

## Navigating the Unseen Voyage: A Moroccan Sociological Analysis of Irregular Maritime Migration among Rural Youth in the Province of Ouled Yaich

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### Abstract

*This article presents a sociological investigation into the phenomenon of irregular maritime migration among rural youth in the Province of Ouled Yaich, Morocco. Drawing on qualitative research employing semi-structured interviews with seven young migrants who attempted irregular sea crossings but were intercepted and returned, this study explores the multifaceted drivers and subjective representations underpinning this precarious migratory practice. The research reveals that economic precarity, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of social justice constitute primary push factors, while the imagined opportunities for economic improvement, quality education, healthcare access, and recognition of rights in destination countries serve as powerful pull factors. The study employs a multidimensional theoretical framework, integrating network theory, push-pull theory, symbolic interactionism, and Marxist historical materialism to comprehensively analyze the structural constraints and agency involved in irregular maritime migration. Findings suggest that irregular migration among rural youth represents a rational response to structural inequalities and a quest for dignity, challenging simplistic narratives that frame such movements as merely deviant or irrational. The article contributes to the sociological literature on migration by providing nuanced insights into the lived experiences of young Moroccans navigating the perilous Mediterranean crossing, with implications for migration policy and development interventions in rural communities.*

**Keywords:** Irregular Maritime Migration, Rural Youth, Morocco, Qualitative Sociology, Push-Pull Factors, Agency

### Resumo

*Este artigo apresenta uma investigação sociológica sobre o fenômeno da migração marítima irregular entre jovens rurais na Província de Ouled Yaich, Marrocos. Com base em uma pesquisa qualitativa que emprega entrevistas semiestruturadas com sete jovens migrantes que tentaram travessias marítimas irregulares, mas foram interceptados e devolvidos, este estudo explora os fatores multidimensionais e as representações subjetivas que fundamentam essa prática migratória precária. A pesquisa revela que a precariedade econômica, o desemprego, a infraestrutura inadequada e a ausência de justiça social constituem os principais fatores de expulsão, enquanto as oportunidades imaginadas de melhoria econômica, educação de qualidade, acesso a cuidados de saúde e reconhecimento de direitos nos países de destino atuam como poderosos fatores de atração. O estudo emprega um quadro teórico multidimensional, integrando a teoria de redes, a teoria de fatores de atração e repulsão (push-pull), o interacionismo simbólico e o materialismo histórico marxista para analisar de forma abrangente as restrições estruturais e o protagonismo (agency) envolvidos na*

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*migração marítima irregular. Os resultados sugerem que a migração irregular entre jovens rurais representa uma resposta racional às desigualdades estruturais e uma busca por dignidade, desafiando narrativas simplistas que enquadram tais movimentos como meramente desviantes ou irracionais. O artigo contribui para a literatura sociológica sobre migração ao fornecer percepções matizadas sobre as experiências vividas por jovens marroquinos que navegam na perigosa travessia do Mediterrâneo, com implicações para as políticas migratórias e para as intervenções de desenvolvimento em comunidades rurais.*

**Palavras-chave:** Migração Marítima Irregular, Jovens Rurais, Marrocos, Sociologia Qualitativa, Fatores de Atração e Repulsão (*Push-Pull*), Protagonismo (*Agency*).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Irregular maritime migration has emerged as one of the most pressing social phenomena of the twenty-first century, capturing the attention of policymakers, academics, and civil society organizations across the globe. The Mediterranean Sea has become a theater of hope and despair, where thousands of young people risk their lives annually in pursuit of better opportunities and dignified living conditions. Morocco, as a country of origin, transit, and destination for migrants, occupies a strategic position in this complex migratory landscape (De Haas et al., 2019; Idrissi et al., 2024).

This study focuses on a specific dimension of this phenomenon: irregular maritime migration among rural youth in the Province of Ouled Yaich, particularly in the rural community of Ait Larabi. The choice of this research site is not coincidental; it stems from the observation that this region has witnessed a significant increase in irregular migration attempts in recent years, with young men from rural backgrounds constituting a substantial proportion of those attempting the perilous sea crossing. This phenomenon has imposed itself on the researcher's attention, given its prevalence and the profound social transformations it engenders within the community.

The urgency of this research is underscored by global migration statistics. According to the World Migration Report 2020, the number of international migrants reached 272 million in 2019, representing 3.5% of the global population (McAuliffe & Khadria, 2019). Notably, 74% of these migrants were of working age (20-64 years), indicating that young people constitute the majority of international migrants. Furthermore, the report highlights that medium-income countries have experienced the most significant increase in migrant workers, suggesting a strong correlation between economic conditions and migration flows.

In the Moroccan context, rural youth face particular challenges that may predispose them to consider migration as a viable strategy for improving their life chances. Limited economic opportunities, high unemployment rates, inadequate infrastructure, and perceived lack of social justice create conditions that push young people to seek alternatives beyond national borders (Dumann, 2021; Radouani, 2024). Understanding the specific drivers and representations that shape migration decisions among this population is crucial for developing effective policy responses that address the root causes of irregular migration while respecting the agency and aspirations of young people.

