

Rethinking Securitization in Empowerment-Based Migration Awareness Campaigns for Sustainable Africa-EU Migration Management

Usman Yusuf Bako

PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Near East University, Lefkoşa & Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai
E-Mail: ybkagara@gmail.com

Orcid: 0000-0002-9258-5231

Sait Akşit

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations & Strategy and Energy Policies Research Center, Near East University, Lefkoşa

E-Mail: sait.aksit@neu.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0003-1973-2300

Abstract

The use of securitization strategies by European states in Africa has led to the implementation of deterrence-based awareness campaigns aimed at controlling migration. However, these campaigns have had limited success, prompting a shift towards an approach that empowers individuals to engage in safe migration practices. Nevertheless, unsafe migration practices from Nigeria to Europe persist. This study examines the “Migrants-as-Messengers” and Waka-Well (“safe migration”) awareness campaigns, which aim to reduce unsafe migration by educating potential migrants. It explores whether combining empowerment with securitization could create a more effective and sustainable model for managing migration. Through interviews with key informants and using Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis, the research examines the influence of migration awareness campaigns on migrants’ decisions. The findings reveal that, while deterrence-based awareness campaigns expose potential migrants to risk, they fail to provide safe migration options. Conversely, the empowerment approach equips potential migrants with the means to utilize safer routes. The study concludes that, although the empowerment approach is more appealing to migrants, it is more effective when combined with clear messaging about the dangers of unsafe, irregular migration. Therefore, integrating a deterrence narrative into empowerment frameworks can balance security concerns with migrants’ aspirations, fostering safer and more sustainable migration paths.

Keywords: irregular migration, migration information, safer routes, sustainable migration, migrant agency

Introduction

The externalization of migration policy by European states has led to securitization and the subsequent adoption of deterrence-awareness campaigns (DACs) in Africa to deter potential irregular migrants (Van Dessel 2021). These campaign strategies rely on fear-based messaging to discourage irregular migration by emphasizing the risks and consequences of migration via unsafe transit routes (Tjaden and Dunsch 2021). This approach aligns with traditional securitization frameworks, which seek to contain migration through risk-appeal strategies. However, highlighting the dangers of perilous journeys has not been effective in curbing irregular migration. Irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe peaked in 2016 with 37,554 illegal border crossings into the European Union (EU) (Frontex 2025). This led to the establishment of the first DAC, Migrants as Messengers (MaM), together with Senegal and Guinea. Nevertheless, Nigeria remains one of the countries of origin for irregular migration to Europe with reported 28,173 arrivals in Europe between 2017 and 2024 (IOM 2025). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nationals from West and Central Africa form around 30 percent of all irregular migrants to Europe. Unfortunately, not all irregular migrants reach their intended destination. An increasing number of migrants lose their lives while crossing the Mediterranean Sea using irregular and unsafe routes or become victims of human trafficking each year (Usman 2022). According to the IOM (2025), more than 17,304 African migrants have either died or gone missing since 2014.

Criticism of deterrence strategies has centered on their inability to curb irregular migration and their failure to provide alternative pathways for aspiring migrants. There has also been criticism of their perceived alignment with external interests seeking to limit migration from Africa (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017; Brachet 2018; Echeverria 2020). Migration awareness-raising campaigns (MACs), such as MaM and *Waka-Well* (Safe Migration), have enhanced information dissemination strategies by promoting access to safer pathways and empowering potential migrants with information about safe migration options (Onoiribholo 2021). This new approach focuses on providing practical support for regular migration, respecting migrants' agency, and offering safe migration options. This approach to migrant empowerment aligns with a development framework that incorporates migrant agency into migration management (Debonneville 2021).

Given the persistence of unsafe migration, there is a need for more empirical insights into the interplay between securitization and empowerment, as well as how these frameworks can be integrated into irregular migration management strategies, particularly in the Nigerian context. Specifically, the potential of combining a securitization-based deterrence awareness campaign with an empowerment-focused strategy to mitigate unsafe migration practices in Nigeria need further exploration. This study, therefore, seeks to understand how securitization and empowerment approaches to awareness-raising campaigns appeal to migrants and influence their decision to migrate safely.

This article examines the dynamics of migrant awareness-raising campaigns in promoting safe migration from Nigeria through the lens of securitization and empowerment

theories. In this regard, it aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on migration management strategies that strike a balance between security and development objectives. Data collection, based on a qualitative methodology, relied heavily on insights from key informants, including returnee migrants, potential migrants, civil society representatives, and migration experts. The study reveals a shift from a purely securitized approach to a more inclusive, empowering model. It highlights the limited effectiveness of deterrence campaigns, the appeal of an empowerment approach, and the benefits of combining the strengths of deterrence narratives with empowerment-focused campaigns. The article offers a pragmatic framework for empowering migrants and integrating their agency into the securitization of migration. The proposed framework supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 10.7, which aims to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration. The framework provides empirical insights into migration policy and the theoretical nexus of securitization and empowerment.

