

# Internal Migration and Urban Sustainability in Nigeria: A Contextual Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*The challenges posed by unprecedented high rate of urbanization resulting from uncoordinated influx of migrants to the urban centers have worsened the living environment in many cities in Nigeria. This article examines the intricate relationship between internal migration and urban sustainability in Nigeria. Driven by a confluence of economic, environmental, and socio-political factors, internal migration significantly impacts the rapid urbanization experienced across Nigerian cities. This paper synthesizes existing literature to explore the trends and drivers of internal migration, the resultant urban sustainability challenges—including housing deficits, inadequate waste management, water scarcity, and energy poverty—and the theoretical frameworks that elucidate these dynamics. It further analyzes the policy landscape, particularly the National Urban Development Policy and its alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 11. By drawing on empirical evidence and case studies from major Nigerian cities, this analysis highlights the urgent need for integrated urban planning and governance strategies to foster resilient, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments in the face of ongoing demographic shifts.*

## KEYWORDS

*Migration, Urbanization, Drivers, Challenges, Sustainability*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is undergoing a profound demographic transformation characterized by rapid urbanization and significant internal migration. This phenomenon presents both opportunities for economic growth and formidable challenges to urban sustainability. The movement of people from rural to urban areas, and between urban centers, is primarily propelled by the search for better economic prospects, educational opportunities, and improved social services, often exacerbated by environmental degradation and insecurity in rural regions (United Nations, 2023). Consequently, Nigerian cities, particularly megacities like Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt, are experiencing unprecedented population growth, placing immense pressure on existing infrastructure, resources, and governance systems.

The phenomenon of rural-urban migration, the most profound type of internal migration in the last three decades, has become a major feature of developing countries especially in Africa. In Nigeria, rapid urbanization has significantly increased due to continuous migration from villages and rural settlements into urban centers such as Lagos, Kano, Port Harcourt, and Abuja. United Nations (2018) observed that more than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas, and the rate of urban population growth in developing countries remain very high. Nigeria, being the most populous country in Africa, has experienced

tremendous urban expansion over the last few decades due to migration and population growth.

Historically, internal migration in Nigeria can be traced to the pre-colonial period when people moved in search of fertile land, security, trade opportunities, and favorable environmental conditions. However, during the colonial era, migration intensified because colonial authorities concentrated economic activities, industries, railways, administrative headquarters, and educational institutions in urban centers. This created uneven regional development and encouraged the movement of people from rural to cities. After independence in 1960, urban growth became more pronounced due to government policies, oil explorations, industrialization, and the creation of new administrative capitals.

The continuous influx of migrants from rural to urban centers in Nigeria has generated a lot of concern among scholars in recent times. The debate, apart from the factors influencing the trend, centers on the capability of the urban centers to sustain the potential effects of such phenomenon. This paper therefore aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the nexus between internal migration and urban sustainability in Nigeria. It seeks to understand the multifaceted drivers and patterns of internal migration, assess the resulting urban sustainability challenges, and evaluate the efficacy of current policy responses. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical insights, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of these complex dynamics, offering critical implications for urban planning, policy formulation, and the pursuit of sustainable development in Nigeria.

## **II. INTERNAL MIGRATION IN NIGERIA: TRENDS AND DRIVERS**

Internal migration in Nigeria is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, characterized by significant movements of people across the country. These movements are primarily directed towards urban centers, leading to rapid urbanization rates that often outpace the capacity of cities to provide adequate infrastructure and services (Blue mark, 2025). The trends in internal migration are shaped by a combination of push and pull factors, which can be broadly categorized into economic, environmental, and socio-political dimensions.

The pursuit of better economic opportunities is arguably the most significant driver of internal migration in Nigeria (IOM, 2024). Rural areas often suffer from limited employment prospects, low agricultural productivity, and inadequate access to markets, pushing individuals, particularly the youth, towards urban areas perceived as hubs of economic activity and higher wages. This rural-urban wage differential, even in the presence of urban unemployment, is a key tenet of the Harris-Todaro model, which helps explain sustained migration flows (Todaro, 1969). The informal sector in Nigerian cities often absorbs a large proportion of these migrants, offering a range of livelihood strategies despite precarious working conditions.

Environmental degradation and climate change impacts are increasingly recognized as critical drivers of internal migration. Regions affected by desertification, soil erosion, and recurrent flooding, particularly in the northern and coastal areas, compel populations to relocate in search of more habitable and productive lands (World Bank, 2023). This environmental displacement often exacerbates existing pressures on urban centers, as migrants seek refuge and new livelihoods in cities.