This article aims to answer the following research question: **What are the motivations and representations of rural youth regarding irregular maritime migration to destination countries?** More specifically, it seeks to: (a) identify the

factors that drive rural youth to undertake irregular migration across the Mediterranean, and (b) explore how these youth represent and perceive the destination countries to which they aspire to migrate.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and programs that address the underlying causes of irregular migration. By providing a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of young migrants, this research aims to inform development interventions that can create viable alternatives to irregular migration and promote sustainable development in rural communities.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Global and Regional Migration Patterns**

International migration has become a defining feature of contemporary globalization, with profound implications for both sending and receiving societies. The number of international migrants has steadily increased over the past decades, from 191 million in 2005 to 272 million in 2019 (McAuliffe & Khadria, 2019). This growth reflects a complex interplay of economic, social, political, and demographic factors that shape migration decisions and flows.

The historical trajectory of migration reveals that human mobility is not a recent phenomenon. Between 1846 and 1939, approximately 59 million people migrated from Europe to settlement regions in North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (De Haas et al., 2019). This historical perspective reminds us that migration has always been a fundamental aspect of human experience, shaped by changing economic conditions, technological developments, and geopolitical transformations.

In the contemporary context, migration patterns are characterized by increasing diversity and complexity. While traditional migration corridors persist, new destinations have emerged, and migration flows have become more diversified in terms of origins, destinations, and migration trajectories (Massey et al., 1993). The Mediterranean region, in particular, has become a critical junction for migration flows, with countries such as Morocco serving as both origin and transit points for migrants heading to Europe.

### **2.2 Migration in Morocco: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives**

Morocco has a long and complex history of migration, shaped by its geographical position at the crossroads of Africa and Europe, its colonial past, and its evolving socioeconomic conditions. Moroccan migration to Europe began in significant numbers during the post-World War II period, initially as labor migration to France, Belgium, and the Netherlands (Dumann, 2021). This labor migration was characterized by temporary arrangements, but gradually evolved into permanent settlement as migrants established families and communities in destination countries.

Since the 1990s, Moroccan migration patterns have diversified. In addition to traditional labor migration, irregular migration has emerged as a significant phenomenon, driven by economic restructuring, demographic pressures, and changing migration policies in Europe (Idrissi et al., 2024). The tightening of legal migration channels has paradoxically contributed to the growth of irregular migration, as aspiring migrants seek alternative routes to reach their desired destinations.

Rural areas of Morocco have been particularly affected by migration dynamics. The Ouled Ayach province, located in the Beni Mellal region, exemplifies the challenges faced by rural communities: limited economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and social marginalization (Belghazi et al., 2025). For young people in such contexts, migration often appears as a rational strategy for improving life chances, accessing better education and healthcare, and achieving social mobility.

### **2.3 Previous Studies on Youth Migration**

Several studies have examined youth migration in Morocco and the broader Middle East and North Africa region. Arfaida's (2017) field study on Libyan youth migration provides valuable insights into the drivers and consequences of youth migration. The study, based on a sample of 20 Libyan youth migrants, identified several key push factors: unemployment and lack of job opportunities, absence of government attention to youth needs, desire to secure economic futures, building personal culture, utilizing scientific resources abroad, improving material conditions, lack of law enforcement, absence of suitable employment matching qualifications, feelings of alienation, corruption, restrictive customs and traditions, lack of respect, and injustice.

While Arfaida's study focuses on the Libyan context, its findings resonate with the Moroccan situation in important ways. The identification of economic factors as primary drivers of migration, alongside concerns about social justice and personal development, suggests commonalities in youth migration experiences across the region. However, the study does not specifically address irregular maritime migration or the unique challenges faced by rural youth, highlighting the need for context-specific research.

Radouani (2024) explored the aspirations of Moroccan youth regarding migration, emphasizing the complex interplay between structural constraints and individual agency. Her research reveals that migration aspirations are shaped by both push factors in the country of origin and pull factors in potential destination countries, with young people navigating uncertainty and precarity in their decision-making processes.

Idrissi et al. (2024) examined mobilities among marginalized youth in Morocco, focusing on precariousness, agency, and networks. Their research highlights how young people in marginalized contexts develop strategies to cope with uncertainty and pursue their aspirations, with migration representing one such strategy. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding youth migration as a form of agency exercised within structural constraints.

Belghazi et al. (2025) investigated perceptions of emigration among young people in the Todgha Valley oasis region of Morocco, exploring the potential of migration for development. Their findings reveal that young people view emigration as a strategy for improving their economic situation and accessing opportunities not available locally, while also recognizing the risks and challenges involved.

These studies collectively highlight the complexity of youth migration decisions, which are shaped by a combination of structural factors, individual aspirations, and social networks. However, there remains a need for research specifically focused on irregular maritime migration among rural youth, examining both the drivers of such migration and the subjective meanings attached to it.