Securitizing Africa-Europe Migration and Shifting Migration Awareness Campaigns

The securitization framework has been widely employed to understand how migration has been transformed into a security threat necessitating state response. This framework, within the context of migration studies, views migrants as potential security risks, often justifying restrictive, deterrent-focused policies aimed at controlling migration (Bourbeau 2015). The European political elite and media outlets portray irregular migration from Africa as a “crisis” that threatens societal stability, European values, and “migrant lives”, justifying policies such as border controls, visa restrictions, offshore detention centers, and deterrence awareness-raising campaigns, even though such measures violate human rights. In his classic text on the EU’s securitization of migration, Huysmans (2000) traces the institutionalization of migration securitization within the EU. He argues that EU integration processes have blended migration with criminality and terrorism, thereby embedding exclusionary politics of belonging. The study criticizes agencies such as the police in legitimizing restrictive policies, which marginalize migrants while reinforcing national identities. Planas Gifra (2024) frames migration as a perpetual crisis, arguing that private entities profit from securitization while promoting surveillance and detention that worsen migrant vulnerabilities, citing three EU contexts: The War on Terror, the 2015 refugee crisis, and the pandemic. Jaskułowski’s (2018) synthesis identified consequences, such as migrant deaths and integration issues, and some recurring themes, such as border militarization, refugee dehumanization, and the erosion of migrant rights. Syallow’s (2024) analysis demonstrates how the media’s framing of African migrants leads to marginalization and difficulties in accessing healthcare and education in Europe. She emphasizes that European governments should collaborate with the press to produce balanced, human-centered narratives to reconsider their securitization-focused migration policy (Syallow 2024). Oluyemi (2024) makes a similar argument, criticizing the EU policies and arguing that the securitization of migration policy creates counterproductive outcomes.

A significant body of scholarship critiques the assumptions underlying the securitization of human mobility. Demirkol (2022) tests the Copenhagen School's claim that the securitization of migration in the EU is driven by political and media rhetoric rather than objective threats. Using panel data analysis (2006–2018) across 24 EU states, the study found no significant empirical evidence linking immigration to security risks. It challenges narratives that frame migrants as a threat to welfare, identity, or public safety. Aslan (2022) applies the securitization framework to EU and African migration contexts, arguing that the shift to security following 9/11 has skewed policy away from addressing the root causes of migration. She illustrates how the politicization of migration leads to reactive measures that often exacerbate the pressures of displacement. Văscan (2024) employs discourse analysis to argue that migration continues to be framed as an existential security threat, despite efforts to change this perception. However, he identifies counter-narratives and highlights the polarization of EU leadership, with Eastern European states focusing on sovereignty and Western states striking a balance between security and human rights. Identity-based discourses and private interests also play a role. Paterson and Karyotis (2020) introduce the idea of “counter-securitization,” demonstrating how British values of tolerance can be used to both support and challenge securitizing migration. Their mixed-methods study (discourse analysis and surveys) highlights the dual potential of identity narratives.

Migration securitization ideas are also tested in various contexts. In West Africa, Sowale (2024) employs the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to argue that securitization fails to address the underlying human security needs, as evident in the border closures between Nigeria and Niger. Instead, he champions deeper regional cooperation, underscoring how RSCT can enrich one's understanding of cross-border dynamics. Ogbonna et al. (2023) demonstrate that Nigeria's border-closure regime primarily serves elite interests rather than prioritizing public safety and recommend “de-securitizing” migration through socio-economic development. Ugwukah (2022) examines Libya-Nigeria flows and attributes migrant exploitation to poverty and policy missteps, echoing the call for a multi-stakeholder approach. Yemisi (2024) assesses Nigerian migrants in Ghana under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free-movement rules, showing how nationalism and securitization override regional commitments and render migrants vulnerable.

While much of the literature critiques securitization, several studies offer pathways for empowering migrants and mitigating irregular flows. Schenetti et al. (2025) demonstrate how European policymakers justify MACs through a dual discourse of care and control. They use the language of empowerment to promote a form of restrictive migration referred to as “soft bordering.” Using multimodal discourse analysis, Giancaspro (2025) reveals the process of “soft bordering” in Nigeria's *Waka-Well* campaigns, where visually embedded deterrence co-opts the empowerment narratives to promote immobility. Obi (2020) demonstrates, through his research on a German-funded awareness campaign in rural Nigeria, that access to accurate information, especially via social media, reduces the intention to migrate irregularly. Similarly, Morgenstern's (2024) study of an EU-backed migration information campaign in Nigeria,

using a randomized trial involving 1,500 participants, concludes that deterrence campaigns can reduce the intention to migrate irregularly, particularly when messages trigger anxiety by highlighting risks.

Scholars also question the humanitarian rationale of EU return programs. Veronese et al. (2021) highlight the psychosocial consequences of displacement, based on thematic interviews in a Nigerian transit center. Their study shows that insecurity erodes migrant mental health, highlighting the human costs of securitized migration regimes, and calls for a mental health-informed approach to migration management. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Nigeria, Shaidrova (2025) finds that while EU actors frame return schemes as humanitarian, locals perceive them as neocolonial tools of migration control. However, the study shows how locals adapt these foreign-sponsored return policies pragmatically to secure resources. This suggests agency within structural constraints, providing insights into how international migration policies are locally negotiated and repurposed.

