

## Entrevista



### **OMOLOLÁ OLARINDE - OLOMOLA**

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NIZAMIY

# Omololá Olarinde - Olomola

*Empirical evidence, however, overwhelmingly contradicts the notion that migrants “take jobs” from locals.*

Interview conducted by **Akinwale Roy Ojomo\***

Nigeria, December 2024

*Dr. Omololá Olarinde-Olomola is Senior Lecturer at Elizade University, Ilara-Mokin, Nigeria. Her research spans gender and migration, migration governance, labour market dynamics, and inclusive growth. She is the author and co-author of numerous works, including on Gender and Migration and Nigeria-Africa Migration Dynamics. Her work frequently informs policy, and she has collaborated with international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). She is also a member of the Network of Migration Research on Africa (NOMRA) and the Nigerian Economic Society (NES) and associate editor for the African Review of Economics and Finance and the International Journal of African Migration (IJAM, Ìrìnkèrìndò).*

**Akinwale Ojomo (AO):** What motivated you to take an interest in Migration and allied studies?

**Omololá Olarinde-Olomola (OOO):** Migration is a personal and globally significant phenomenon that affects countless lives, including my own. Growing up in a mixed-nationality family, migration has been an integral part of my reality since childhood, shaping my understanding of identity, belonging, and mobility. Despite its prevalence, migration remains one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented topics worldwide, with numerous misconceptions persisting across regions and cultures. As an economist specialising in development and labour markets, I observed a significant gap in migration research, particularly within the Nigerian context. The scarcity of rigorous, evidence-based studies in this field—especially those

that link migration to broader issues such as inclusive growth, labour market dynamics, and governance—compelled me to delve into migration studies. My motivation stems from a commitment to addressing these gaps, challenging misconceptions, and contributing to a nuanced understanding of migration's multidimensional impacts.

**AO:** In past conferences and studies, you have highlighted the socio-economic contributions of sub-Saharan migrants within West Africa. What concrete examples can you share about their contribution to local development?

**(OOO):** Several of my studies have highlighted the significant socio-economic contributions of sub-Saharan migrants, particularly within the context of West African migration. For example, the

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Migration for Inclusive African Growth (MIAG) study underscored the entrepreneurial role of migrants, who have established businesses and contributed to driving competition among local firms. This competition has, in turn, led to improved market outcomes and better services. In my conference paper on migration and human capital formation, I argue, in line with the new economics of labour migration, that the prospect of migration serves as an incentive for individuals to build higher skill levels than they might have otherwise developed in their home country. This phenomenon is especially evident in Nigeria, where aspiring migrants often seek to enhance their skills to improve their chances of migrating to larger labour markets, ultimately resulting in a net increase in skill formation. Additionally, my work on remittances highlights how migrants contribute not only to the consumption needs of their families but also to investment expenditures, helping to stimulate local economies and support development in their origin regions. These examples reflect the broader impact of migration on local and regional development, emphasising the multifaceted contributions that migrants make.

**AO: How would you describe the perception of sub-Saharan migrants in the corridor between Eastern and Southern Africa by local communities and authorities?**

**(OOO):** I have not specifically measured the perceptions of local communities and authorities towards sub-Saharan migrants in the corridor between Eastern and Southern Africa. However, the impressions I have gathered come from three studies I have been involved in, where I interviewed Nigerian return migrants, primarily Assisted Voluntary Returns,

who shared their experiences across various African destinations. While most of these returnees passed through ECOWAS countries and ended up in Northern Africa, a small number had migrated to Eastern and Southern Africa. Many of these returnees' experiences were shaped by the intermediaries who directed their journeys, including traffickers or smugglers. Consequently, these migrants often encounter hostile reception from host communities, who tend to hold preconceived notions about them. Additionally, media narratives sometimes amplify these skewed perceptions, and I have observed instances of organised protests against specific migrant groups, such as Nigerians. I would caution against interpreting these encounters as fully representative of general perceptions. There is a need for more comprehensive studies to better understand the perceptions of both policymakers and host communities towards migrants in Africa. Only through such research can we gain a clearer, more balanced view of migration perceptions in the region.

**(AO): How does the stereotype of migrants “coming to take our jobs” affect the daily lives of migrants in the region and their relationships with host communities across Africa?**

**(OOO):** The idea that migrants “take the jobs” of locals is a pervasive stereotype in many migrant-receiving countries, including Nigeria. This narrative often fuels tensions between migrants and host communities, shaping perceptions and interactions in significant ways. A study I participated in, the *Migration for Inclusive African Growth (MIAG) project*, explored these dynamics in detail. Among the themes that emerged, were competition and wage differentials among locals and immi-

grants from across Africa, as well as Asia and Europe. For instance, local respondents in the textile and food commodity sectors—industries characterised by inter-industry trade—perceived African and Asian immigrants as competitors. West African migrants were particularly visible in sectors such as sewing and construction, with some establishing tailoring businesses and working as tilers on construction sites in Nigeria. Interestingly, the competitive practices were often viewed through contrasting lenses. While local respondents sometimes characterised migrants as competitors exerting undue pressure on wages, West African migrants in the MIAG study described locals as rent-seekers who preferred managerial roles while treating migrants as subcontractors. This tension, while occasionally fraught, often fosters a creative dynamic, as competition can lead to improved products, services, and efficiency.