## **2.4 Research Gap and Contribution**

While existing literature provides valuable insights into migration dynamics in Morocco and the broader region, several gaps remain. First, research specifically focused on irregular maritime migration among rural youth is limited, with most studies examining migration in urban contexts or across broader populations. Second, the subjective experiences and representations of youth who attempt irregular sea crossings have received insufficient attention, with much of the literature adopting quantitative approaches that cannot capture the nuanced meanings and motivations involved. Third, there is a need for research that integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to capture the complexity of migration decisions, recognizing both structural constraints and individual agency.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on rural youth in the Ouled Yaich province who have attempted irregular maritime migration. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, it explores the motivations, experiences, and representations of these young people, providing a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon. By employing a multidimensional theoretical framework, the study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of irregular maritime migration and its implications for policy and development.

## **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

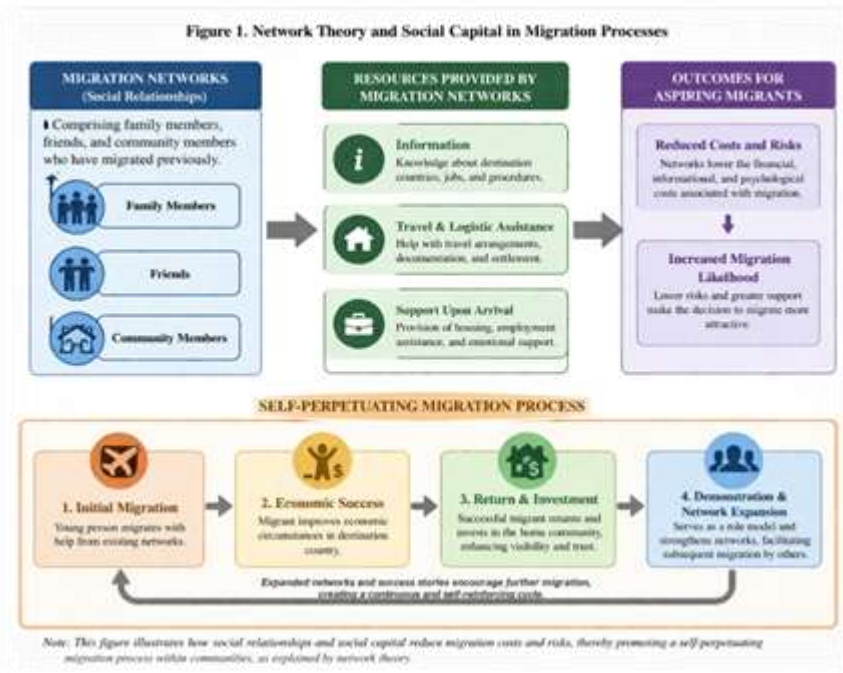
This study draws on multiple theoretical perspectives to develop a comprehensive understanding of irregular maritime migration among rural youth. Each theory contributes distinct insights into the complex factors that shape migration decisions and experiences.

### **3.1 Network Theory and Social Capital**

Network theory, as developed in migration studies, emphasizes the role of social relationships in facilitating and sustaining migration flows (Massey et al., 1993). According to this perspective, migration networks—comprising family members, friends, and community members who have migrated previously—provide crucial resources for aspiring migrants, including information about destination countries, assistance with travel arrangements, and support upon arrival.

The theory posits that these networks reduce the costs and risks associated with migration, thereby encouraging further migration. When aspiring migrants have connections in destination countries who can provide information, housing, and employment assistance, the perceived risks and uncertainties of migration diminish, making the decision to migrate more attractive (De Haas et al., 2019).

In the context of this study, network theory helps explain how migration becomes a self-perpetuating process within communities. As more young people from a particular area migrate, they create channels and resources that facilitate subsequent migration. The presence of successful migrants who have improved their economic circumstances and returned to invest in their communities may also serve as powerful role models, encouraging others to follow similar paths.



**Figure 1. Network Theory and Social Capital in Migration Processes**

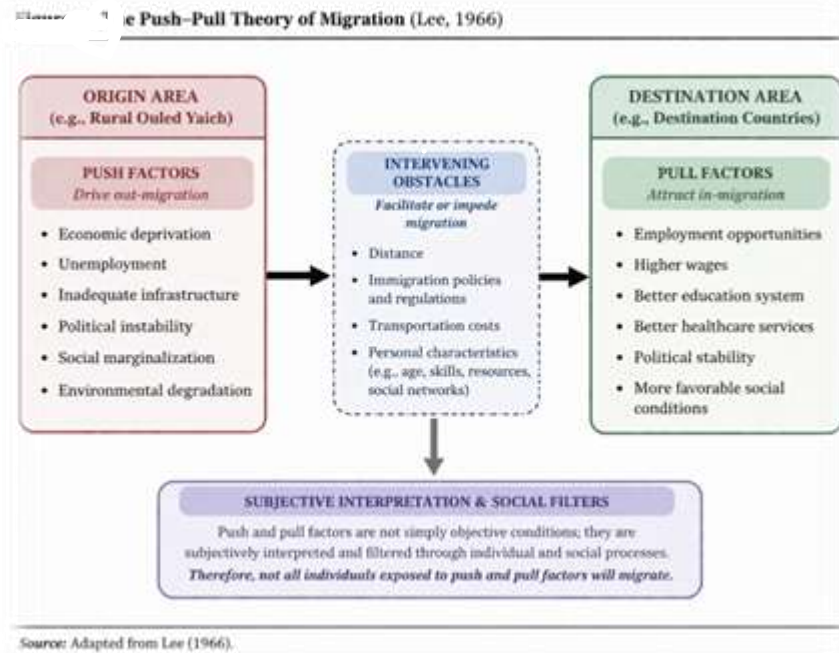
### 3.2 Push-Pull Theory

Push-pull theory, originally developed by Everett Lee (1966), provides a framework for understanding the factors that drive migration from origin areas and attract migrants to destination areas. According to this theory, each area contains both push factors that encourage out-migration and pull factors that attract in-migration.