Many scholars have critiqued the securitization of migration while advocating for empowerment, highlighting tension between humanitarian intentions and securitized outcomes. The literature frames securitization and empowerment as mutually exclusive, but both have their strengths. Further scholarly exploration is needed to examine how these approaches intersect and complement each other (Triandafyllidou et al. 2019). Existing literature reveals critical research and policy gaps in the context of migration awareness-raising campaigns, where the shared objectives of deterrence or fear-based narratives (securitization) and migrant rights-based strategies (grounded in empowerment) remain unreconcilable. Could securitization strategies, such as framing risk-appeal as a collective security concern, be reconfigured to mobilize resources for empowerment? Conversely, can empowerment approaches mitigate the harms of securitization without reinforcing exclusionary narratives? The current literature offers little insight into integrating these approaches into hybrid models, which this study aims to address.

Theoretical Framework: Securitization-Empowerment Nexus in Migration

Securitization theory, as articulated by Buzan, Waeber, and de Wilde (1998) in their seminal work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, posits that an issue is transformed into a security threat through a “securitizing” discourse, or “speech acts”, of an actor (political elite or media) which defines it as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures. This threat is socially constructed: when it receives acceptance and thus support from the audience (the public, lawmakers, and international communities), this legitimizes the extraordinary measures. The Copenhagen School’s securitization theory highlights how migration is framed as a security concern by powerful actors, such as European politicians and the media, who present African migration to Europe as a threat and irregular migration as inherently dangerous. This approach focuses not on actual dangers but on how threats are constructed. Irregular migration is framed

as a threat to Europe's safety, culture, and values. As such, European political actors claim to protect national borders, public order, and the lives of migrants. Acceptance by the audience of the idea that migration or irregular migration is a threat allows governments to take strict measures, such as tightening border controls, restricting visas, and launching DAC, aiming to dissuade potential migrants from embarking on migration. These campaigns use fear and control to expose potential migrants to the dangers along the routes, thereby discouraging migration. Scholars like Huysmans (2006) show how this framing is built through language and media messages.

Although many Africans see migration to Europe as a journey of hope, the securitized framing of African migrants by Europe transforms irregular migration from a social phenomenon into a crisis, justifying the extraordinary measures. Consequently, securitizing actors prioritize control over compassion in managing migration by mobilizing resources and implementing policies. This approach justifies draconian policies and fails to address the reasons why people migrate. Deterrence campaigns rarely offer alternatives, such as visa access and job programs. Therefore, to govern migration ethically, empowerment approaches provide a more effective alternative to traditional migration policies and practices.

Empowerment approaches challenge the traditional top-down approach to problem-solving. Empowerment theory was developed with the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970), who argued for empowering the oppressed to achieve "critical consciousness," to understand social injustice and take action to transform their reality. Later, Rappaport (1987) focused on how people can gain more control over their lives. Zimmerman (1995) built on these ideas, explaining the possibility of empowerment at three different levels -personal, organizational, and community-based on three assumptions. These three key assumptions are also helpful in contributing to the effectiveness of migration awareness-raising campaigns (Zimmerman 1995: 586-595). First, empowerment takes different forms for different people: MACs should be designed to meet the specific needs of each group rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, a young girl at risk of trafficking may need support to build self-confidence and access education. In contrast, a migrant worker may require job training and access to legal information. Second, empowerment takes different forms in different contexts. Where and how a person lives affects their sense of empowerment. Strict environments can lead to creative or collective ways of making one's voice heard, while open settings may offer group discussions or leadership roles to foster growth and development. For migration campaigns, this means adopting strategies to the specific setting, whether it is a school, rural area, or urban area. People can feel powerless in some areas of life, yet strong and respected in others. Campaigns should consider these different situations to be more effective. Third, empowerment is a dynamic variable that may fluctuate over time. Empowerment is not a permanent personality trait, but rather something that grows and evolves with experience. A person may feel empowered after getting useful information from a campaign or connecting with support services but can lose that feeling if confronted with new obstacles. This means that MACs must be an ongoing process that adapts over time, giving people room to grow, learn, and reassess their plans.

Empowerment theory reminds us that awareness is about support, not control. When applied to migration campaigns in Nigeria, it helps build safer futures by focusing on personal agency, tailored messages, and dynamic support. Everyone deserves the chance to make a secure and informed choice, but not everyone needs the same message. In practice, empowerment theory shifts the focus of migration campaigns. Rather than using fear or control to prevent migration, empowerment-based campaigns treat migrants as decision-makers by building their skills and increasing their awareness of their rights, thereby enabling them to make informed choices. This approach aligns with global initiatives, such as Sustainable Development Goal 10.7, which promotes safe, orderly, and regular migration. Empowerment theory has limitations. It doesn't address systemic or structural barriers. Participation is essential, but it ignores the reality of asymmetric power. Sometimes, international organizations have more control than local voices. Critics say that campaigns using "empowerment" language may subtly discourage migration (Vammen 2023; Schenetti et al. 2025; Giancaspro 2025).

