

Beyond International and Municipal Immigration Conversations: Resilient African Immigrants make it to the U.S Southern Border Despite Enormous Challenges (2017-2021)



Danvas Ogeto Mabeya*

Southeast Community College, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

Submission: December 13, 2022; **Published:** January 04, 2023

***Corresponding author:** :Danvas Ogeto Mabeya, Southeast Community College, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA

Abstract

For decades, crossing seas and oceans to get to the United States illegally was out of reach and a dream beyond reality for most Africans. The only way to get to the U.S. was through legal means, apart from those forcefully brought as slaves. Therefore, most illegal African immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers saw Europe as a viable destination not only of its proximity but lax laws for many decades. With an increase of immigrants from Africa, The European Union (EU) has decided to implement a new dismemberment policy that has seen enforcement along the European borders. Instantly, African immigrants turned north. This study explores the factors that have led African refugees to want to get into the US through the southern border in the recent past. The central question explored in this study is this: What is the push and pull factors that have contributed to the recent surge of African refugees/asylum seekers across the Atlantic? To answer this question, an extensive review of newspapers, internet sources, and other available literature is done. The study uses applied and public sociology to entangle the African immigrant trajectory. The Findings reveal an urgent need for international actors addresses African refugee issues.

Keywords: Africans; Immigrants; Refugees; Asylum Seekers; US Immigration Policy

Abbreviations: EU: European Union; OAU: Organization of African Unity; UNHCR: United Nations refugee agency; USCIS: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services; TPS: Temporary Protected Status; MPP: Migrant Protection Protocols; ACAs: Asylum Cooperative Agreements; UNHCR: United Nations High commission for Refugees; CBP: Customs and Border Protection; ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement IMF: International Monetary Fund; UN: United Nations

Introduction

The rise in African refugees arriving at the U.S-Mexico border could partly be attributed to the tightening of European Union (EU) immigration policy. In June 2018, the EU implemented a new dismemberment policy, in which Libya became the African refugee and immigrant processing center. Some of those taken to Libya for processing had been apprehended while attempting to cross the Mediterranean. On arrival, they found themselves confronted with a raging civil war as they were headed to locally run detention centers. Many refugees, migrants, and asylum-seekers have died or gone missing in this endeavor. Others have faced physical torture, starvation, health problems and sexual violence. People fleeing persecution and other human right abuses end up left with two options "risk losing their lives while trying to migrate through Libya or take the long and even more challenging and expensive route through South America into the United States.

Increasingly, they're opting for the second" Sur [1]. The main cause of immigration from Africa to the West include long civil wars, poverty, hunger, famine, religious conflict, language, tribalism. Other possible conflicts in Africa maybe as a result of access to water, land, ecological degradation, natural resources, culture/identity or ethnicity, socio-economic factors, migratory pressures, border disputes or political and military crises Kotoudi [2]. Most Africans have only entered the U.S. in the past as on student visas, as asylum seekers, green card lottery winners, refugees and a few as immigrant workers.

Going back to the 60's for instance, some Africans were awarded some scholarships to come study in the U.S. under the JFK airlift scholarships. Among the beneficiaries was Barack Obama Sr., President Obama's father. The airlift was political though, as it also helped Kennedy's narrow election victory. On

September 11, 1959, eighty-one students from East Africa arrived in New York City on a flight and were dispersed to colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. The airlifts continued through 1963 bringing more than 750 students from East African to the U.S John F Kennedy [3] Presidential Library and Museum website. This study explores the conditions under which African immigrants decide to migrate to the United States rather than Europe and more so the challenges they face on their journey in the recent past. My interest in this study emanates from a newspaper I read whose headline was, "Why Record Numbers of African Migrants Are Showing Up at the U.S.-Mexican Border" Sur [1]. This arose my curiosity. Read the article and asked myself "why?" Almost immediately I found the reason why, "Europe's failure to help refugees in Libya is driving them across the Atlantic" Sur [1]. This startled me and prompted me to start digging more information. This becomes the cornerstone of my research problem. This study found illegal crossing of the Southern border into the U.S in the past has been mostly done by immigrants from South America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico). Therefore, African immigrants surfacing at the U.S-Mexico border is seen as a new phenomenon and has not only baffled me, but also the U.S and Mexican governments (The New York Times. June 16, 2019). The study starts with a section embedded with a central question, followed by preliminary research findings. Definitions of a refugee by different international actors is provided. Then the literature review, theoretical frameworks, methodologies and findings. Newspaper excerpts will illustrate the set of some of immigrant voices. The paper also highlights the immigration policy dimension that can be useful in understanding the U.S policy towards immigrants and more so during the Trump administration. The paper finally offers a conclusion and a framework for action.

Preliminary Question/problem

As Europe tightened its immigration controls, the numbers of illegal immigrant and refugee crossing the Mediterranean fell precipitously, citizens of troubled African nations started looking west across the Atlantic. The central question in this study is this: What is the push and pull factors that have contributed to the recent surge of African refugees/asylum seekers across the Atlantic? The research problem in this study is: how has the international community responded to this human catastrophe of the long and dangerous journey to north America? Paradoxically, this was happening as the Trump administration was putting in place the most stringent and strict immigrant and refugee policies Solomon D Beth [4]. For instance, at this time there were an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 refugees in Tijuana as of March 2021 awaiting to legally or illegally enter the U.S according to Espacio Migrante which is an immigration rights nonprofit that works between Mexico and California Venkat Buzzfeednews [5].