Empirical evidence, however, overwhelmingly contradicts the notion that migrants “take jobs” from locals. In Nigeria, even when migrants and locals operate within the same industries, their offerings are often differentiated, contributing to greater diversity and choice in the marketplace. For instance, West African migrants in construction or textiles produce distinct products and adopt innovative techniques that expand the industry rather than displace locals.

**(AO): Through your interactions with migrants, which personal stories have impacted you the most, and how do they reflect the complexity of internal African migration?**

**(OOO):** I have had numerous profound moments of inspiration while engaging with diverse categories of migrants. These interactions have illuminated

the resilience, creativity, and complexity that characterise African migration. For instance, during the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) study on mixed migration in 2018, I was deeply moved by the harrowing challenges refugees faced during their journeys. Despite these adversities, I was struck by their remarkable capacity to acculturate upon reaching their destinations. Refugees often exhibit immense potential to contribute productively to their host communities, provided they are given adequate support. Our study highlighted the need for better mechanisms to integrate refugees into the labour market. We recommended sensitising firms to the presence of refugees in the workforce and establishing agreements to allocate a small quota of employment opportunities to qualified refugees, which could significantly enhance their socio-economic inclusion.

**(AO): Do you observe significant differences in the journeys of sub-Saharan migrants compared to those heading to Europe?**

**(OOO):** One of the key themes that emerged from the DYNAMIG study is the diversity of migration destinations for aspiring and actual migrants from Nigeria. A significant proportion of our respondents had migrated within the West African region rather than outside the continent, a trend consistent with existing migration literature. These intra-African migrants, particularly those who undertook regular journeys, reported positive perceptions of their experiences. Challenges within Africa were more common among those who travelled irregularly, where inadequate documentation exposed them to heightened risks, including exploitation and human trafficking. This underscores the

importance of proper documentation and regional frameworks that facilitate safer migration pathways. For those heading to Europe, the trajectories were often as Schapendonk *et al.* (2020) described, marked by “twists and turns.” Many aspiring migrants aimed for destinations in the Global North, such as the United Kingdom or the United States, but often adopted a stepwise migration strategy. For instance, some routed through Cyprus or Cape Verde, which were perceived as easier entry points to “open their passport”—a term used to describe improving their chances of securing visas for Western countries by first travelling to less restrictive destinations. These interim stops often required migrants to spend time raising funds or establishing a migration history before pursuing further aspirations.

**(AO): Do you think African migration policies are prepared to address internal migration flows, or do approaches still primarily focus on international migration?**

**(OOO):** There has been notable progress in migration policymaking at the continental and regional levels, with significant advancements at the national level, particularly in Nigeria. Nigeria has developed sectoral migration policies, including separate frameworks for labour migration, internally displaced persons (IDPs), diaspora engagement, and health worker migration. These developments serve as a model for other African countries to consider. However, the movement of persons remains one of the most complex liberalisation streams compared to the movement of goods, services, and finances. Despite these advances, Nigeria has yet to ratify the African Union’s Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, which would fur-

ther facilitate mobility within the continent. Although there are challenges to liberalising the movement of persons, particularly for Nigeria, as a net receiving country, the benefits of such liberalisation outweigh the costs.

**(AO): What role do the media play in representing sub-Saharan migration within the continent, and what suggestions would you make for a more balanced and comprehensive approach?**

**(OOO):** I consider the media to be critical in shaping perceptions about migration, as they play a central role in presenting dominant narratives that influence public opinion. Significant progress has been made in the media’s representation of migration, particularly through interventions by international organisations. For instance, Elizade University, where I am based, partnered to conduct a training program aimed at improving labour migration reporting. This initiative involved collaboration with peers from over twenty Nigerian universities to integrate migration topics into media studies curricula under the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) FAIRWAY programme. Additionally, the ILO FAIRWAY programme established a community of practice focused on promoting accurate and responsible labour migration reporting.

**(AO): In your opinion, what measures could be taken at the local, regional, or continental level to improve the integration of Sub-Saharan migrants and harness their potential for the development of the communities they traverse?**

**(OOO):** The integration of sub-Saharan migrants and the harnessing of their

potential for community development can be greatly enhanced by measures at the local, regional, and continental levels. At the **local level**, encouraging community-based programs, such as cultural exchange activities, can help reduce social tensions and build stronger relationships between migrants and host communities. These programs foster understanding, empathy, and cooperation, facilitating the acculturation of migrants. Additionally, investing in local economic integration programs, such as offering skills development opportunities tailored to the needs of migrants, can improve their employability and ensure they contribute more effectively to the economy. Local governments can also promote the creation of migrant support networks that facilitate their access to essential services like healthcare, housing, and education. At the **regional level**, investments in infrastructure and labour market integration initiatives are key. Expanding access to employment opportunities for migrants through regional partnerships and infrastructure development would ensure they can contribute to the regional economy. Region-

al organisations could also introduce and support skills development programs to meet the demands of the labour market, thus improving migrants' abilities to secure jobs and contribute productively. So far migration programmes have focussed on entrepreneurial activities, but migrants are also good workers. Regional mobility policies can be harmonised to facilitate easier movement and employment for migrants, allowing them to work and live freely within the region. At the **continental level**, mechanisms to recognise migrants' qualifications and skills, such as trade tests, have made progress, but there is more to be done. A pan-African accreditation and certification system could be developed, making it easier for migrants to find work across Africa and contribute their expertise in different countries. Additionally, the media and governments can work together to promote positive narratives about migration, combat xenophobia, and highlight the contributions of migrants to Africa's economic growth, innovation, and cultural diversity.