Both securitization and empowerment have their own strengths in MACs. Securitization can be effective in prompting governments and organizations to act quickly, share resources, and collaborate to combat human trafficking and smuggling (Morgenstern 2024). It also supports campaigns that warn migrants about the dangers they might face – like exploitation or even death – and aims to break the networks that profit from unsafe migration. In contrast, the empowerment approach focuses on helping migrants make informed choices. It provides them with helpful information about safe migration options (Obi 2020) and addresses the underlying causes of migration, such as poverty and unemployment (Debonneville 2021). It also promotes migrant rights and includes migrants in the decision-making process regarding migration policies. While securitization supports rapid state-led interventions, empowerment offers a sustainable, rights-based alternative. Thus, MACs can strategically harness both approaches. MACs can utilize securitization to discourage risky journeys while also employing the empowerment approach to support safer migration and protect the rights of migrants.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing academic and policy documents and reports, as well as personal interviews in the form of key informant interviews (KII) with individuals involved in migration awareness campaign processes.¹ A purposive sampling method was used to identify and select 25 officials, academic and policy experts, each recognized for their active roles in migration awareness campaigns and expertise in migration management, including civil society representatives working for the IOM in Nigeria, officials from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), and the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS). Additionally, a snowball sampling technique was

¹ Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Near East University Ethics Committee on 4 April 2022.

employed to select 20 participants, comprising 10 returnee migrants and 10 youth leaders from Edo state, Nigeria, who had either experienced irregular migration firsthand or had direct exposure to migration awareness campaigns. The interviews and research process were conducted between April and August 2022. For ethical reasons, the study maintains the anonymity of respondents; their areas of expertise, affiliations, and initials were used, where necessary, for better clarity.

Migrant Resource Center and civil society organizations in Edo state helped to establish connections with knowledgeable youth leaders and returned migrants. Edo, located in Nigeria's South-South region, was chosen for this study for two key reasons. Firstly, in Nigeria, Edo state is the epicenter of irregular migration, with a high prevalence of youth migration (Osauzo 2020) and a longstanding influence of traffickers in the area. Secondly, Edo state has been a focal point for the IOM's MaM and *Waka-Well* campaigns, as well as NAPTIP's awareness campaigns. These factors have played a significant role in the mobility agreement on managing irregular immigration with the EU and the IOM.

Semi-structured interview questions were used, targeting the abovementioned groups with knowledge of migration awareness campaigns and irregular migration management. Specifically, the questions focused on push-pull factors and the experiences of irregular migration, the responses of relevant stakeholders, the limitations of the DAC, and the shift to empowered awareness-raising campaigns (EAC). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis² was employed to analyze interview data and assess the evolution of securitization strategies into empowerment-focused approaches in MACs in Nigeria. Interview transcripts were systematically examined for recurring themes and patterns, with verbatim transcription applied to all interviews. An open coding process was then used to identify and refine these themes into a coherent narrative. Direct quotations were purposefully selected and systematically incorporated into the narrative to illustrate and substantiate key themes. This process was intended to support the study's conceptual framework and form the backbone of the analytical discussion, clarifying how empowerment discourses are increasingly shaping migration governance in a context that was previously dominated by securitization logics. Table 1 illustrates the interplay between different actors, policies, patterns, and outcomes in disseminating migration information to manage irregular migration.

The Dynamics of Awareness-raising Campaigns in Nigeria

The study's main findings reveal that governments in both sending and receiving states, as well as international bodies, have adopted securitization and empowerment approaches to manage migration. It identifies a shift from deterrence-focused to empowerment-based

2 Braun and Clarke (2006: 86) argue that "thematic analysis involves the searching *across* a data set - be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts - to find repeated patterns of meaning." They define six-phases of thematic analysis for qualitative research as follows: familiarizing yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. See Braun and Clarke (2006: 86-93) for a more detailed description of the process.

awareness-raising strategies and shows the emergence of EAC, addressing the limitations of DAC. Through the EAC, the study develops a model of migration management that supports the aspirations of potential migrants and addresses security concerns in facilitating safe and regular migration. This thematic analysis examines the context of migration awareness campaigns in Nigeria and explores the intersection of DAC and EAC approaches to managing irregular migration.

Migration Drivers and Realities of Unsafe Routes

Key findings from interviews indicate that socio-economic factors, including personal aspirations, poverty, unemployment, and dissatisfaction with governance, have a significant influence on irregular migration from Nigeria. Available data highlighted Nigeria's significant migration rate compared to other sub-Saharan African countries. A migration expert states the trend of mass migration is exacerbated by the failures of social provisioning and lack of employment opportunities among the youth: "Many young graduates without jobs and perceived opportunities abroad see irregular migration as a necessity for survival" (KII-ME2, personal interview, April 2022).

Respondents also cited the appeal of improved living standards and perceived social status associated with migrating to Europe. Stories of success from people who have crossed into Europe or Asia through irregular routes motivate other potential migrants. The display of wealth among returnees in Edo motivates potential migrants, leading to an increase in irregular migration. One potential migrant noted that seeing affluence can inspire others:

"Some of the fine houses you see in the city are owned by Nigerians in the diaspora. Even though we don't know the sources of their income, all I know is that they have successfully made it to Europe, and they can't survive there by stealing. So, I believe they are working and getting a good salary to send home. I also want to travel but don't have the money to pay agents" (KII-YL4, personal interview, April 2022).