Insecurity, conflicts, and communal clashes have also emerged as significant push factors for internal migration. Various regions in Nigeria have experienced periods of heightened

insecurity, leading to the displacement of large populations who seek safety and stability in urban areas or other regions (Nwokolobia, 2024). Additionally, the desire for improved access to education, healthcare, and other social amenities, which are often concentrated in urban centers, acts as a strong pull factor for many Nigerians.

These drivers collectively contribute to a continuous influx of people into major Nigerian cities, transforming their demographic profiles and placing immense demands on urban resources. The implications of these migration patterns for urban sustainability are profound and multifaceted, as discussed in the subsequent section.

### **III. URBAN SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA**

The rapid and often unplanned urbanization fueled by internal migration has precipitated a myriad of urban sustainability challenges across Nigerian cities. These challenges manifest in various sectors, undermining the quality of life for urban residents and hindering the achievement of sustainable development goals.

One of the most pressing issues is the severe housing deficit. Estimates suggest a national housing shortfall of approximately 28 million units, a figure that continues to grow with increasing urban populations (Bello, 2024). This deficit leads to overcrowding, exorbitant rents, and the proliferation of informal settlements and slums, such as Makoko in Lagos. These areas often lack basic amenities, proper infrastructure, and secure tenure, making residents vulnerable to environmental hazards and social marginalization.

Nigerian cities grapple with inefficient waste management systems. The daily per capita waste generation is estimated at around 0.51 kg, with total waste projected to reach 107 million tones by 2050 (CAPP, 2025). However, collection rates are low, and disposal methods are often rudimentary, relying on open dumping and burning. This results in significant environmental pollution, public health risks, and clogged drainage systems, exacerbating flooding during rainy seasons.

Access to safe and sufficient water and sanitation remains a critical challenge. Many urban residents lack access to piped water, relying instead on boreholes, which can lead to groundwater depletion and contamination (Olaniyi, 2024). According to SDG 6 data, only 30% of Nigerians have access to safely managed drinking water and 32% to safely managed sanitation services. This inadequacy contributes to waterborne diseases and poor hygiene practices, particularly in densely populated informal settlements.

Despite being a major oil producer, Nigeria faces significant energy poverty. Urban areas experience frequent power outages, leading to widespread reliance on expensive and polluting backup generators. This not only increases the cost of living and doing business but also contributes to air and noise pollution, impacting public health and environmental quality.

Nigerian cities are increasingly vulnerable to environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change. Coastal cities like Lagos and Port Harcourt are susceptible to flooding and sea-level rise, while northern cities face desertification and drought (Dossa, Miassi & Bakary, 2025). The loss of green spaces, air pollution from vehicular emissions and industrial activities, and inadequate urban planning further exacerbate these environmental challenges, threatening urban resilience and sustainability. The urban metabolism framework offers a lens to analyze these resource flows and their environmental impacts, highlighting areas for intervention (Bello, 2024).

#### **IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

Understanding the complex interplay between internal migration and urban sustainability in Nigeria necessitates the application of various theoretical frameworks. These frameworks provide conceptual lenses through which to analyze the motivations behind migration, its impacts on urban development, and the systemic challenges that arise.

##### *A. The Harris-Todaro Model*

One of the most influential models in explaining rural-urban migration in developing countries is the Harris-Todaro Model. This model posits that migration is primarily an economic phenomenon driven by rational individual decisions based on expected income differentials between rural and urban areas, rather than actual wage differentials (Todaro, 1969). Even in the presence of high urban unemployment, migrants are drawn to cities by the prospect of securing a high-wage job in the formal sector, weighing the probability of finding such employment against the lower, but more certain, rural income. In the Nigerian context, where urban centers often promise higher, albeit uncertain, economic returns compared to stagnant rural economies, this model helps explain the persistent flow of migrants despite visible urban challenges like unemployment and inadequate housing.

##### *B. Systems Theory of Migration*

The Systems Theory of Migration offers a broader perspective, viewing migration not as an isolated event but as part of a larger, interconnected system involving both sending and receiving areas (Ikwuyatum, 2016; Bello, 2024). This theory emphasizes the feedback loops between these areas, where migration flows are influenced by economic, social, and political ties, as well as information networks. In Nigeria, this framework highlights how the development (or underdevelopment) of rural areas is intrinsically linked to the growth and challenges of urban centers. For instance, remittances from urban migrants can support rural households, while the continuous outflow of youth from rural areas can lead to labor shortages and further rural decline, thereby perpetuating the migration cycle.

