

## **Social Acceptability and Adaptability: The Re-integration and Welfare of Returnees in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Despite frantic efforts by concerned bodies to stop or reduce the rate of illegal migration, it is still on the rise with disastrous effects on the migrants as well as their relatives. These migrants often end up in transit and sometimes encounter serious life threatening challenges, after which many are returned/deported. Facts have revealed that Edo State is endemic for illegal migration and this has thus drawn the attention of the national and international communities. It is worthy of note that at the point of arrival, there are usually mixed reactions among relatives and returnees. It is against this backdrop that this study examined the acceptability, re-integration and welfare of returnees who were returned between February and December 2018. Being a descriptive study, it adopted the qualitative method of data collection and analysis using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques in selecting 45 respondents who were returnees. The study findings revealed that most returnees are perceived as under-achievers, some are gladly accepted back by their relatives for certain reasons and there is discontinuity in the re-integration process by relevant bodies and this has affected migrants' wellbeing. Based on the findings, the study advocated implementable economic and revolutionary developmental policies towards deterring youth from travelling abroad illegally.

**Keywords:** Acceptability, Integration, Migrants, Returnees and Welfare.

### **Introduction**

In the past two decades, Nigeria like some other Sub-Saharan African countries has been in the international limelight as a result of the activities of illegal migrants who leave the shores of the country without legal process/channel of migrating outside the country.

Asekhame (2018) stated that the discourse on international migration has taken the front burner across the world due to some internal and external factors within and outside the migrant environment. It is a known fact that major influencers of migration in contemporary times is economic reason as stipulated in the *New Economic Migration Theory* and the *Ravenstein theory of migration*. However, factors such as security, better life, available government presence, job opportunity, available basic infrastructure, natural disaster and others may also influence the desire to move from one place of origin to another (Alenkhe & Longe, 2019; Alenkhe & Longe, 2015; Alenkhe & Omigie, 2014). Alenkhe and Longe (2019) also proposed that one of the ripple effect of migrant remittances is that it will instigate some members of the migrants' families back home to migrate without considering the channel to follow.

Studies have often revealed the challenges faced by most migrants either in their point of transit or the place of destination and these ranges from culture shock (Eghafona & Osunde, 2017) to language, environmental adaptation, acculturation, and many more (Alenkhe & Obarisiagbon, 2020). The aforementioned challenges sometimes delay the integration of migrants in their places of destination and if the adjustment and adaptation process are difficult, the migrants are often left in the dilemma of either returning home or transiting to another preferable destination. The Nigerian situation is not different pertaining to the migrants' reasons for migrating. Nwokocha (2007) and Alenkhe (2011) stipulated that Nigeria as a nation is generally characterized by poor amenities (both in quality and quantity), with a larger rural to urban dichotomy, with disproportionately more disadvantaged rural dwellers as compared to the urban dwellers due to governmental neglect.

National Migration Policy (NMP) (2015) revealed that unemployment and large economic differentials often lead the country's labour force into international migration and due to the strict measure/ expensive process of acquiring visas to their favourable destination, most resort to alternative means to migrate. Alenkhe and Longe (2019) discovered that most migrants (especially teenagers) relocate from Nigeria due to ignorance, as some of them get more than they bargained for and become slaves in their supposed destinations. Studies by Garrett (2006) and Nunez (2014) revealed that most migrants face huddles of language barriers, job security, housing, access to basic and infrastructural facilities, cultural barrier and many others. As a results, they are often maltreated especially, when their entry into the countries are not properly documented. In addition, Spracklin (2017) avowed that language barriers, employment, housing, access to services (health, social, welfare), transportation issues, cultural differences, prejudice and racism, isolation and

weather condition are some major barriers faced by immigrants in most countries. These are obvious especially when the migrants move from a developing country to a developed one or from a tropical zone to a temperate zone, or from an English speaking country to a non-English speaking country.