Preliminary Findings

There are various reasons that can be attributed to the surge of African migrants seeking refugee/asylum status in the United States and elsewhere according to Salyadore [6]. First, according to a report by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), political conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo early in 2019 displaced about 4.5 million people. Therefore, this forced a lot of people to look for safety outside their country of origin. Second, in Cameroon, conflict there has been a long-lasting conflict for decades between French speaking who are a majority, and the Anglophone are the minority in the south. Recently, the conflict got worse resulting into the deaths of many people, reports of torture and rape, forcing many people to flee. Some of those seeking asylum from Africa are LGBTQI (homosexuality is illegal in 32 African countries) fearing persecution and student activists/organizers fleeing government retribution from Congo and Cameroon. Third, is increased enforcement along European borders. Europe made a deal with countries like Turkey to stop the flow of transit migration to the European Union. Faced with this and rising cost of the journey to Europe, African migrants see the United States as a viable alternative. Fourth, is family members or acquaintances who have successfully made the journey to the U.S. then sent word back home through social networks. Fifth, Brazil and Ecuador's visa requirements allow citizens of many countries in Africa to travel there with relative ease and thus make their journey to the north. With all the above reasons however, the most difficult work for any government is to identify genuine people seeking asylum and refugee status. In the following section I state different definitions of who a refugee is according to different international actors.

Definitions

Who is a refugee and asylum seeker?

A refugee can be said to be a person fleeing life-threatening condition. This definition concept is generally advanced by international instruments, municipal statutes, and scholarly treatises Shacknove [7]. In addition, the person is said to have crossed an international boundary because of a well-founded fear of persecution. This is the general premise where, well-founded fear of being persecuted can be construed to be for reasons such as race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his country and is unable owing to such a fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. In this case, the bond between the individual and that person's country has been severed. These conditions are the necessary and sufficient conditions for determining refugeehood of an individual. Critically, this has both moral and an empirical claim. Moral, since a minimal relation of rights and duties between the citizen and the state has been

damaged, therefore endangering the individual. Empirical, in that the consequences of the severed bond can lead to persecution of that individual Shacknove [7]. The following are definitions from international actors.

The United Nations

Under the United Nations Convention, “a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such a fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” UN Convention, art 1A (2) [8].

The United States

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also referred to as the Hart-Celler Act, is a federal law passed by the 89th United States Congress and was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson. This law did away with the National Origins Formula, which was the foundation of the U.S immigration policy since the 1920s. The act thus removed the de facto discrimination against Southern and Eastern European, Asians and other non-Northwestern European ethnic groups from the U.S immigration policy Roberts [9]. Currently under U.S. law, a “refugee” is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin. This definition is based on the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocols relating to the Status of Refugees, which the United States became a party to in 1968. Following the Vietnam War and the U.S. experience resettling Indochinese refugees, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which incorporated the Convention’s definition into U.S. law and provides the legal basis for the current U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) Refugee Council USA [10].

Organization of African Unity (OAU)

But the OAU definition of a refugee goes further than that of the United Nations and the United States. OAU defines a refugee is person who, “owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of nationality” OAU [11]. Notably, the OAU and the UN definitions indicate different historical contexts, “the latter was a response to the European totalitarian experience when, indeed, refugees were primarily the persecuted victims of highly organized predatory states. Regrettably, similar states still exist, and the OAU definition provides for them. But the OAU definition recognizes, as the UN definition does not, that the normal bond between the citizen and the state can be severed in diverse ways, persecution being but one” Shacknove [7]. Some countries break up not because of internal conflicts but conflicts that initiated by foreign countries.

Asylum seeking in the United States

(a) Authority to apply for asylum

(I) In general

“Any alien who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States (whether or not at a designated port of arrival and including an alien who is brought to the United States after having been interdicted in international or United States waters), irrespective of such alien’s status, may apply for asylum in accordance with this section or, where applicable, section 1225(b) of this title” (8 U.S. Code § 1158 – Asylum).

A Brief History of US Black Immigration Laws: The history of US immigration law is closely tied to Fugitive Slave Laws that were put in place in the 1800s at a state level across the US that eventually ended up in the Civil War. There was concerted effort to institutionalize and control the movement of former Black slaves Walker [12]. According to Alina Das [13], “From the beginning, race had everything to do with who belonged in the United States and was a significant driver of these concepts of citizenship and immigration.” This even extended to birthright citizens whose protections are in the US Constitution, however blacks were denied citizenship at birth. He provides examples to support his assertion about the Fugitive Slave laws that became the cornerstone of the first US immigration laws such as the 1875 Page Act, Chinese Exclusion Act and The Immigration Act of 1924.