Push factors in origin areas may include economic deprivation, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, political instability, social marginalization, and environmental degradation. Pull factors in destination areas may include employment opportunities, higher wages, better education and healthcare systems, political stability, and more favorable social conditions (Lee, 1966).

Lee's theory also recognizes the importance of intervening obstacles—factors that may facilitate or impede migration, such as distance, immigration policies, transportation costs, and personal characteristics. These intervening obstacles help explain why not all individuals exposed to push and pull factors actually migrate.

For this study, push-pull theory provides a useful framework for identifying the specific factors that push rural youth in Ouled Yaich toward migration and those that pull them toward specific destination countries. However, the theory must be applied critically, recognizing that push and pull factors are not simply objective conditions but are subjectively interpreted and filtered through individual and social processes.



**Figure 2. The Push-Pull Theory of Migration (Lee, 1966)**

### 3.3 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, as articulated by Herbert Blumer (1986), emphasizes the role of subjective meanings and interpretations in shaping human behavior. According to this perspective, individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them, and these meanings arise from social interaction and are modified through interpretive processes.

In the context of migration, symbolic interactionism directs attention to how potential migrants interpret their circumstances and possibilities, how they construct meanings around migration, and how these meanings are shaped through interaction with others (Weber, 1978). This perspective recognizes that migration decisions are not simply determined by objective conditions but are mediated by subjective understandings, aspirations, and interpretations.

Max Weber's concept of the ideal type is particularly relevant for understanding migration as social action. Weber distinguished between different types of action: traditional, affectual, value-rational, and instrumental-rational. Migration decisions may involve combinations of these types, reflecting both rational calculation and emotional attachment (Weber, 1978).

Symbolic interactionism also highlights the importance of understanding migrants' own perspectives and interpretations. Rather than imposing external categories and explanations, researchers must seek to understand how migrants themselves make sense of their experiences and decisions.

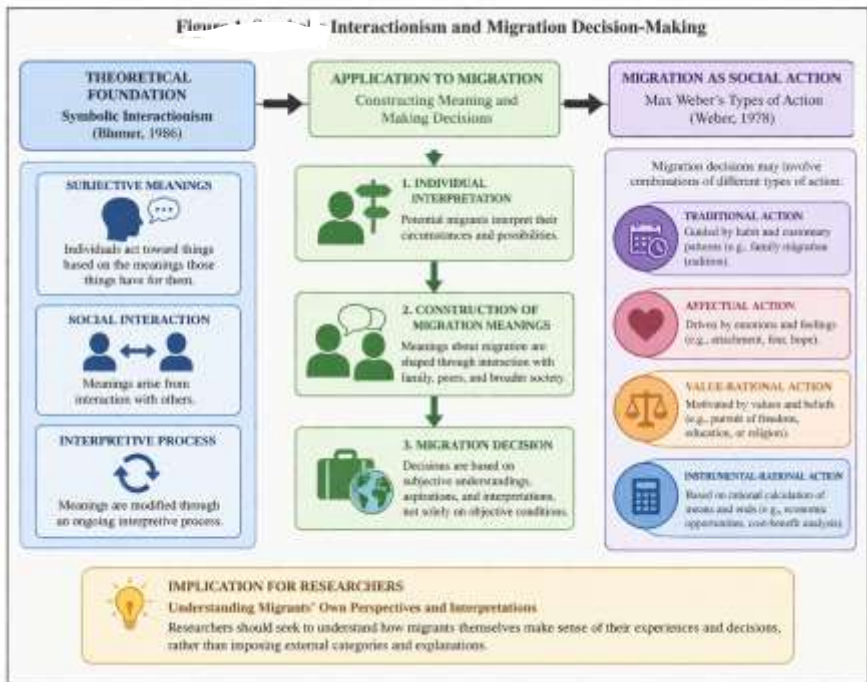


Figure 3. Symbolic Interactionism and Migration Decision Making

### 3.4 Marxist Historical Materialism

The Marxist perspective, rooted in historical materialism, provides a critical analysis of migration within the context of capitalist development and global inequalities (Massey et al., 1993). According to this perspective, migration is fundamentally shaped by the uneven distribution of productive resources and the structural inequalities that characterize capitalist economies.

From a Marxist standpoint, migration represents a response to the contradictions inherent in capitalist development. Regions that are incorporated into the global economy in subordinate positions experience economic stagnation, unemployment, and poverty, creating conditions that drive out-migration. Meanwhile, core capitalist regions attract migrant labor to fill positions that native workers are unwilling to occupy, creating a segmented labor market that perpetuates inequality (De Haas et al., 2019).