In the last decade, the out flock of Nigerians to developed countries via illegal means has become alarming as the actions, experiences and maltreatment by some traffickers, “*madams*” and some foreign corroborators have drawn the attention of the Federal Government, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Civil Societies Organizations (CSOs) and the International community. African migrants are often rejected and victimized especially in countries without centralized government. Those without valid documents in the country of destination are faced with starvation and dehydration. These are killers of West African migrants whose destination to Europe is *enroute* Niger Republic through the Sahara Desert to Libya, Morocco and/or countries in the North of the African continent (Alenkhe & Obarisiagbon, 2020). Having overcome the above mentioned challenges, the migrants are then faced with the danger of crossing the Mediterranean Sea before getting to countries such as Italy, Spain or European countries along the Mediterranean Sea shore.

As documented by Ojieson (2018), these migrants in most cases are often taken hostage, some traded as slaves while others are held captives in uninhabitable confinement such as camps or house prisons with other inmates with infections, or life threatening diseases. The Vanguard Newspaper of 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2017 revealed the comment of the Edo State Governor who stated that about Thirty Seven Thousand (37000) illegal immigrants were arrested in Europe and about 15,000 (fifteen thousand) of them were from Edo and Delta state. The Governor further affirmed that in 2017, over 10,000 youth from Edo State alone were trafficked to Europe and at least 3,000 of them would have died travelling through dangerous routes to Europe (Ezehi, 2017). Those who succeeded in entering European countries without proper documentation are often deported while others willingly return home due to the strenuous and stiff policies and unhealthy living condition they were subjected to in their point of destination.

Dako-Gyeke and Kodom (2017) opined that some migrants could be vulnerable to deportation if they are undocumented or are illegal and whose stay is a threat to the countries of destination. They explained that deportation is based on official administrative or criminal legal proceedings that result in the expulsion of people from countries in which they currently reside. Returnees or deportees are migrants of families, whom society views

as survivors/messiahs capable of changing their fate and that of their families in the home of origin. Hence, when they (the migrants) embark on their expedition, considering the De Haas model of remittances to household members, there are expectations of greater remittances as most decisions to travel are communally based as against that of the individual (the new economic labour migration theory). However, when the unexpected happens due to the migrants' influenced or "*uninfluenced*" will and they are deported or returned by self-will, concerned organizations or coerced situation, there are mixed feelings by dependent families and friends of the migrants and these feelings coupled with other environmental factors for which the migrants travelled, often inhibit their ability to adapt and be accepted by the relatives and friends back home.

Despite the various literature on migration, remittances and diaspora studies, the current debate on illegal migration, returnees, deportees and other personalities on the migration corridor has taken centre stage in various international discourses with Nigeria as one of the leading countries whose citizens face inhuman treatment in foreign countries. In past decades, the activities of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in returning or repatriating stranded and maltreated citizens of Nigeria has been commended as statistics revealed that over 40,000 (forty thousand) persons have been returned from Libya alone since 2005 till date by the Voluntary Humanitarian services (IOM, 2019).

This number shows the large number of emigrants outside the Nigerian shores, that often consist of youth who make up the labour force of the country. Studies by many scholars have uncovered the fact that most migrants from Sub-Sahara African countries intends to get to Europe but get stock in transit in North African countries whose means of entry into such countries on transit were never properly documented (Alenkhe & Obarisiagbon, 2020; Alenkhe & Longe, 2019; Ojieson, 2018). After various experiences, challenges and inhuman treatment received in their point of transit or destination, the migrants are either voluntarily returned or deported and they are faced with the same situation that instigated or acted as the pull factor to the migrants' movement.