##### *C. New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM)*

The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) put forward by Taylor (1999) challenges purely individualistic economic models by suggesting that migration decisions are often made by households or families as a collective strategy to diversify income sources and minimize risks. In contexts marked by imperfect markets (e.g., for credit, insurance, or capital), migration serves as a means to overcome local economic constraints, invest in human capital (e.g., education for children), or cope with economic shocks. For Nigerian households facing agricultural risks, market volatility, or limited access to financial services, sending a family member to an urban center can be a strategic decision to secure remittances and improve overall household welfare, even if the migrant faces precarious conditions (Nwokolobia, 2024).

#### *D. Urban Metabolism (UM)*

To understand the biophysical dimensions of urban sustainability, the concept of Urban Metabolism (UM) is highly relevant. UM analyzes cities as complex ecosystems that import resources (energy, water, food, materials) and export waste products (solid waste, wastewater, emissions). By quantifying these flows, UM provides insights into the environmental footprint of urban areas and identifies inefficiencies in resource use. Applying UM to Nigerian cities like Lagos or Jos reveals the immense resource demands placed by rapidly growing populations and the challenges in managing the resulting waste streams. This framework is crucial for developing strategies for circular economy principles, resource efficiency, and sustainable infrastructure development (Chisasa & Khumalo, 2023)

These theoretical frameworks collectively provide a robust foundation for analyzing the drivers and consequences of internal migration on urban sustainability in Nigeria, informing both empirical research and policy interventions.

#### *E. Policy Context and Governance for Urban Sustainability*

Addressing the complex challenges at the intersection of internal migration and urban sustainability in Nigeria requires robust policy frameworks and effective governance mechanisms. Nigeria has recognized the need for strategic interventions to manage urbanization and promote sustainable development, as evidenced by various national policies and its commitment to international agendas.

#### *F. National Urban Development Policy (NUDP)*

The National Urban Development Policy (NUDP) is a key instrument designed to guide urban planning, development, and governance across Nigeria. The policy, which has undergone revisions (e.g., in 2024/2025), aims to transform Nigerian cities into "well-functioning, prosperous, resilient, secure, and livable spaces for all" (FMHUD, 2024). The NUDP emphasizes several critical areas, including:

- Integration of urban planning programmers through the promotion of comprehensive and participatory planning approaches that consider the interlink ages between urban and rural areas.
- Prioritizing investment in critical urban infrastructure such as housing, transportation, water, sanitation, and energy.
- Advocating for sustainable environmental practices, waste management, and climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.
- Strengthening institutional capacities, promoting decentralization, and fostering collaboration among different tiers of government and stakeholders.

The effective implementation of the NUDP is crucial for managing the impacts of internal migration and fostering sustainable urban growth. However, challenges such as weak enforcement, inadequate funding, and limited technical capacity often hinder its full realization (Ogusakin, 2025).

### G. *Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11)*

Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes Sustainable Development Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (UN, 2025). SDG 11 provides a global framework with specific targets and indicators that resonate directly with Nigeria's urban challenges. These targets include:

- Ensuring access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and basic services.
- Providing access to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems.
- Enhancing inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlement planning and management.
- Reducing the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management.
- Providing universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces.

Nigeria's commitment to SDG 11 provides a guiding principle for its urban development efforts. However, significant gaps remain between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities, particularly in rapidly expanding urban centers grappling with migrant influxes.

Beyond the NUDP and SDG 11, other national and sub-national policies and initiatives contribute to the urban sustainability agenda. These include the National Housing Policy which is aimed to address the housing deficit through various programs and partnerships, the environmental sanitation policy that focuses on improving waste management and sanitation practices as well as the state-level urban development plans where many states and local governments have their own urban master plans and development strategies, though their effectiveness varies.

Despite these policy efforts, a fragmented approach, lack of coordination, and insufficient data for evidence-based planning often impede progress. The integration of migration dynamics into urban planning and policy formulation remains a critical area for improvement.

## V. **CASE STUDIES**

To illustrate the practical implications of internal migration on urban sustainability, this section examines specific case studies from prominent Nigerian cities: Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt. These cities represent diverse urban contexts, each experiencing unique pressures and challenges due to migration-led growth.

### A. *Lagos the Megacity under Population Pressure*

Lagos, Nigeria's economic hub and one of Africa's largest megacities, exemplifies the profound impacts of internal migration. Its population, estimated to be over 20 million,

continues to grow rapidly, largely due to a continuous influx of migrants seeking economic opportunities ( ). This relentless growth has led to: infrastructure overload and as a result the existing infrastructure, including transportation networks, housing, and utilities, is severely strained. Traffic congestion is endemic, and the housing deficit is particularly acute, leading to the expansion of informal settlements (Ikwuyatum, 2016).