Karl Marx's insights into the nature of capitalist exploitation and the alienation of labor remain relevant for understanding migration dynamics. The structural inequalities that compel individuals to leave their homes and families in search of better opportunities reflect fundamental contradictions in the global economic system.

This perspective helps explain why migration flows tend to follow patterns of economic inequality and why certain regions become sources of migrant labor while others become destinations. It also illuminates the power dynamics involved in migration governance and the ways in which migration policies serve the interests of capital rather than those of migrants.

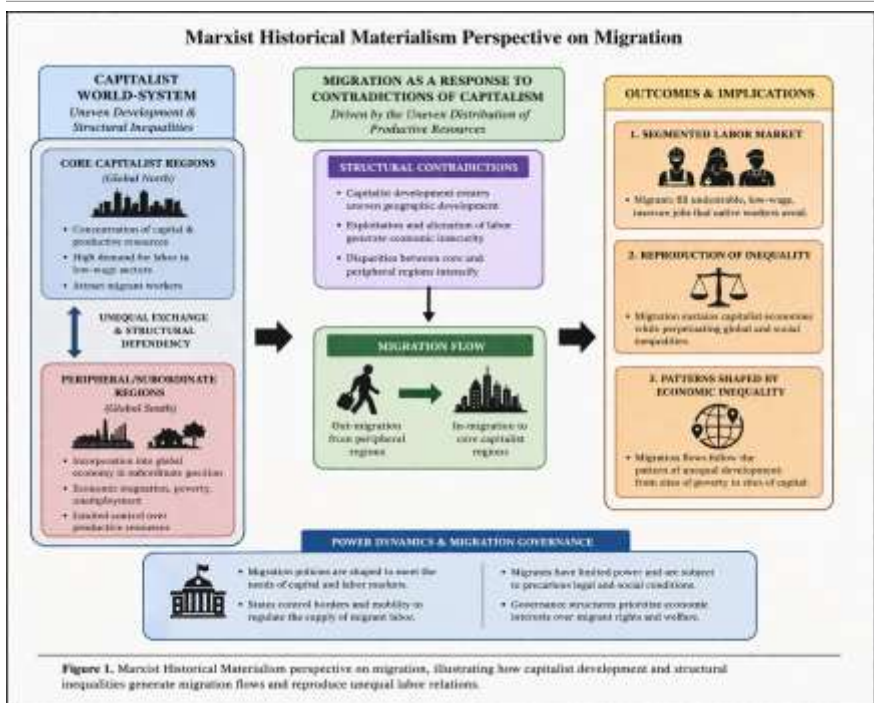


Figure 3. Marxist Historical Materialism Perspective on Migration

### 3.5 An Integrated Theoretical Approach

This study adopts an integrated theoretical approach that draws on multiple perspectives to capture the complexity of irregular maritime migration. Network theory helps explain how social relationships facilitate migration and sustain flows. Push-pull theory provides a framework for identifying the factors that drive migration from origin areas and attract migrants to destination countries. Symbolic interactionism illuminates the subjective meanings and interpretations that shape migration decisions. Marxist historical materialism offers a critical analysis of the structural inequalities that underpin migration dynamics.

By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to avoid reductionist explanations that attribute migration solely to individual decisions or structural determinants. Instead, it recognizes migration as a complex phenomenon shaped by the interplay of structural constraints, social networks, and subjective meanings.

## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is particularly suited for exploring the subjective meanings, experiences, and interpretations that shape migration decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Qualitative methodology allows for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, capturing the nuance and detail that quantitative approaches may miss.

The choice of qualitative methodology is justified by the research objectives, which seek to understand not just the factors that drive irregular migration but also how migrants themselves make sense of their experiences and decisions. By adopting an interpretive approach, the study aims to access the lived experiences of young migrants and understand their perspectives from within.

#### **4.2 Research Site**

The research was conducted in the rural community of Ait Larabi, located in the Ouled Yaich province of the Beni Mellal region, Morocco. This site was selected because it has experienced a significant increase in irregular maritime migration attempts in recent years, making it an appropriate location for studying the phenomenon.

Ait Larabi is a rural community characterized by limited economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and high rates of youth unemployment. Agriculture, the primary economic activity, is increasingly precarious due to environmental challenges and market fluctuations. Young people in this context face limited prospects for social mobility, making migration an attractive alternative.

#### **4.3 Sampling and Participants**

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants who had attempted irregular maritime migration and been returned to Morocco. This sampling strategy was appropriate given the research focus on a specific population with particular experiences. The sample consisted of seven young men from Ait Larabi who had attempted irregular sea crossings to Europe but were intercepted by authorities and returned. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 35 years, with a mean age of 27. All participants were unmarried at the time of their migration attempts, though some had since married. Their educational backgrounds varied, with some having completed secondary education and others having only primary schooling.