Remittances play a significant role in the sustenance of many families in Nigeria. The impact of remittances encourages irregular migration because families can improve their economic standing, which strengthens their social status. As a student union leader noted, "many of our people who send money back home to support our education are held in high esteem. Some parents also depend on financial support from their wards and take pride in remittances received" (KII-YL2, personal interview, May 2022). All the potential rewards of a better life and remittances reinforce the belief that the risks of migration are justified.

Some of the returnee migrants interviewed shared their horrible experiences of attempting to reach Europe via irregular routes. Their journeys were fraught with dangerous desert and sea crossings and maltreatment from traffickers, smugglers, and Libyan authorities. One female returnee recounted her harrowing journey via the Niger-Libya route, highlighting

the physical abuse and exploitation women faced. She also mentioned missing people and those unable to make it across the sea (KII-RM1, personal interview, May 2022). Another returnee described their experience at the Libyan detention camp, noting overcrowding, hunger, lack of food and water, and physical violence (KII-RM4, personal interview, June 2022). The returnees also described how hazardous the journey across the Sahara Desert was, with deaths due to dehydration or exhaustion. A male survivor stated: “Crossing the desert to reach Libya was a nightmare for me. It was a hell for us. We survived a severe condition of the desert areas drinking contaminated water, at times without food” (KII-RM5, personal interview, June 2022). Testimonies illustrate the physical and psychological trauma irregular migrants face and the risks involved in migrating through unsafe routes.

Governmental and Non-governmental Responses

European and African governments and NGOs have responded by employing different methods to control the irregular flow of migrants, mainly from Africa. The media exaggerated the rate of migrant deaths across the Mediterranean Sea and the dangers associated with irregular migration and migration crisis, fueling the securitization of migration and deterrence narratives. The European media primarily depicted the migration crisis, through irregular channels, as a security threat to Europe, prompting policymakers to introduce stricter border controls and the externalization of such control through DAC to reduce the irregular flow of migrants (KII-ME1, personal interview, April 2022). Despite deterrence campaigns, many potential migrants in Nigeria were determined to migrate irregularly due to economic aspirations and limited legal pathways.

The Nigerian government strengthened its response to irregular migration to combat human trafficking and smuggling. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons combats human trafficking, while the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) regulates migration. NAPTIP is also mandated to raise awareness of the dangers of irregular migration and to prosecute human traffickers (Aluko 2017; Enogholase 2018). According to one respondent, “We investigate all acts of human trafficking and smuggling, ... we arrest and also prosecute human traffickers” (KII-ME9, personal interview, April 2022). Meanwhile, the NIS intercepts individuals attempting to leave Nigeria without proper documentation (KII-ME19, personal interview, June 2022). However, the efforts of these agencies remain limited as migration remains a necessary means of economic survival.

The IOM led awareness campaigns to dissuade potential irregular migrants, highlighting the dangers of irregular routes. An interview with a civil society representative suggests that awareness campaigns have partially deterred irregular migration due to its potential benefits, such as remittances and social status (KII-ME22, personal interview, August 2022). Another civil society official noted that “We have been making efforts through social media and community gatherings to educate people to avoid dangerous journeys in

their desire to fulfil personal dreams of a better life outside Nigeria” (KII-ME23, personal interview, May 2022). This demonstrates commitment by governments, the IOM, and civil society groups towards combating unsafe migration practices.

Migration Motivation, Limitations of the Deterrence Approach and Empowering Migrants

As already highlighted, there are push and pull factors driving migration from Nigeria to Europe. Interviews reveal a complex interplay between the economic and social benefits and the dangers that face migrants. Lack of employment, dissatisfaction with governance, and inadequate social support systems push Nigerians into irregular migration. Some have successfully gained entry to Europe, many have attempted it, and many are willing to embark on the perilous journey. A government official expressed concern about Nigeria’s image, which has been negatively impacted by the media’s portrayal of a mass exodus of irregular migrants from the country to Europe, and called for a more effective solution to the migration crisis (KII-ME12, personal interview, June 2022). Irregular migration is risky, but many Nigerian youths are drawn to the potential economic and social benefits of the perceived social mobility. Many wish to escape the economic and social deprivations of their communities and build a better life (KII-ME11, personal interview, June 2022). Considering the cost and benefits of irregular migration, the dialectics highlight the need for a more effective approach to address the fundamental causes of irregular migration and adopt better strategies for safer alternatives.

Study findings show that the externalization of securitization, NAPTIP campaigns, and NIS interception methods align with the initial deterrence-based approach to irregular migration. Border controls and information dissemination about the dangers of irregular migration have not been successful in deterring or preventing migration. These securitization methods have proven ineffective. A potential migrant voiced a common sentiment about the deterrent measures, saying, “a campaign to discourage Nigerians from migration. We believe it is sponsored by the Europeans. They should make obtaining a visa easier, and our people don’t have to take the dangerous journeys” (KII-YL4, personal interview, May 2022). The perception was that deterrent measures served European interests rather than the needs of aspiring migrants. This further fostered distrust and the perception that the governmental deterrence approach prioritized external political pressure over the safety of migrants, thereby limiting its effectiveness and acceptance.