A large informal sector absorbs many migrants, providing livelihoods but often operating outside regulatory frameworks, complicating urban planning and service delivery. Efforts towards a "Smart City" vision often clash with the realities of informal urbanization (Lagos State, 2024). Situated on a low-lying coastal plain, Lagos is highly vulnerable to flooding, which is exacerbated by poor drainage systems, waste accumulation, and the reclamation of wetlands for development. The city also faces significant air and water pollution challenges (World Bank, 2025).

### *B. Abuja: Beyond Expected Population Growth*

Abuja is a typical planned federal capital but with unplanned growth and sustainability. Abuja, the federal capital territory, was meticulously planned to avoid the chaotic growth of other Nigerian cities. The establishment of Abuja as the Federal Capital Territory in 1976 was strategically developed to replace Lagos as the nation's capital because of its central location, availability of land, and neutrality among ethnic groups. Since then, Abuja has attracted people from different parts of Nigeria due to concentration of government institutions, business activities, educational opportunities, and infrastructural developments.

However, internal migration, driven by administrative and economic opportunities, has led to rapid population expansion, particularly in its peri-urban areas and satellite towns ( ). This has resulted in sprawling informal settlements: The high cost of living within the planned city center has pushed many migrants and lower-income residents to settle in unplanned satellite towns, which often lack adequate infrastructure and services, creating a dual urban reality (Jimoh, 2020). There has also been intensive pressure on resources leading to poor living standard and several illegal means of survival.

The rapid growth has strained water supply, waste management, and transportation systems, challenging the original master plan's capacity assumptions. Managing the growth of satellite towns and integrating them into the broader urban fabric also poses significant governance and planning challenges, often leading to uncoordinated development.

### *C. Kano: Population Diversity and Conflicts*

Kano, a historic commercial and industrial center in northern Nigeria, attracts migrants from across the northern states and neighboring countries. The city's growth is characterized by strain on basic services. The influx of migrants places immense pressure on public services, including education, healthcare, and sanitation. Access to clean water is a persistent issue, and waste management systems are often overwhelmed.

While Kano has a long history of absorbing migrants, rapid demographic shifts can strain social cohesion and resource allocation, particularly for vulnerable migrant populations. Several inter-tribal conflict frequently occurred in the last few decades, in areas dominated by non-indigenes of the town. Industrial activities and population density have also contributed to air and water pollution. The encroachment of urban development on

agricultural lands also poses environmental concerns with consequential environmental degradation.

#### *D. Port Harcourt: Oil City and Environmental Justice Concerns*

Port Harcourt, a major oil-producing city in the Niger Delta, attracts migrants seeking employment in the oil and gas industry and related sectors. However, its growth is intertwined with significant environmental and social challenges. One of the major problems in the city is environmental pollution: Oil exploration and refining activities, coupled with poor waste management, have led to severe environmental pollution, including oil spills, gas flaring, and air pollution, impacting public health and livelihoods resulting into frequent communal conflict and insecurity.

Infrastructure deficiencies are also common. Despite its economic importance, Port Harcourt struggles with inadequate infrastructure, including poor road networks, housing shortages, and insufficient drainage, leading to frequent flooding (Ifedapo, Aliu & Oke, 2026). There is also profound social inequality and conflict in Port Harcourt. The uneven distribution of oil wealth and the influx of migrants have exacerbated social inequalities and contribute to conflicts over resources and opportunities.

These case studies underscore the diverse yet interconnected challenges faced by Nigerian cities in managing migration-led urbanization. They highlight the urgent need for tailored, context-specific interventions that integrate migration dynamics into urban planning and sustainability strategies.

## **VI. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE URBAN FUTURES IN NIGERIA**

The preceding analysis reveals a critical juncture for Nigeria's urban development: the undeniable link between internal migration and the escalating challenges to urban sustainability. While migration is a fundamental human process and a potential catalyst for development, its current trajectory in Nigeria, largely driven by economic disparities, environmental pressures, and insecurity, is placing immense strain on urban systems. The theoretical frameworks—Harris-Todaro, Systems Theory, and NELM—collectively underscore the rational, yet often constrained, decisions of migrants and households, highlighting the need for interventions that address both the push factors in rural areas and the pull factors in urban centers.

The case studies of Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt vividly illustrate the varied manifestations of these challenges. From Lagos's struggle with infrastructure overload and environmental vulnerability to Abuja's battle against unplanned growth in satellite towns, Kano's strain on basic services, and Port Harcourt's environmental justice concerns, a common thread emerges: the inadequacy of current urban planning and governance to effectively manage rapid demographic shifts (Jimoh, 2020; Lawal, 2025). The Urban Metabolism framework further emphasizes the unsustainable resource consumption and waste generation patterns prevalent in these rapidly expanding cities.