#### **4.4 Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2024. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework, covering topics such as: motivations for migration, experiences during the migration attempt, representations of destination countries, and reflections on the migration experience.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participants' native language, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring topics as they emerged in conversation, while ensuring that key themes were addressed across interviews.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis, involving systematic coding and identification of patterns and themes. The analysis process involved several stages: (a) transcription of interviews, (b) initial reading and familiarization with data, (c) development of coding framework based on research questions and emergent themes, (d) application of codes to transcripts, (e) identification of themes and sub-themes, and (f) interpretation and synthesis of findings.

The analysis was guided by the theoretical framework, but remained open to emergent themes that were not anticipated in advance. This iterative approach allowed for the development of a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.



Figure 5. Thematic Analysis

#### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles of research with human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with explicit discussion of the research purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and research outputs.

Given the sensitive nature of irregular migration, particular care was taken to ensure that participants did not face any risk of harm or stigmatization as a result of their participation. The researcher maintained ongoing awareness of participants' emotional well-being during interviews and provided information about support services when appropriate.

#### 4.7 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is small, reflecting the difficulty of accessing this population and the intensive nature of qualitative research. Findings should not be generalized beyond the specific context studied, though they may offer insights applicable to similar contexts. Second, the study only includes those who were returned after attempted migration, not those who successfully reached their destinations, limiting understanding of the full range of migration experiences. Third, the retrospective nature of the interviews may be subject to recall bias and post-hoc rationalization. Fourth, time constraints limited the depth of engagement with participants and the broader community, suggesting the need for more extended ethnographic research.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the motivations and representations of rural youth engaged in irregular maritime migration, contributing to understanding of this important phenomenon.

### 5. FINDINGS

#### 5.1 Economic and Social Drivers of Irregular Migration

The findings reveal that economic factors constitute the primary drivers of irregular maritime migration among rural youth in Ait Larabi. All seven participants identified

unemployment, poverty, and lack of economic opportunities as the main reasons for their migration attempts.

### **Unemployment and Poverty**

Participants described a situation of chronic unemployment and economic precarity that left them with few viable options for improving their circumstances. As one participant explained:

*"There is no work here. You wake up in the morning and have nothing to do. You have no money, no future. What can you do? You think about your family, about how you can help them, but there is nothing."* (Participant 1, 28 years old)

This sentiment was echoed across interviews, with participants describing a sense of hopelessness about their economic prospects. Several participants noted that even when work was available, it was typically low-paid and insecure, offering no path to economic stability or social mobility.

*"I worked in construction for a while, but it was not enough. You work all day, you come home tired, and what do you have? Not enough to save, not enough to think about marriage or building a house. You just survive, day by day."* (Participant 3, 26 years old)

### **Inadequate Infrastructure and Services**

Participants also identified the poor quality of infrastructure and services in their community as factors contributing to their desire to migrate. Education and healthcare were particularly salient concerns.

*"The school here is not good. If you want a real education, you have to go to the city, but that costs money we don't have. How can our children get ahead if they don't have good schools? The hospital is also not good. If someone is sick, you have to travel far for proper treatment."* (Participant 5, 32 years old)

These concerns reflect not only immediate material conditions but also broader concerns about the future and the capacity to provide for families. For young men contemplating marriage and family formation, the inadequacy of local infrastructure represented a significant obstacle to achieving their aspirations.

### **Absence of Social Justice and Rights**

A recurring theme in interviews was the perception that young people in rural areas are denied their legitimate rights and that the state fails to provide adequate services and opportunities. This sense of injustice was articulated by participants as a powerful motivation for seeking alternatives elsewhere.

*"We are not treated like citizens. We are forgotten here. The government does nothing for us. They talk about development, but we see nothing. Why should we stay when we are treated like we don't matter?"* (Participant 4, 30 years old)

This sense of marginalization was linked to broader perceptions of social injustice and the feeling that young people's contributions and aspirations are not recognized or valued by authorities.

## **5.2 Cultural Drivers of Migration**

While economic factors dominated participants' accounts, cultural factors also played a role in shaping migration decisions. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the cultural environment in their community, describing it as restrictive or incompatible with their aspirations.

### **Rejection of Local Cultural Norms**

For some participants, the decision to migrate was motivated by a desire to escape what they perceived as restrictive cultural norms and practices. These participants expressed admiration for what they understood as more open, tolerant, and rights-respecting cultures in destination countries.

*"Here, people are always watching you. They tell you what to do, what not to do. There is no freedom. In Europe, I have heard, people are free. You can be yourself, you can do what you want without people judging you."* (Participant 2, 25 years old)

This participant's account reflects a perception of destination countries as spaces of greater personal freedom and autonomy, contrasting with what he perceived as oppressive social controls in his community.

### **Aspirations for Personal Development**

Some participants framed migration as an opportunity for personal growth and development that was not available locally. This included aspirations for education, skills development, and exposure to different ways of life.

*"I want to learn, to see the world. Here, everything is the same. You grow up, you work in the fields or construction, you get married, you have children. There is nothing else. I want to know what is out there."* (Participant 6, 23 years old)

This desire for personal development was sometimes linked to a critique of the local educational system, which participants perceived as inadequate for preparing them for the future they imagined.