These three excluded immigrants based on their race, profession or nationality Alina Das [13]. The recent deportation of Haitians at the US border in Texas will attest that this model is still in place and being used to indicate biases against black immigrants or refugees. Haitians recently suffered double tragedy back home, their President Jovenal Moise was assassinated on 7 July 2021 by a group of mercenaries, destabilizing the country subsequently, the country was hit by a deadly 7.2 magnitude earthquake on 14th August 2021 that affected nearly 800000 killing thousands and leaving tens of thousands displaced. From this outlook, seems Haitians had genuine reason to run away from their country and seek refuge in another country experts assert referring to the international legal documents on refugees. However, even if they went through proper channels like applying for visas before arriving, most of them will be “denied or don’t qualify” asserts Yoliswa Cele, Director of Narrative and Media at Undocu Black Network Walker [12].

Review of the Related Literature: The Trump Administration: In Lucas Guttentag’s research on Trump’s immigration policy that he started in 2017 after Trump took office, Guttentag identified changes to immigration policy at the departments of State, Labor, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Justice and other departments using a tracker Shear & Jordan [14]. In most cases, Guttentag asserted, “the Trump administration attacked parts of the immigration system in a variety of ways, issuing guidance from agencies, changing

regulations, changing documentation and announcing presidential directives” Shear & Jordan [14]. For instance, the deconstruction of the asylum protection system was done by about 30 consecutive and collective measures. Guttentag collected and documented 1,064 immigration changes; 163 changes to forms and information collection; 106 official rule changes; 416 agency directives; 57 presidential orders; 301 changes in practice by agencies and their employees; 16 program terminations; 40 modifications to data and reports; 29 formal changes to the way immigration law is adjudicated; and six legislative proposals Shear & Jordan [14].

Further, Aleinikoff (2021) director of Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility and Kerwin (2021) the executive director of the Center for Migration Studies of New York, in 2017-2020 presuppose that the Trump administration made far-reaching changes in federal policies on immigration. The two scholars indicate that during this period there has been national discourse between those that support and those against immigration and immigrants. Presidential executive orders and “America First” policies have led to denial of entry to millions of immigrants into to the U.S. Strict regulations and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) operations have at times blocked or slowed down drastically the admission of legal immigrants. Processing slowdowns, case backlogs and application fee hikes. This has made acquiring visas and immigration a nightmare for immigrants and their families. U.S businesses have been slowed to unfathomable levels because of new bureaucratic requirements that have led to low productivity, competitiveness and job creation. For several occasions, the administration has also attempted to bring to a halt the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and also to end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program. According to Politico (Rodriguez, 02/02/2021), Trump executed more than 400 immigration-related executive actions while president. He also oversaw the separation of more than 5,500 families and about 600 parents of children that are still held at the border and have to be located since June 2018 when they were separated.

Aleinikoff and Kerwin (2021) indicate, refugee programs that foster admission process have been reduced to near zero. More so, community-based infrastructures that enable refugee resettlement and integration have been eradicated. The ability asylum seekers of asylum seekers getting in at the southwest border has been decimated, and legitimate asylum seeking has been thrown in disarray. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in restrictions on refugee and asylum admissions. Legal access and due process for refugee and asylum seekers halted. Their discussion goes on to state, immigrant detention system has been expanded and privatized twofold, and unleashed as a deterrent mechanism. Coupled with that, billions of dollars have been spent to erect new barriers at the southern border. Border patrol officers have mercilessly separated thousands of children from their parents and subjected others to indefinite detention

with or without their parents. Thus, meaningful immigration enforcement priorities thrown out. Furthermore, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has constantly been misused as a political tool by the administration (Aleinikoff & Kerwin, 2021).

Subsequently, the mission statement of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has been re-written taking out “America’s promise as a nation of immigrants” to securing “the homeland” and, “honoring our values.” The shift reflects America’s new status as a country that does not let people in but will work hard to keep people out. By changing this phrase, the administration hopes to change the country (Aleinikoff & Kerwin, 2021). However, Trump administration’s intention of halting immigration found unforeseen loopholes. Immigrants already in the U.S. with the help of lawyers and medical doctors quickly started to look for ways to avoid the administration’s dragnet to eliminate them. With help of doctors, some immigrants for instance, get Form N-648 from a physician which will declare an applicant for naturalization to be unable to complete the civics and English-language tests because of a disability or mental impairment. The Trump administration became aware of this and in July of 2020 made it stricter by increasing the number of questions a doctor must answer from 12 to 23 adding pointed questions on how disability affected everyday life of an immigrant applicant and if was as a result of illegal drug use Shear & Jordan [14].

According to Yoliswa Cele, Director of Narrative and Media at UndocuBlack Network, “Black immigrants are most often hurt most by these additional requirements, discouraged from applying based on minute requirements like a previous arrest” and currently, “people from poorer countries have more requirements and fees than their wealthier counterparts and an overall harder time getting approved for US visas. More so, “The State Department data uncovers a staunch difference in the number of visas distributed between European and African nations” Walker [12]. Ironically, the ever-told narrative of America as a nation of immigrants, has always been aspirational. For every immigrant who sought its shores arrived in a warm welcome. Likewise, there are those that arrived at the shores in chains, who did not receive a welcoming ceremony but a degradation ceremony (African slaves). All these drastic policy changes have enormous, short and long-term implications on immigrants more especially refugees and asylum seekers. African immigrants will be hit most (Aleinikoff & Kerwin, 2021). For instance, Pew Research Center reports, 84% of Black immigrants are legal in the US and about 16% who are illegal making about only 7% of all undocumented immigrants Walker [12]. But blacks make up to about 20% of those deported according to The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services. Out of these, 76% of Black immigrants are deported on criminal grounds, many from civil infractions like minor traffic infraction and only less than half of all these deportations is on criminal grounds Walker [12].