The deterrence approach was also criticized for failing to recognize the significant benefits that migration brings to the Nigerian economy. A community member in Edo state observed, “Remittances coming to Nigeria from Nigerian migrants abroad serve as a source of financial support to families here. It helps a lot of families to overcome the challenges of life” (KII-CM2, personal interview, June 2022). A similar sentiment was echoed by a youth leader and a politician, suggesting that a “holistic approach is needed to address restrictive and harsh policies for those who want to Japa (migrate). Consideration should be given because of the

economic benefits of migration” (KII-YL6, personal interview, May 2022). Thus, DACs have been defined as narratives that appeal to risk to dissuade potential migrants. They are designed to control irregular migration. However, portraying migrants as a security threat increases xenophobia, justifying restrictive border surveillance and detentions. It also prioritizes state security over human security and fails to address the root causes of migration.

The role of returnee migrants in awareness-raising initiatives proved pivotal in managing irregular migration. Initially focused on deterrence, the narrative shifted towards promoting safe migration facilitation by migrants. Returnees shared their experiences of irregular migration, highlighting the dangers of smuggling routes and detention camps. A returnee described the hardship as “exploitation from *bogas* [smuggling agents], hunger, thirst, insecurity along the way, and maltreatment in Libyan detention centers” (KII-RM7, personal interview, June 2022). Returnees’ firsthand accounts resonate deeply with potential migrants, offering insights into the risks of migration and the importance of safe channels. The engagement of potential migrants extends beyond returnee testimonies, encompassing various stakeholders, including local CSOs, traditional institutions, cultural groups, and the media. According to a migrant advocacy group member, “various stakeholders are involved in disseminating information that will help intending migrants on how to travel out of Nigeria safely” (KII-ME10, personal interview, June 2022). Community engagement fosters support systems through collaboration, reaching at-risk groups, and empowering potential migrants.

Shift to Empowered Awareness-Raising Campaigns

The shortcomings of securitizing migration through DAC prompted IOM’s collaborative efforts with the Nigerian government and non-governmental agencies to engage positively with potential migrants. This new engagement focuses on supportive systems over fear-based deterrence. According to a migration expert at the University of Benin, “supportive engagement with intending migrants encourages the positive and constructive perception of migration. Giving them reliable information helps them to make informed decisions” (KII-ME5, personal interview, April 2022). He supports shifting the focus of migrant awareness campaigns from deterrence to empowerment, providing potential migrants with the information they need to make informed choices about their aspirations.

A vital component of shifting towards an empowerment campaign is the use of peer-to-peer communication. Returnees can provide realistic insights into irregular migration, and campaign volunteers can offer safe migration options. A returnee migrant shared her experiences, explaining how campaigns “helped to disabuse the mind of many who thought that going by land through Libya is the best option to save cost” (KII- RM5, personal interview, May 2022). She recounted how smugglers exploited her family’s wealth to take her to Europe, but she ended up in the Libyan detention center. She joined the safe migration campaign as a volunteer advocate. Thus, reframing the narrative to focus on educating and supporting migrants is referred to as an empowered awareness-raising campaign.

The *Waka-Well* campaign by the IOM marked a significant shift in Nigeria’s migration awareness-raising campaigns. The initiative “is deeply committed to empowering young people in West Africa to make informed migration decisions” (IOM News 2021) and focuses on safe, informed migration rather than deterrence. According to IOM Nigeria representative Cyprine Cheptepkeny, “Information and awareness like this (the *Waka-Well* campaign) require collaboration and practice as well as different stakeholders, partners and returned migrants to achieve the goal” (Onoiribholo 2021). *Waka-Well* and other empowerment programs such as Edo state government’s 2022 Migration 2.0 initiative, have contributed to the shift from traditional deterrence narratives. Migration 2.0 offers skills, guidance, and information to potential migrants, enabling them to pursue their dreams safely and in a structured manner (The Nation 2022). This reflects a growing commitment to recognizing migration as beneficial and aspirational.

EAC’s new approach actively engages migrant agencies and supports potential migrants in achieving regular migration by providing them with knowledge and resources. This challenges the traditional deterrent methods and empowers potential migrants with an agency that aligns with their goals and circumstances. The EAC promotes responsible and safe migration practices that honor migrants’ agency while mitigating irregular migration. However, the EAC cannot eliminate visa restrictions imposed by European states that leave migrants in uncertainty. Additionally, the strategies that work in Edo communities may not be effective in other places, such as Kano, where needs differ. Similarly, funding and coverage of empowerment schemes across regional and rural-urban divides hinder their success. Asking migrants to participate does not automatically translate to overcoming the challenges of misgovernance and poverty. Critics also argue that EAC efforts are a subtle way of building resilience among potential migrants to stay home, rather than truly giving them a choice to meet their migration aspirations (Vammen 2023).

A Comparative Analysis of Migration Management

Transforming DAC to EAC represents a fundamental shift in migration management strategies, indicating a change in securitizing migration from a traditional deterrence approach to an empowered model. Table 1 illustrates DAC’s reliance on risk appeal narratives, which employ fear to discourage irregular migration, whereas EAC adopts safe appeal narratives, emphasizing the importance of informed migration decisions. The DAC focuses on changing behavior through deterrence, while the EAC engages migrants directly through civic engagement, providing a supportive environment in which they can pursue their aspirations safely. Alternatively, applying both DAC and EAC implies preventing dangerous journeys and supporting safe migration.