## **5.3 Economic and Social Representations of Destination Countries**

Participants' representations of destination countries were dominated by economic and social considerations, reflecting the primacy of material concerns in their migration decisions.

### **Economic Improvement**

All participants expressed the belief that migration would enable them to improve their economic situation and that of their families. This expectation was grounded in representations of destination countries as places of economic opportunity where hard work is rewarded and living standards are higher.

*"If I go there, I can work and send money home. My family will have a better life. I can save, maybe start a business one day. Here, that is impossible. There is no future here."* (Participant 7, 29 years old)

This representation of destination countries as spaces of economic opportunity was remarkably consistent across interviews, suggesting that it functions as a powerful cognitive frame that motivates migration despite the risks involved.

### **Access to Quality Services**

Participants also emphasized the importance of better education and healthcare in destination countries. For some, this was framed in terms of their own aspirations; for others, it was about the future they envisioned for their children.

*"I have heard that in Europe, the schools are good, the hospitals are good. If I can get there, my children will have a chance. They will not have to suffer like I have."* (Participant 1, 28 years old)

This focus on services reflects not only immediate material needs but also longer-term considerations about family formation and intergenerational mobility.

### **Recognition of Rights**

A significant theme in participants' representations was the expectation that in destination countries, their rights would be recognized and respected. This contrasted sharply with their experience of marginalization and neglect in their home community.

*"In Europe, they respect people. There are laws, there is justice. Here, if you have money, you are somebody. If you don't, you are nothing. There, everyone has rights."* (Participant 4, 30 years old)

This representation of destination countries as places where rights are respected and justice prevails reflects both specific information participants had gathered about these countries and a critique of conditions in their home community.

### **5.4 Cultural Representations of Destination Countries**

In addition to economic and social representations, participants also held cultural representations of destination countries that shaped their migration aspirations.

#### **Admiration for Foreign Culture**

Some participants expressed admiration for what they perceived as the cultural qualities of destination countries, including values such as freedom, tolerance, and respect for individual rights.

*"I like how they live there. They have freedom, they have respect for people. Here, people are always fighting, always problems. There, everything is organized, people follow the law."* (Participant 2, 25 years old)

These representations, while based largely on second-hand information and media portrayals, served to construct destination countries as desirable places to live and work.

#### **Rejection of Local Cultural Constraints**

For some participants, the cultural appeal of destination countries was closely tied to their rejection of local cultural constraints. Migration was seen as a way to escape social pressures and expectations that they found burdensome.

*"Here, you have to do what people expect. You have to get married, you have to follow the traditions. If you don't, people talk about you. There, you can live how you want. Nobody cares."* (Participant 6, 23 years old)

This desire for escape from social constraints reflects the complex ways in which migration decisions are shaped by both material and symbolic considerations.

## **6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Structural Constraints and Individual Agency**

The findings reveal the complex interplay between structural constraints and individual agency in shaping migration decisions. Participants' accounts consistently emphasized the structural conditions that made migration appear necessary: unemployment, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and social marginalization. These conditions reflect deep-seated inequalities that shape the life chances of rural youth in Morocco.

From a Marxist perspective, these structural conditions can be understood as consequences of uneven development and the incorporation of rural areas into the global

economy in subordinate positions (De Haas et al., 2019). The economic restructuring that has transformed Moroccan agriculture and reduced employment opportunities in rural areas reflects broader processes of capitalist development that generate surplus populations with limited local options.

However, participants were not merely passive victims of these structural conditions. Their decisions to migrate, despite the considerable risks involved, represent forms of agency exercised within constraints. The decision to attempt irregular maritime crossing reflects active engagement with the possibilities available, however limited.

This interplay between structure and agency is captured by network theory, which emphasizes how social relationships enable individuals to navigate structural constraints (Massey et al., 1993). Participants' migration decisions were informed by information from family members, friends, and acquaintances who had migrated before, demonstrating how social networks mediate between structural conditions and individual action.

## 6.2 The Role of Social Networks

Social networks played a crucial role in facilitating migration decisions and attempts. Participants drew on information and support from family members, friends, and community members who had migrated before, either successfully or unsuccessfully.

*"My cousin went two years ago. He made it to Spain. He calls sometimes, tells me about life there. He says it's hard but better than here. He sends money to his family. They built a new house."* (Participant 3, 26 years old)

This account illustrates how successful migrants serve as role models and information sources, demonstrating the possibility of migration and providing concrete information about conditions in destination countries. The visibility of successful migrants in the community—evidenced by new houses and improved economic circumstances—creates powerful incentives for others to follow.

Network theory also helps explain the persistence of migration flows from particular areas. Once migration networks are established, they reduce the costs and risks associated with migration, making it more accessible to a broader range of individuals (Massey et al., 1993). The presence of established networks in destination countries provides crucial support for new arrivals, reducing the uncertainties that might otherwise deter migration.

## 6.3 Subjective Meanings and Interpretations

Participants' accounts reveal the importance of subjective meanings and interpretations in shaping migration decisions. The same objective conditions—unemployment, poverty, inadequate services—were experienced and interpreted differently by different participants, reflecting the mediating role of individual and social processes.