The WRAP

Unfortunately, during deportation process. African deportees have faced mistreatment and humiliation from deportation officials. For instance, a number of Cameroonians and Ugandans were deported to their respective countries in November 2020 said they were cinched into a restraining device known as WRAP before being placed on deportation planes by ICE authorities Hoffman Nathaniel [15]. Some deportees were hooded, and some complained of serious medical conditions like heart conditions. The deportees filed a civil rights complaint through a coalition of organizations that fight for racial justice and immigrants against ICE Morrissey [16]. The complaint raises the question of whether the treatment and use of WRAP on African deportee was influenced by racism. "So far, the only deportees that advocates have identified as having experienced The WRAP were Black asylum seekers from African countries" Morrissey [16]. The WRAP is usually used on violent arrestees who may pose a danger and not on those who don't resist arrest. Those arrested and deported to Africa said they obeyed all orders they were given and were not a danger in any way to themselves and the ICE officials Gaynor [17].

Applying Sociological Theories

Refugees and asylum seekers; these groups of immigrants tend not to be understood by both the public and even sociologists. In most cases the public and some sociologists tend to think refugees are either from a different world, foreign or at times sub-human. I would like to add a human face to refugees. We should not only condemn strangers but show them 'love'. Refugees are just like us; the only difference is that they are people who for some reason have to leave their home and live in foreign society because of the circumstances beyond their own control. Indeed, "We are all potential candidates for refugee status, especially in this 21st Century where most of the nations have modern weaponry in stock while the internal and inter-state relations are increasingly becoming fragile" Centre for Policy Analysis [18]. Therefore, refugee problem is not only their problem, but our problem too. Most of us have never pictured ourselves in the position of being a refugee. We always think it is their problem and not ours. There are many situations that can cause human displacement and not necessarily human conflict (civil wars). As human beings, we are likely to find ourselves in one of these situations. Conditions for forced human migration can range from political persecution, floods, draught (environmental), fires (California), hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes (Haiti), climatic etc.... The world is a very fragile home to human beings. To tell the truth, I had a chance to work as an intern with UNHCR at Dadaab refugee camps in 2000 changed my life and thoughts to date about refugees. My first contact with refugee camp life shocked me beyond imagination. Living conditions in those camps were not just inhuman but appalling. Life in there was depressing and without hope. Some refugees that I met had completely lost hope. More so, they could

not tell how long they would live in those camps or see their homes again. In section I will tie sociological theories to this study Mabeya [19].

Applied Sociology

According to Perlstadt [20] applied sociology can be traced back to Auguste Comte's work of 1850. Comte divided the sociology in two sections: social statics, the study of social order, and social dynamics, the study of social progress and development (2004: 342-343) and two types of sociologies emerge out of these, 'basic research' and social interventionism. Basic researchers are meant to educate and influence public debate, whereas social interventionists are political activists actively encouraging and pushing for social change (2004: 343). In the public social sphere, practical sociologist can take different roles, decision-maker, educator, social critic, researcher for clients, and consultant. Generally, two characteristics of a sociologist emerge: client and consultancy Zetterberg [21]. Applied sociologist can take use two methodologies: First, use of quantitative method to gather data leading to informed decisions. Second, the applied sociologist can use sociological theories or concepts to help critical analyze issues DeMartini [22]. This approach can greatly be applied to the study of immigrants and refugees to elucidate their plight, as they make it through the jungles into a new environment that may welcome them.

In their research paper, Auken [23] refer to sociologist Auguste Comte who underscored the need for positivist scientific approach to studying society. His believe to attain objective, bias-free knowledge was only attainable through the use of science rather than religion. In this way science and not religion would be the cornerstone of solving societal problems including that of immigrants and refugees, though he never provided the process of data collection which is necessary for studying society. Subsequently, early sociological theorists like Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois used an applied orientation to be the mouthpiece of minorities and immigrants. They advocated for social justice reforms that included racism, prejudice and discrimination. Consequently, Georg Simmel theorized about society as a web of patterned interactions among humans including community members, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers since each individual has a narrative to tell then a platform should be provided where these groups can air their views. Sociologists can offer this platform. Whereas Max Weber believed sociological research should exclude personal values and economic interests when studying society and social interactions. He thought values should be a matter of subjective preference and people engage in economic interest in collective action which advances those interests. Therefore, the issue of refugees should be viewed as a social problem in which society should engage in a collective way in alleviating human conflict and suffering without looking down on them. In summary, what these scholars have in common is a

bigger perspective of studying society through the application of sociology to understand social problems and ways to solve social problems including refugee and immigrant issues through applied sociology.