Table 1. Comparison of DAC, EAC, and S-EAC Strategies in Migration Management

Dimension	DAC	EAC	S-EAC
Premise	Risk-appeal – informs potential migrants the risks of irregular migration	Safe-appeal – promotes informed, safe migration pathways	Combines risk and safe appeal in creating well-informed migrants
Orientation	Deterrence- fear-based information sharing (securitizing)	Empowerment- value orientation through civic engagement (Empowering)	Balanced approach towards humanizing migration management (securitized-empowerment)
Goals/Objective	To prevent irregular migration through behavioral change	To ensure safe migration through informed decision	To encourage informed, safe migration through secure migration channels
Target (the influenced)	Potential migrants	Potential migrants and returnees	Potential migrants, returnees, and those in transit or in the diaspora
Instruments	Face-to-face interaction & social media campaigns	Online open resources & open community platforms	Integrated tools with accessible data and participatory platforms
Facilitator (the influencer)	EU, IOM, state agencies, CSOs	EU, IOM, state agencies, CSOs, community forums, including migrant agencies	Multi-stakeholder approach, leveraging institutions and community engagement
Beneficiary	EU member states, IOM, CSOs	Migrants, sending states, IGOs, CSOs	Inclusive benefits to all stakeholders: migrants, receiving & sending states, IGOs, CSOs

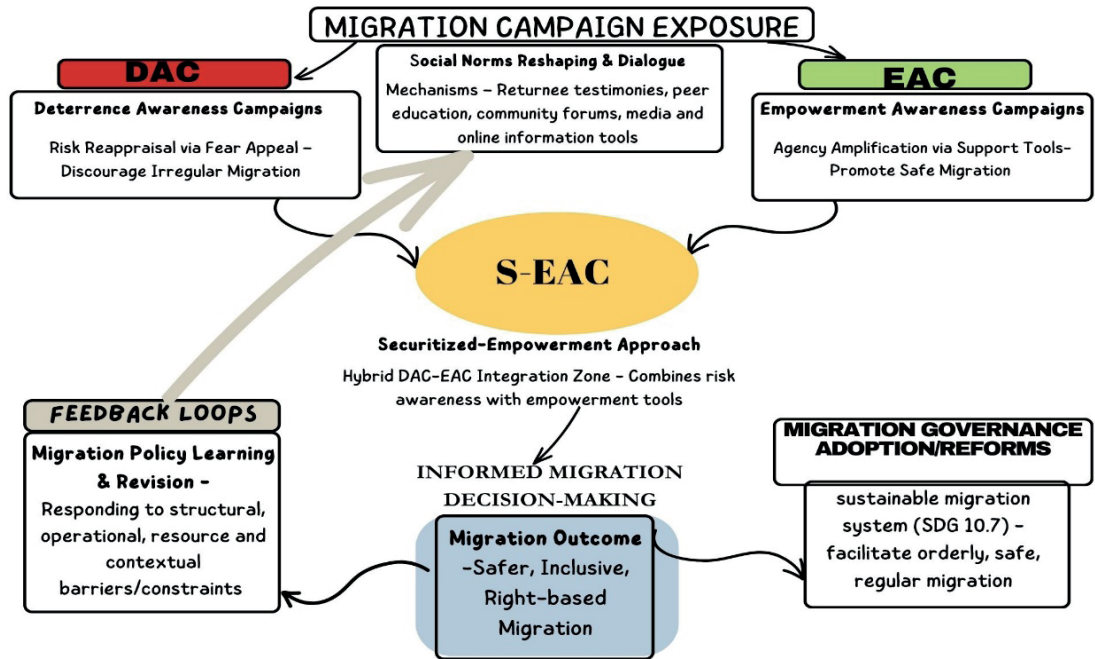
Source: Authors 2023.

Reliance on risk-oriented messages alone limits the effectiveness of the DAC model. The DAC offers no accessible, safe migration alternatives and is an instrument of migration control. In contrast, the EAC model is an inclusive, support-oriented strategy that empowers migrants. It engages potential migrants in safe migration options and ensures they have access to a broad spectrum of reliable and accurate information on safe migration. Thus, the EAC model empowers individual migrants rather than controlling them. It serves the interests of migrants, source and destination countries, and other relevant organizations.

Where DAC complements EAC, it creates a securitized-empowerment awareness campaign (S-EAC), which views migration as a mutually beneficial process. This campaign exposes potential migrants to the dangers of irregular migration and the benefits of safer, legal alternatives. It also empowers migrants to make conscious, responsible decisions. As noted by a civil society official, “The safe migration narrative echoed by the Waka-Well campaign is aimed at educating the youths on the risks associated with a dangerous journey. It is a community network to interact, share, and access reliable information about migration” (KII-ME16, personal interview, August 2022). This view clearly illustrates the combination of DAC and EAC to provide potential migrants with more accurate and comprehensive information.

