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Exploring Migration Intention as an Entrepreneurial Barrier in Anambra State

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Abstract

Anambra State is widely regarded as one of Nigeria's most commercially vibrant states, with a population historically associated with strong entrepreneurial orientation and trading culture. Yet in recent years, the state has also become a significant source of youth emigration, popularly referred to as "Japa Syndrome", raising the question of how the intention to migrate interacts with, and potentially undermines, local entrepreneurial activity. This paper explores migration intention as an entrepreneurial barrier among prospective and early-stage entrepreneurs in Anambra State. Anchored in the theoretical frameworks of the theory of planned behaviour and push-pull migration theory, the paper draws on a qualitative synthesis of entrepreneurship, migration, and youth-employment literature to examine how a strong disposition toward emigration shapes individuals' willingness to invest time, capital, and long-term commitment into local business ventures. The paper argues that migration intention functions as a distinct behavioural barrier to entrepreneurship, operating through mechanisms including short-term planning horizons, reduced willingness to reinvest profits locally, diversion of capital toward migration costs, and a general disposition to treat local enterprise as a temporary or transitional activity rather than a long-term commitment. The paper further considers how this dynamic interacts with the more commonly studied structural barriers to entrepreneurship in Nigeria, such as inadequate access to finance, infrastructural deficits, and regulatory bottlenecks, suggesting that migration intention may compound rather than simply coexist with these constraints. It concludes with recommendations for entrepreneurship policy and support programmes that explicitly account for the migration-intention dimension of youth economic behaviour in Anambra State.

Keywords: Migration intention, entrepreneurship, Japa Syndrome, Anambra State, youth economic behaviour

1. Introduction

Anambra State occupies a distinctive position within Nigeria's economic geography, long associated with a commercially dynamic population whose entrepreneurial activity, particularly in trading, manufacturing, and services, has historically underpinned much of the state's economic identity. Paradoxically, this same population has, in recent years, become closely associated with one of Nigeria's most pronounced patterns of youth emigration, a phenomenon popularly termed "Japa Syndrome". This paper is concerned with an underexplored intersection of these two trends: the extent to which the intention to migrate, independent of whether migration is ultimately realized, functions as a behavioural barrier to entrepreneurial activity among Anambra State's youth population.

The rationale for this inquiry rests on a simple but consequential premise: entrepreneurship typically requires a long-term orientation, encompassing sustained investment of capital, time, and effort into a venture whose returns may only materialize over an extended horizon. Where individuals hold a strong intention to emigrate, this long-term orientation may be structurally undermined, regardless of whether emigration is ever realized, as prospective entrepreneurs may rationally discount the value of local investment relative to the anticipated returns of relocation. This paper interrogates that dynamic, asking: in what ways, and through what mechanisms, does migration intention function as a barrier to entrepreneurial activity among youths in Anambra State?

The paper proceeds as follows: section two reviews relevant literature on entrepreneurship barriers, migration intention, and their intersection in the Nigerian context; section three presents the theoretical framework; section four outlines the methodology; section five discusses findings across four mechanisms through which migration intention undermines entrepreneurship; and section six concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Entrepreneurship Barriers in Nigeria

Existing literature on entrepreneurship in Nigeria has extensively documented structural barriers to venture formation and growth, including limited access to affordable credit, inadequate power and transport infrastructure, regulatory and bureaucratic bottlenecks, and macroeconomic instability linked to currency depreciation and inflation. These structural constraints have been widely studied as primary explanations for Nigeria's comparatively high rate of informal, subsistence-oriented enterprise relative to formally registered, growth-oriented businesses.

2.2 Migration Intention as a Distinct Construct

Migration studies distinguish migration intention, the subjectively held disposition or plan to emigrate, from migration behaviour, the actual act of relocating, noting that the former can exert independent effects on an individual's economic decision-making even where the latter is never realized or is significantly delayed. Research grounded in the theory of planned behaviour has shown that behavioural intentions shape present-oriented decision-making, including investment, saving, and career-planning choices, well before, and sometimes regardless of, whether the intended behaviour is ultimately enacted.