The Public Sociology Approach

Auken and colleagues went further to explain, there is a more contemporary approach that has emerged augmenting applied sociology, and that is “Public Sociology” which they contend stretches into the community to gain information in new levels than before. As a subfield of sociological subject, it emphasizes on expanding the threshold of sociology in order to engage with non-academic audiences including community members, public policy, political activism, social movements, social institutions, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The results of this new formulation yielded a strong relationship between the community at large and the researcher to foster understanding or awareness of social life. This has proven to be crucial where apprehension may directly affect the study cohort such as immigrants and refugees. Sociology as a subject acknowledge the fact that humanity in every sense, whether it is the researcher or participants must be shielded and appreciated including that of a refugee or immigrant populations. Public sociologists must present their work to the public in a clear and straight forward way that is accessible to the public and without academic jargon. Public sociology aims to engage ‘lay’ audiences, neighborhood groups and grassroots organizations that aims at encouraging informed public dialogue Burawoy [24]. Public sociologists should possess public communication and public speaking skills that enables them to express themselves in clear and plain language. More especially to immigrants and refugees who might face enormous challenges in a new social environment. This is the approach sociologists should take when in contact with a study group. What role does a sociologist have in helping society apart from collecting information, analyzing presenting and publishing collected information! The question is.....

Methodology

This study focuses on African refugees and asylum seekers into the U.S. The study, however, narrows down to specific period of the Trump administration 2017-2021. The research material for this study is mostly collected from secondary sources, internet, peer reviewed Journals (JSTOR), newspapers, and zoom forums that I have attended on refugee issues in the United States.

Justification of use of Newspapers

To explore African immigration trajectories to the United States, I conducted an analysis of several newspaper articles (from 2017-2021) since not much has been written by scholars in peer reviewed journals during the Trump administration. The use of newspapers to analyze public discourse is a long-standing trend in the social sciences especially in public or clinical sociology.

In recent past however newspaper circulation has decreased, implying that newspaper framing may have less public impact than previously. However, declining print media subscriptions does not mean that newspapers are becoming a less important source of information. Actually, it is on the contrary. Print media sources continue to provide useful current data for the analysis of cultural framing and public discourse. Therefore, to get substantial information I focused my article search more on African immigration, African immigrants at the U.S-Mexico border, Africans immigration trajectories to Europe and U.S immigration policies towards Africa as sources of secondary data.

Analysis

Due to the way information was collected, the method of analysis used in this study is descriptive and analytical. Various sources of information are closely examined and critically analyzed.

Limitations

Though I tried as much as I can not to be biased in my arguments and critic, at times I felt overwhelmed by issues that I found myself so strongly against especially with policy issues. Since I also depended on internet sources and zoom presentations, some of the information may not be so accurate, apart from the information I gathered from peer reviewed journals. Also, important, I did not have permission, time and funding to go collect primary data. I present the findings followed by a discussion, conclusion then framework for action in the following section.

Findings

The epic Journeys from Africa to the U.S (their story)

Perhaps Trump unknowingly motivated some of the African refugees to make the journey to the north. In August of 2016, he asked African American community to vote for him by saying, “What the hell do you have to lose?” LoBianco and Killough CNN [25]. Metaphorically this call resonated very well with African refugees and asylum seekers who heeded his call. This may have served as a motivation to make the journey to the North. Among those who made their journey to the north are people whose lives had been threatened, lost their children, family, homes, property and country. They had completely nothing but only their lives. Once again, ‘What the hell do they have to lose’ by making their journey to the north? As I noted earlier, Brazil and Ecuador’s visa requirements allow citizens of many countries in Africa to travel there with relative ease. From there African immigrants make it across South America on foot and at times by public transport en-route to the north.

The Journey across Mexico

According to an article in ‘The Telegraph Media’ (2020), “hobbling from snake bites, men and women traversing one of

the world's most dangerous stretches of jungle are abandoned to their fate," "Corpses float by in the brown churn of the angry river." This journey can be juxtaposed with the journey the Sudanese Lost Boys took in Africa in the late 80's. Unlike the Sudanese Lost Boys who took care of each other during their exodus in Africa Mabeya [19]. Those who risk the journey from Africa to the north are sometimes on their own. The following are some immigrant voices I acquired from 'The Telegraph Media' (2020). Tangie a former money transfer agent fled his home in Cameroon because of persecution and flew to Quito, Ecuador headed north to the U.S. says: "I did not decide to leave but I had to leave because my life was at risk", "in the heart of the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama there is no time to wait for the incapacitated, the infirm or those not strong enough to push on. "The only thing you can do is help yourself," says Tangie Sule, aged 29, shaking his head as he recalls the days and months, he spent on one of the world's most extraordinary migration journeys.

He goes on: "There are times when we got to the summit, and we waited hours for people, and they don't come. There are people that had snakebites and we didn't have any medication for them – we saw their legs starting to get black and all we could do was abandon them. "We had people being carried by the [river] water – you just see their corpses left by the water on the bank" Tangie quips, "But life in Tijuana is getting harder day after day. I have no choice but to get into the US illegally. If you don't find me online, just pray for me" Emmanuel, who is 42 years old and a teacher from Angola, came via Brazil to Mexico. Unlike other immigrants, he has no desire of getting into the U.S. "I don't know the procedure here," he says. "But as long as I can get a visa and find a job to do, I'm in Mexico. I can't be here without working." Aginetta another immigrant who is 30 years old from Kinshasa, Congo, traveling with her two daughters aged one and eight s, said her final destination was the U.S. "It's difficult to be here," she says. "I don't have money to eat or sleep or drink." The Associated Press [26] has an excerpt from Mbi Deric Ambi, from the English-speaking Cameroon who said: "We don't have jobs in the English part, the educational system is poor, they are looking at us as dogs."