Nigeria's policy landscape, particularly the National Urban Development Policy and its commitment to SDG 11, provides a foundational vision for sustainable urban development (FMUHD, 2024). However, the gap between policy formulation and effective implementation remains substantial. This disparity is often attributed to weak institutional capacity,

insufficient financial resources, fragmented governance structures, and a lack of comprehensive data for evidence-based decision-making (Auwalu, 2023; Ogunsakin, 2025). Moreover, the integration of migration dynamics into urban planning is often an afterthought rather than a central tenet, leading to reactive rather than proactive strategies.

Moving forward, a paradigm shift is required. Sustainable urban futures in Nigeria necessitate a holistic approach that recognizes internal migration not merely as a problem to be managed, but as a demographic reality that must be strategically integrated into development planning. This involves fostering inclusive urban growth that provides equitable access to housing, services, and opportunities for all residents, including migrants. It also demands a renewed focus on strengthening rural economies and improving rural livelihoods to reduce distress-driven migration, thereby creating a more balanced national development trajectory. Furthermore, leveraging technology and innovative financing mechanisms can enhance urban infrastructure development and service delivery, while promoting community participation can ensure that urban development initiatives are responsive to the needs of diverse populations. Ultimately, achieving urban sustainability in Nigeria will depend on a concerted effort to bridge policy-implementation gaps, enhance multi-level governance, and embrace integrated planning that accounts for the complex interplay of human mobility and urban development.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Internal migration is an indelible feature of Nigeria's demographic landscape, profoundly shaping its urban centers and presenting both opportunities and significant challenges for sustainable development. This paper has systematically explored the drivers of internal migration, the resulting pressures on urban sustainability, the theoretical underpinnings of these phenomena, and the existing policy frameworks. The analysis underscores that while Nigeria possesses the policy intent to foster sustainable cities, the practical implementation is often hampered by systemic weaknesses and the sheer scale of migration-induced urbanization.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To navigate the complex terrain and build truly sustainable urban futures in Nigeria, the following recommendations are put forth:

- **Integrate Migration into Urban Planning:** Urban development plans at all levels (national, state, local) must explicitly incorporate migration dynamics. This includes forecasting migration patterns, assessing their impact on urban infrastructure and services, and designing responsive strategies for housing, transportation, and public utilities. Proactive planning, rather than reactive measures, is essential.
- **Strengthen Rural Development Initiatives:** Addressing the root causes of distress migration is paramount. Investments in rural infrastructure, agricultural productivity, education, healthcare, and job creation in rural and peri-urban areas can reduce the pressure on major cities and promote more balanced regional development. This aligns with the principles of the Systems Theory of Migration by fostering stronger linkages and reducing disparities between sending and receiving areas.

- **Enhance Urban Governance and Capacity Building:** Effective implementation of policies like the NUDP and SDG 11 requires robust urban governance. This includes strengthening the institutional capacity of urban planning agencies, improving coordination among different tiers of government, and combating corruption. Capacity building for urban managers and planners in data collection, analysis, and evidence-based decision-making is also crucial.
- **Promote Inclusive Urbanization and Slum Upgrading:** Recognizing that migrants often settle in informal areas, policies should focus on inclusive urbanization. This involves providing secure land tenure, upgrading existing informal settlements with basic services and infrastructure, and integrating these communities into the broader urban fabric. This approach is more sustainable and equitable than forced evictions.
- **Invest in Sustainable Infrastructure and Resource Management:** Prioritize investments in resilient urban infrastructure, including efficient public transportation, renewable energy solutions, and integrated waste and wastewater management systems. Adopting Urban Metabolism principles can guide efforts to optimize resource flows and minimize environmental footprints.
- **Leverage Data and Technology:** Implement robust data collection systems to monitor migration flows, urban growth, and sustainability indicators. Utilizing geospatial technologies, big data analytics, and smart city solutions can provide valuable insights for planning, resource allocation, and service delivery.
- **Foster Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:** Sustainable urban development is a shared responsibility. Encouraging partnerships among government agencies, the private sector, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and local communities can mobilize resources, expertise, and foster collective action towards common sustainability goals.

By embracing these recommendations, Nigeria can transform the challenges posed by internal migration into opportunities for building resilient, inclusive, and truly sustainable cities for all its inhabitants, contributing significantly to its national development aspirations and global sustainability commitments.

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