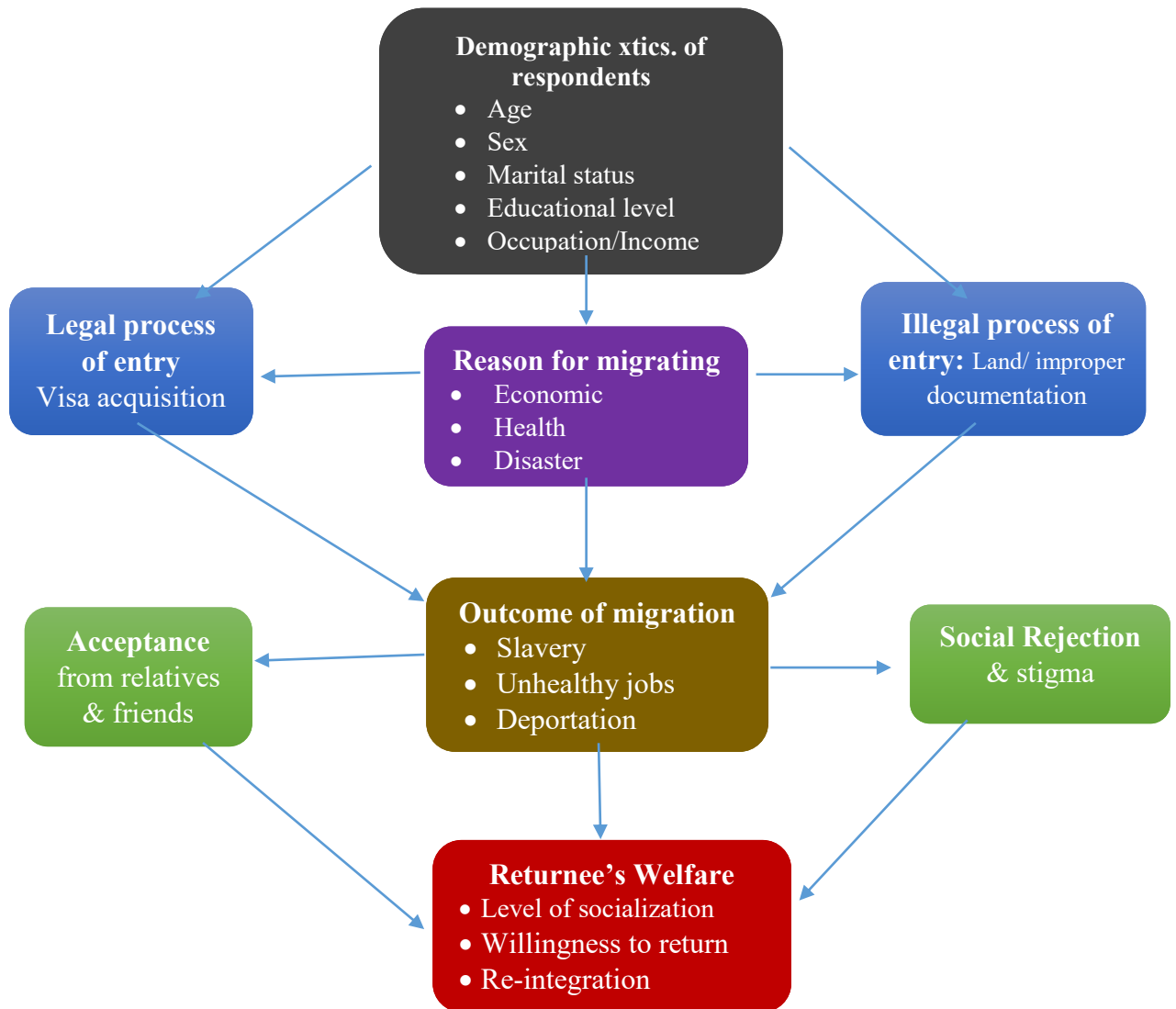
The narrative that successful migrants are celebrated and their effects visible on the dynamics within the left behind families in the migrant's home of origin, is often said to be true and when the unexpected circumstances happens where migrants who are often seen as hope for change or change agents of their families are returned or repatriated, the story takes a different outlook. The re-integration of the returnees, the acceptability among relatives and the adaptability in the face of the circumstances that acted as push factor to their migration becomes a point of discussion. At the point of arrival there are mixed reactions and feeling among relatives and returnees, this is due to the fact society often see

the returnees as under-achieved and at some point some are seen as failure when compared with others who succeeded and are remitting monies and other non-financial remittances to their families. It is also considered that the circumstance that influenced the decision to migrate is not an individual one but communal taking the *New Economic Labour Migration theory* into perspective. It is on this background that this study critically examined the cause of migration, the reason for returning/departing, the re-integration process with relatives and friends and the coping strategies *vis-a vis* the welfare of the returnees in Benin city.