Racism and discrimination

Apart from encountering tough conditions on their journey from Africa to the U.S boarder, African immigrants had to confront another task, racism, prejudice and discrimination. Paulina Olvera Cárnez, the director of Espacio Migrante is quoted to say, "Black migrants get noticed immediately, so they get stopped by the police a lot more," "And when the police stop them, they may ask for money in exchange for not turning them over to immigration, or they might just mistreat them. They face greater discrimination not just because of the language, but also because of racism in Mexico" Venkat Buzzfeednews [5]. Tangie and other African immigrants have encountered negative reactions from the Mexican society. He asserts: "Permit me but there is a lot of racism here. Even in the bus, people take their clothes and cover their noses and it's not comfortable for them."

Maria Dolores Paris Pombo, a professor at Mexico's Colegio de la Frontera Norte conforms this by saying:

"Mexico has no tradition of integration, not even for Central Americans.... Racism in Mexico is very strong and there is very little support – including for applying for asylum. Most people have to support themselves from within the community." Laure, known only by her middle name out of fear of the circumstances that caused her to flee Cameroon in the first place says, "she had to deal with rampant bigotry specifically directed at Black women on account of their race and gender. She alleges she was repeatedly told by employers and local residents that the only way a Black woman could make money in Mexico was sex work" Venkat [5]. She goes on to say: "Many times, I would pass in the road, and every time the Mexican guys say, 'Cuánto, cuánto, cuánto.' I didn't know what this 'cuánto' meant. I think maybe it was a greeting, because I didn't know Spanish. So, I say, 'Hola, hola!'" She later learnt that meant how much she would sell her body for from another African who understood Spanish. She adds "When you arrive at immigration, they treat you like a pig. They prefer to have Central Americans. Nobody gives you any attention," "In immigration, the Central Americans have a line, the Africans have another line". These factors are a disincentive of African immigrants wanting to make Mexico their final destination and most start thinking and headed to the northern border, waiting to ask for asylum in the US (The Telegraph Media, 2020). However, they are also slowly learning something new as they head north and reality is coming down on them, "Biden's administration has focused on people who aren't Black. The end of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and the Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACAs), for example, announced in January, explicitly affects Mexican and Central American immigrants" Venkat [5]. This has left thousands of Africans in limbo and still in the shadows.

Those who manage to cross into the U.S.

In 2017, a huge number of African immigrants who were apprehended in Texas, were dropped off by federal officials in San Antonio. Upon their arrival in Portland, Portland officials communicated there were rumors that some of the migrants were carrying the Ebola virus. "They quickly refuted the claim by stating that asylum seekers were in the United States legally" (AFP, 2019). In Texas city the feds made a plea for French-speaking volunteers for translating work "and most importantly, making our guests feel welcome" (AFP, 2017). Many of these immigrants were transported to Portland and Maine trying to get them as far they could from the Mexican border. They were also acutely aware of the Somali refugees that were resettled in Portland in the 1990s (AFP, 2019). "The majority of the people arrested from the continent of Africa claimed some form of immigration relief due to credible fear of returning to their country. Families chose to make the journey to the United States in order to take advantage of the legal framework that enabled them to be released if traveling as a family group and claiming fear," a spokesperson of the Customs and Border Patrol told NCR Salyadore [6]. In a turn of events, in 2019,

the Mexican government issued exit visas for extracontinental migrants to enable them to continue their journey to the north and finally to the United States Salyadore [6]. Colleen Bridger who is a city official in San Antonio said in reference, “Mexico can’t afford to be sending Africans back on planes. And the figures that I could get from Mexican officials show a big increase in just the first four months of this year. There were 2,000 Africans detained. But it’s unclear where they’re being released to, where they’re going” Kahn [27].

Quandary

Other challenges the African refugees faced as they headed north was criminal gangs and guerrilla armies at the Darian Gap. Commonly referred to ‘mouth of the funnel’, this is a hub of transportation of hauls of cocaine from Columbia to the north into the U.S (The Telegraph Media, 2020). Some immigrant females end up being raped by these criminal gangs and guerrilla armies (The New York Times. June 16, 2019). Even after enduring such an epic journey and arriving in Mexico, things are still tough “the immigration authorities have designated many of the African migrants “stateless” and refused their applications for short-term “humanitarian visas,” which would allow them to transit through Mexico without being detained or deported. Many were told that they must leave Mexico and travel back over the Guatemala border” Deslandes [28].

Priscilla Olivarez, an attorney with American Gateways, an organization that has asylum-seeking clients from Africa states, “her African clients have been “shocked” when they are detained after seeking asylum at the border-especially those who were imprisoned in their home countries for being political activists and must now deal with what she called the “retraumatization” of being detained” Sydney [29]. Olivarez goes on to say “for many of them, America was a country that valued freedom, which is why they made the dangerous journey to come to the U.S. They believed the U.S. was the only country that would provide them with sufficient protection. However, when they arrive in the U.S., they feel as if they are treated as a criminal” Sydney [29]. According to Mike Smith (a Methodist pastor) running a shelter that assists migrants upon arrival says, “Unlike migrants from Central America and Mexico, African migrants rarely have a contact in the USA waiting to sponsor them. Central Americans stay at his shelter for a few days before connecting with friends or families; the African migrants are usually there for a week or more” Jervis [30].