Symbolic interactionism provides a framework for understanding these processes (Blumer, 1986). Participants did not simply respond to objective conditions but actively constructed meanings around their circumstances and possibilities. Their decisions to migrate were shaped by how they interpreted their situation, how they imagined alternative futures, and how they perceived the risks and benefits of different courses of action.

The construction of destination countries as places of opportunity, freedom, and justice reflects an interpretive process through which participants imagine alternative

lives and assess the possibilities for achieving their aspirations. These representations, while based on limited information, serve as powerful motivators for migration.

Weber's concept of the ideal type is relevant here, as participants constructed idealized representations of destination countries that emphasized certain features while downplaying others (Weber, 1978). These ideal types provided cognitive frameworks that guided migration decisions and sustained motivation despite the risks involved.

#### **6.4 Economic Rationality and Migration Decisions**

Participants' accounts suggest that migration decisions involve a form of economic rationality, even when the risks are substantial. From their perspective, the potential benefits of successful migration—economic improvement, better services, recognition of rights—outweigh the risks of the crossing.

This rationality is not simply individual but is shaped by social and cultural factors. The calculation of risks and benefits is informed by information from social networks, by representations of destination countries, and by comparisons with the lives of those who have migrated successfully.

The Marxist perspective provides critical insights into the structural conditions that make such calculations appear rational (De Haas et al., 2019). When local opportunities are limited and structural inequalities constrain life chances, migration may represent a rational response to circumstances beyond individual control.

#### **6.5 Implications for Migration Policy and Development**

The findings have important implications for migration policy and development interventions. First, they suggest that efforts to reduce irregular migration must address the structural conditions that drive it: unemployment, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and social marginalization. Development interventions that create viable alternatives to migration in rural areas may be more effective than policies focused solely on border control.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of social networks in sustaining migration flows. Policies that target networks directly may have unintended consequences, such as driving migration further underground. More effective approaches might focus on providing legal pathways for migration that would allow networks to operate transparently.

Third, the subjective meanings and representations that shape migration decisions suggest the importance of addressing not only material conditions but also aspirations and perceptions. Development interventions that respond to young people's aspirations and provide pathways for their realization may be more effective than those that ignore or dismiss these aspirations.

Fourth, the study highlights the need for policies that respect the agency and dignity of migrants. Framing irregular migrants as either victims or criminals obscures the complex decision-making processes that lead to migration and may lead to policies that fail to address underlying causes.

### **7. CONCLUSION**

This article has presented a sociological analysis of irregular maritime migration among rural youth in the Province of Ouled Yaich, Morocco. Drawing on qualitative interviews with seven young men who attempted irregular sea crossings and were returned, the

study has explored the multifaceted drivers and representations that shape this phenomenon.

The findings reveal that economic factors constitute the primary drivers of irregular migration, with unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunities cited by all participants as the main reasons for their migration attempts. Inadequate infrastructure and services, particularly in education and healthcare, also contribute to the desire to migrate, as does a sense of social injustice and marginalization. While economic factors dominate, cultural factors also play a role, with some participants expressing dissatisfaction with local cultural norms and aspirations for personal development that they believe cannot be realized in their community.

Representations of destination countries are similarly dominated by economic considerations, with participants expecting to improve their economic situation, access better services, and have their rights recognized. Cultural representations, including admiration for perceived freedom and tolerance in destination countries, also shape migration aspirations.

The analysis has drawn on multiple theoretical perspectives to understand these findings. Network theory helps explain the role of social relationships in facilitating migration flows. Push-pull theory provides a framework for identifying the factors that drive migration from origin areas and attract migrants to destination countries. Symbolic interactionism illuminates the subjective meanings and interpretations that shape migration decisions. Marxist historical materialism offers a critical analysis of the structural inequalities that underpin migration dynamics.

By integrating these perspectives, the study has developed a nuanced understanding of irregular maritime migration that recognizes both structural constraints and individual agency. The findings challenge simplistic narratives that frame irregular migration as merely deviant or irrational, instead revealing it as a rational response to structural inequalities and a quest for dignity and opportunity.

The study has implications for migration policy and development interventions. Addressing the structural drivers of irregular migration requires comprehensive development approaches that create viable alternatives for rural youth. Recognizing the agency and aspirations of young people is essential for developing policies that respect their dignity while providing pathways to regular migration.

Future research should extend this analysis through larger-scale studies that capture the diversity of migration experiences among rural youth. Longitudinal research could track the trajectories of those who attempt migration and explore the long-term outcomes of migration decisions. Comparative research across different rural contexts in Morocco and beyond could illuminate the commonalities and variations in migration dynamics.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of irregular maritime migration among rural youth, highlighting the complex interplay of structural constraints, social networks, and subjective meanings that shape this phenomenon. In doing so, it provides a foundation for more informed and effective policy responses that address the root causes of irregular migration while respecting the dignity and aspirations of those who undertake this perilous journey.

### **Dedication**

*This article is dedicated to my boss ANTÓNIO PÓVOAS, PROF. CLARA KEATING AND INÊS BERNARDES FOR THEIR ENCOURAGEMENT, SUPPORT AND HELP.*

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