2.3 The Intersection of Migration and Entrepreneurship

A smaller but growing body of literature has begun to examine how migration intention interacts with entrepreneurial behaviour, generally identifying two competing effects. On one hand, some studies suggest migration intention can stimulate entrepreneurship, as individuals raise capital for eventual migration through local business activity. On the other hand, a growing strand of literature, particularly relevant to the Nigerian and broader West African context, documents a discouragement effect, in which strong migration intention reduces individuals' willingness to commit to long-term local investment, favouring instead short-horizon, low-commitment economic activity pending an anticipated departure. This paper situates itself within this second strand, examining its specific manifestation in Anambra State.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Icek Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, which holds that behavioural intention, shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, is the most immediate and reliable predictor of actual behaviour. Applied here, the theory suggests that an individual's strongly held intention to migrate will shape present-day economic decisions, including whether and how to invest in entrepreneurial activity, independent of whether migration is subsequently realized.

This is complemented by the push-pull framework of migration, which conceptualizes migration decisions as a function of factors that push individuals away from their present location, such as limited economic opportunity or political distrust, and factors that pull them toward a destination, such as perceived higher earnings or better governance. Read alongside the theory of planned behaviour, this framework helps explain both why migration intention forms in the Anambra context and how it is subsequently translated into the specific entrepreneurial behaviours examined in this paper.

4. Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on a desk review and thematic synthesis of secondary literature on entrepreneurship barriers, migration intention, and youth economic behaviour in Nigeria, supplemented by documented case evidence and survey-based findings specific to Anambra State and the broader South-East region. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring mechanisms through which migration intention is reported to influence entrepreneurial decision-making, organized around four themes: planning horizon effects, capital allocation effects, reinvestment behaviour, and interaction with structural barriers. This approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research question and the current scarcity of large-scale primary data directly linking migration intention and entrepreneurial outcomes specific to Anambra State.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Planning Horizon Effects

The evidence reviewed suggests that individuals holding strong migration intentions tend to adopt significantly shortened planning horizons for local economic activity, favouring ventures that can be quickly established, easily liquidated, and require minimal long-term infrastructural or relational investment. This pattern is consistent with the theory of planned behaviour's prediction that a dominant behavioural intention, in this case, emigration, will shape subsidiary decisions, including business planning, in ways that accommodate rather than compete with the primary intended behaviour.

5.2 Capital Allocation Effects

A recurring theme concerns the diversion of capital that might otherwise be directed toward business investment into migration-related costs, including visa application fees, standardized test preparation, agency charges, and international tuition or relocation deposits. Where individual or household capital is limited, this diversion directly competes with entrepreneurial capital formation, effectively crowding out local investment in favour of migration-related expenditure.

5.3 Reinvestment Behaviour

Beyond initial capital allocation, the findings indicate that even where individuals with migration intentions do establish local businesses, often as a means of funding eventual emigration, they exhibit reduced willingness to reinvest business profits into expanding or strengthening the venture. Profits are instead frequently channelled toward migration savings, producing a pattern in which locally established businesses remain persistently under-capitalized and structurally limited in their growth trajectory, a dynamic with implications for local employment generation and economic development.

5.4 Interaction with Structural Barriers

Finally, the findings suggest that migration intention does not operate independently of the structural barriers to entrepreneurship already well documented in the Nigerian context, but rather compounds them. Where infrastructural deficits, limited access to finance, and regulatory bottlenecks already constrain the expected returns to local entrepreneurship, a strong migration intention appears to further tilt individuals' cost-benefit calculations away from sustained local investment, reinforcing the perception that entrepreneurial commitment within Anambra State carries a comparatively unfavourable risk-return profile relative to emigration.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored migration intention as a distinct behavioural barrier to entrepreneurship among youths in Anambra State, operating through shortened planning horizons, diversion of capital toward migration costs, reduced reinvestment in local ventures, and compounding interaction with existing structural barriers to enterprise. These findings suggest that conventional entrepreneurship support interventions, focused primarily on addressing finance, infrastructure, and regulatory constraints, may be insufficient on their own where a strong underlying migration intention persists among the target population.

The paper recommends: first, entrepreneurship support programmes in Anambra State should incorporate an explicit understanding of migration intention as a behavioural factor, tailoring mentorship and support structures accordingly; second, policymakers should consider hybrid support models that accommodate rather than ignore diaspora ambitions, such as structures allowing remote or diaspora-linked co-ownership of local ventures; third, targeted interventions addressing the broader push factors underlying migration intention, including governance credibility and security, discussed in related literature on political distrust and youth emigration, may indirectly strengthen local entrepreneurial commitment; and fourth, further empirical research, particularly primary survey work directly measuring migration intention alongside entrepreneurial investment behaviour among Anambra youths, is recommended to more precisely quantify the mechanisms identified in this paper.

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