Analysis

There have been many suggested ways that have been fronted to deal with refugee crisis but seems none have worked very well. For instance, the United Nations High commission for Refugees (UNHCR) that was established on 3 December 1949 as a temporary office, with a projected life span of only three years, its mandate has since been extended every five years to respond to the world’s growing refugee problems to date. The consequence of the narrow

definition of a refugee as that of the UN and US has far reaching consequences and can lead in denial of international protection to thousands of people who are in serious situations and may be seeking international protection. For such persons, refugee status could be a privileged position. More so, Trumps rhetoric about Africans and Africa is not helping either for having suggested he preferred more immigrants from places like Norway BBC [31]. I will therefore argue that the definition of a refugee should be expanded to start by any person whose basic human needs are unprotected by their country of origin, and who have no option otherwise but to seek international protection and necessary resources to survive. As some refugees have indicated, they did not desire to leave their home countries but were forced out.

Retrospectively, when determining who can be classified as a refugee, most countries like the United States and other international agencies do not put into consideration natural disasters, such as floods and droughts, fire (climate refugees) and are usually dismissed for making baseless claims. Some African countries face long term droughts compounded by human conflicts. Ethiopia in 1983-84 is a classic example. About eight million Ethiopian citizens were affected by drought and over one million died. BBC’ Michael Buerk described it as “a biblical famine in the 20th century” and “the closest thing to hell on Earth”. The causes of these famine situations were recurring drought, failed harvests, food scarcity, conflict that kept aid from reaching people in occupied territory, and government policies that relocated families and routed relief to certain areas. Locals indicated that that famine was enhanced by insect invasions, drought, Ethiopian military policies and declines in agricultural production Reid [32]. The world seemed oblivious of the situation in Ethiopia. It was not until 1985, when prominent American musician Willie Nelson, Michael Jackson, Lionel Ritchie, and Bob Dylan gathered to record the song “We are the World” that highlighted the situation in Ethiopia which led to fundraising of millions of dollars for the Ethiopian famine relief Sharpe, U.S History Scene [33]. In Cameroon, the conflict is rooted in the colonial history of the country. After World War I, Cameroon was colonized by both France and the UK. The country has even two different spellings, according to the area and the language: Cameroon for English, and Cameroun for France. The French-speaking territories was more development than the western provinces (British) that were perceived to be poor. The problem that exists is that the minority English speaking group is being dominated by the French speaking majority who also controls the government. Thus, Anglophone Cameroon has been at the forefront of ethno-regional protests which demands rearrangement of state power Njie [34].

Shacknove [7] argues “unlike the violent acts one person perpetrates against another, such disasters are not considered “political” events. They are, supposedly, sources of vulnerability beyond social control which therefore impose no obligation on a government to secure a remedy. The bonds uniting citizen and state are said to endure even when the infrastructure or harvest

of a region is obliterated. For even an ideally just state cannot save us from earthquakes, hurricanes, or eventual death” (279). Therefore, the initial legitimacy of the state as a national actor rests on control of human beings rather than on control of natural forces, thereby the obligation of a state as an actor cannot go beyond human capabilities. But as Lofchie, Sen, and Shue indicate, “natural disasters” are frequently complicated by human actions” Lofchie [35]. For instance, a flood or sometimes famine can be reduced or enhanced by social policies and institutions. Lofchie asserts: “The point of departure for a political understanding of African hunger is so obvious it is almost always overlooked: the distinction between drought and famine.... To the extent that there is a connection between drought and famine, it is mediated by the political and economic arrangements of society. These can either minimize the human consequences of drought or accentuate its effects Lofchie [35]. More so, Sen has argued that the weather and other natural factors might play minor roles in human displacement in parts of the world. That is starvation can occur not because of drought or flood but because people hoard grains or at times people or agencies that help in distribution are corrupt. Therefore, deprivation is not as a result of natural conditions. If left unchecked, this can lead to life-threatening situation because of human actions instead of natural causes. Therefore, the state as an actor has not fulfilled its basic duty to protect the citizen from the actions of corrupt people. In a situation like this then, basis for a legitimate claim to refugeehood emerges “threats to vital subsistence are subject to the same logic” Shue [36].

It is in this regard that the United States should broaden its definition of refugees and asylum seekers to include those affected by natural disasters and not only by human actions. African refugees unlike those from South America and Europe endure a lot more difficult situations and will need extra attention when considering their applications for refugee and asylum status. The Trump administration refugee policies were meant to bar African refugees from entry into the U.S. For instance, in February 2020, Trump added and expanded immigration restrictions on citizens from Nigeria, Myanmar, Eritrea and Kyrgyzstan who want to live or work in the U.S. permanently. In addition to those from Sudan and Tanzania citing security as the main reason and deficiencies in sharing terrorist, criminal or identity information Alvarado & Gomez [37]. Trump closed the door to those seeking asylum in the U.S by referring asylum seeking to a “scam”. Trump adopted a policy that denied anyone who passed through another country on the way to the U.S without seeking refuge in that country first Orsi, Gonzalo & Spagat [38]. As if that is not enough, Trump took his fight to Somalia refugees living in Minnesota. He stated in his speech, “give local communities a greater say in refugee policy and put in place enhanced vetting and responsible immigration controls” Chiu Allyson [39].