Many respondents indicated that potential migrants make informed decisions when provided with accurate and reliable migration information but are even better informed when made aware of the risks associated with irregular migration routes.

Figure 1. Conceptual Mapping of Securitized Empowerment in Migration Awareness Governance



Source: Authors 2025

Figure 1 illustrates how migration awareness campaigns influence decision-making. The hybrid Securitized-Empowerment Approach blends DAC and EAC strategies, combining risk warnings with support tools. S-EAC shapes social norms through peer dialogue, media, and community engagement. Feedback from migrants helps improve policies, while informed decisions lead to safer, rights-based migration. This also supports reforms for a fair and sustainable migration system. Therefore, S-EAC provides a hybrid approach to migration management combining risk-based awareness with empowerment. It operationalizes security objectives (reducing trafficking, smuggling, and migrant deaths) through consent-building tools (peer-to-peer education, media, and skills training) rather than coercion.

Unlike traditional securitization, which portrays migrants as threats to justify coercive measures, the S-EAC approach recognizes and channels migrant agency toward safer, informed migration choices. It emphasizes inclusivity and open knowledge sharing among stakeholders. It offers a safer, well-informed approach to migration than DAC or EAC. It aligns with migrants' aspirations, global mobility goals, and national socio-economic objectives. It also balances security concerns and the rights and aspirations of individual migrants. It offers a pragmatic and sustainable approach to migration management. However, securitized empowerment campaigns may encounter challenges stemming from language and cultural

differences, such as campaign materials not accurately representing Nigeria's over 500 diverse ethnicities, as well as structural limitations, including visa restrictions and funding shortages, which affect both the EAC and S-EAC.

Conclusion

The findings of this study corroborate those of Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan (2017) regarding the growing ineffectiveness of the deterrence approach. They present the process by which campaigns against irregular migration have shifted from deterrence-based to empowerment-focused strategies. Migration awareness campaigns aimed at addressing the issue of increasing irregular migration from Africa to Europe focused primarily on a deterrence approach, prioritizing border restrictions, surveillance, and risk-appeal awareness-raising campaigns. However, these measures had little impact on limiting irregular migration, largely due to the socio-economic benefits of migration (World Bank 2025). Unfortunately, this led to an ever-increasing number of fatalities over the following decade because of the prevalence of irregular migration. The findings confirm that potential migrants often distrust information from deterrence campaigns as representing European interests (see also Vammen 2023; Shaidrova 2025). Remittances from the Nigerian diaspora, averaging over US\$20 billion per year since 2010 (World Bank 2025), and further increasing during the peak of the migration crisis (except during the pandemic years), strengthen this position. Thus, securitizing migration conflicts with the economic benefits, such as remittances, and is regarded as restrictive, exclusionary, and counterproductive in terms of sustainable migration management (Sowale 2024).

Following the shift in MaM's narrative towards safe migration awareness, and the launch of IOM's *Waka-Well* campaign and the Edo state Government's Migration 2.0 project, stakeholders have become more engaged with (potential) migrants, providing them with information and resources to support their aspirations for safe migration (Onoiribholo 2021; The Nation 2022). These initiatives empower potential migrants to make informed choices. The engagement of potential migrants with returnee migrants and migration stakeholders to share authentic migration experiences and accurate migration information is an example of EAC. The EAC challenges the traditional securitization narrative of deterrence. It aligns with similar practices, demonstrating that engaging and empowering potential migrants can support their aspirations for safe migration (Debonneville 2021).

However, the study shows that neither a securitized deterrence strategy nor an empowerment strategy addresses the complexity of irregular migration from Nigeria on its own. It highlights that the DAC was only partially successful, and while the EAC is appealing (Obi 2020), its practical outcome still needs to be verified and clarified. In practice, the EAC passively positions migrants and lacks implementation standards. Given the importance of risk-associated messaging (Morgenstern 2024), simply empowering migrants has not yet been effective in preventing unsafe migration practices. The study illustrates that when complemented by the DAC, the EAC enhances progress, promotes standardized practices, and creates genuinely informed migrants, thereby contributing to safer migration practices. Therefore, the study highlights the

importance of incorporating deterrence narratives into empowerment as a supplementary tool for the evolving migration policy framework. Integrating DAC into EAC addresses security concerns and socio-economic realities that shape migration patterns. This approach refers to a securitized-empowerment approach in migration management, aligning migration policy with the Sustainable Development Goals and the empowerment of individual migrants.

The integration of a deterrence approach within an empowerment framework represents a migration management model that addresses the tension between security concerns and migrant aspirations, as evidenced in the Philippines (Debonneville 2021; Rother 2022). The *Waka-Well* is an example of securitized empowerment that requires further strengthening. It disseminates risk-aware messaging about the dangers of desert and Mediterranean crossings, while also empowering migrants to “choose” safety through peer networks, visa guides, and skills development. This advances EU border security, protects the lives of migrants, and supports their aspirations. However, migrant groups and diaspora organizations must be actively involved to counteract the dominance of securitizing agents in awareness-raising campaigns. This paradigm shift promotes a more pragmatic, humane, and inclusive approach to migration management. It makes a meaningful contribution to the global migration agenda and the achievement of SDG 10.7.

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