafficked persons seeking asylum. This unique group exists in many countries that accept refugees but are often difficult to identify. The economic-asylum seekers are neither refugees. After all, they voluntarily leave their countries, nor pure economic migrants because they do not have proper documentation, e.g., job acceptances or work visas. Nevertheless, they are applying for asylum as an easy alternative to integration and achieving their economic motive. The study is designed for this unique group focusing on their experiences while waiting for asylum results. We argue that the aspiration-capability approach could be used to understand the wellbeing of this group. We conceptualized that while they moved with the expectation to improve their wellbeing, they may be lacking the capabilities to overcome the integration constraints, which affect the level of wellbeing they could achieve.

This study is interesting because it focuses on a minority yet to receive sufficient attention in the integration-wellbeing nexus research. The field survey was conducted by someone of similar ethical background and nationality as the respondents, enabling more access to them. The results highlighted several integration barriers or constraints faced by Nigerian asylum seekers caught up in a protracted refugee status determination (RSD) system. These constraints range from psychological, structural, economic constraints to social constraints. Specifically, in terms of structural and economic constraints, the migrants face delays in processing residence permits, inability to access jobs, lower wages, job insecurity, and job dissatisfaction, resulting in limited livelihood choices. They have traumatic journey experiences that affect their emotional wellbeing. They are often discriminated against and are at constant risk of being exploited due to their status. We associate these constraints as the reasons they have low wellbeing levels. They consider their life satisfaction higher in Nigeria than in Italy. These issues elongate the time to achieve the capability to live a meaningful life, such as getting their accommodation, earning money, supporting their families, or making vital decisions about their lives. These deprivations lead to frustration, which has several social consequences.

Leaving the asylum seekers without policy assistance undermines the development opportunities that migration brings and tampers their human rights. Therefore, we underscore that policymakers should note that a conscious policy that reduces the integration constraints of these minority groups could be beneficial to the general society. Their wellbeing could be improved with policies that enhance their access to public services, e.g., education and psychological services, and protect them from exploitations—for example, introducing rules that penalize

those who exploit the asylum seekers. We also recommend a speedup of the asylum procedure in Italy. This will enable asylum seekers to know their fate and make informed decisions about their lives.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval The research is reviewed by and approved by the appropriate institutional and/or national ethical review committee.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Consent All respondents signed a declaration of consent.

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