Framework for Action

To minimize the problems associated with refugees and

asylum seekers, the U.S and other European countries that have experienced an influx of refugees over the recent years should try and solve the refugee crisis by its root cause. Barring, deporting, and detaining refugees won't solve the problem. People who are suffering, persecuted, hungry have nothing to lose but to try and make dangerous journeys and cross crocodile infested rivers. “The New Colossus,” describing the Statue of Liberty is in sharp contrast to what the Trump administration stood for. Indeed, the Biden Administration on June 8th, 2021, did send the Vice-President Kamala Harris to South America to a fact-finding mission on the root cause of problems that are associated with refugee/immigrant causes BBC [40]. The Biden administration should also send officials to Africa for a fact-finding mission. This approach should be encouraged.

No doubt Lazarus would be touched to hear of Trump's rhetoric on immigrants and refugees knowing Trump himself before becoming president hired illegal immigrants to work in his businesses. Actually, illegal immigrants worked in his property even after he was President Burroughs & Jordan [41]. Her words continue to move and inspire even today. For the Biden administration to effectively deal with the refugee crisis, there is urgent need to come up with a workable solution. Refugee matters remain still a challenging aspect of any administration. Biden had campaigned to increase the refugee cap from 15,000 to 125,000 per year. By April 16th, 2021, the Biden administration remained non-committal to increase the number of refugees from the Trump administration that had set the refugee admission ceiling at 15,000 with the following breakdown: Africa (7,000), East Asia (1,000), Europe and Central Asia (1,500), Latin America and the Caribbean (3,000), Near East and South Asia (1,500) and Unallocated Reserve (1,000). This raised the ire of refugee advocates and supporters who cried foul. On May 3rd Biden carving to this call through a memo that he signed increased the number of refugees admitted on fiscal year 2021 to 62,000 under section 207(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1157(b)) with the following adjusted breakdown, 22,000 spots for refugees from Africa, 6,000 from East Asia, 4,000 from Europe and Central Asia, 5,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 13,000 from South Asia. Another 12,500 unallocated spots will also be available. Holland & Rosenberg [42].

The Biden administration also has rescinded the use of words or terms that seem prejudicial to immigrants such as “alien” and “illegal alien” are to be replaced with “non-citizen” and “immigrant assimilation” to be replaced with “immigrant integration” or civic integration. Other terms that are to change include “unaccompanied alien children” for noncitizen unaccompanied children” and “undocumented alien” and “illegal alien” to undocumented non-citizen, and “undocumented individual” and migrant”. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have been asked to update these terms in their agencies Gamboa [43]. Turning to Africa, what is needed in Africa is political support not ammunitions. Africa like Europe in

the 1940's needs a vibrant Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan, also known as the European Recovery Program, was a U.S. program providing aid to Western Europe following the devastation of World War II. The African model can be referred to as the African Recovery Program. Like the European model, the African Recovery Program should provide aid to the recipients essentially on a per capita basis. The aid should be used to reconstruct those refugee producing countries. The funds should be channeled through civic agencies and not through corrupt governments under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other United Nations (UN) agencies. For those refugees that have to make the journey to the north or somewhere else. The United Nations should be given a mandate to follow the tracks of those refugees to provide them with protection, food, medicine, water and any help they may need. This should be on humanitarian grounds [44-53].

Conclusion

Presenting the findings of this study and other studies of African immigrants/refugees at the U.S-Mexico border would allow African immigrants to speak for themselves using applied and public sociology. This could provide important insight into their quest for refugee or asylum seeking in the U.S. Moreover, this research has identified challenges that African immigrants endure as they make it across South America to the U.S border, ironically, though their dramatic increase in numbers has been left out of U.S. immigration conversations, immigration movement and black narratives. For decades, the U.S has been a refugee receiving country though not willing to deal with source issues. There has been limited willingness in U.S. refugee policy to dealing with refugee producing factors depending on geo-political issues and location. Indeed refugee-producing conditions have forced many people to flee their countries of origin around the world. From Africa, to Asia, to South America and the Middle East. However, as compared with asylum seeking, the U.S, has fairly dealt with refugee issues than asylum. A viable solution to refugee/asylum seeking problem in Africa lies in what has not been tried before. Going to its root cause. Political solutions are necessary to those countries in Africa that have experienced conflict and unrest for long periods, Congo (DRC), Somalia, Cameroon and Ethiopia to mention but a few. Education and conflict resolution programs should be initiated by leading industries countries to root out the origins and causes of these conflicts. This should include interested parties such as academicians, non-governmental organizations and regional leaderships. Sustainable programs should be put in place instead of dependence on developed countries.

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DOI: [10.19080/ARR.2022.08.555733](https://doi.org/10.19080/ARR.2022.08.555733)

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