The main objective of the study is to examine the re-integration and welfare of returnees in Benin City, other specific objectives includes to; examine the causes for migration and reasons for returning or departing, ascertain the level of re-integration on returnees by government, with relatives and communities and ascertain the coping strategies adopted by returnee as well as their wellbeing in Benin City.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on two theoretical orientations, which is New Economic Labour Migration Theory by Stark and Bloom in 1985 and Ravenstein theory by Ernest Ravenstein in 1885/1889. The main thrust of both theories proposed that economic reasons is the main idea for migration by migrants. However, the point of diversion by Stark and Bloom in 1985 stipulates that the idea to migrate is not an individual decision as it often involve the consultation of close relatives which often influence the migrant's will to move, work and remit money and other valuables to the home of origin when they finally settled in the point of transit or home of destination as supported by De Haas (2007). This two factors (economic and social) influence the entry process into migrant point of transit or destination and it has a spiral effect that often end in the migration outcome such as slavery, unhealthy job, remittance (for those with legal entry). On the contrary, the migrant experience deportation/returned (when the home of destination is not favourable), at the point of arrival they are often greeted with mixed reaction depending on the rationale and attitude of the waiting families. Acceptance are usually created when the families sees the migrant as achievers and are quick to re-integrated with families, whereas those that see migrants(deportee) as failures, returned without achieving anything as against the aim for which he/she travelled often create a level of rejection and stigma to the deportee. This dyadic situation always affects the wellbeing of the returnee/deportee, as it either stimulates their integration process, level of socialization or willingness to return using any available opportunity when it arises.



Source: Authors 2020

### Materials and Methods

The study adopted the descriptive and exploratory design approaches, as it made use of the qualitative method of data collection and analysis. The study adopted the purposive and convenience sampling techniques to select 45 respondents who are returnees and have

stayed outside the shores of Nigeria for over one year. The selection criteria for this study were mainly returnees by International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other international agencies who were brought back to Nigeria between February and December 2018, as well as some that are currently undergoing some training by governmental and non-governmental organizations. The study adopted a one-time survey method and made use of the in-depth interview guide in eliciting information from the respondents as it related to the study objectives as well as secondary data from the Nigerian dailies. Findings from the study were collected, structured and thematically analyzed using the content analysis technique.

### **Result of the Findings**

The findings were systematically structured according to the study objectives.

### **Causes of Migration and Reasons for Returning or Deporting**

The causes for migration according to the findings of the study range from unemployment, undue hardship, remittances from relatives abroad, perceived greener pasture abroad, ignorance and family decision. This finding support the earlier studies by Ravenstein (1885/1889), Nwokocha (2007) and Alenkhe and Longe (2015), who affirmed that economic reasons and ignorance are some major reason for migrant movement from point of origin to the point of destination or transit. The study findings further revealed that most of the returnees came back due to the suffering and inhuman treatment they received on transit and at their destination as this corroborate with the assertion of Alenkhe and Obarisiagbon (2020). This was revealed from the interviews from returnees below;

The factors that led to my travelling was due to family pressure, the quest to make money for my family and become somebody in the society. Also the disunity in my immediate family as a result of the polygamous nature of my father who had 4 wives and the pain and stress of my mother taking care of her own children also instigated my travelling. My brother, the journey was not easy at all as the sponsor that took me to Libya, mis-informed me and others who also travelled with us. As we transited from one spot to another, we were handed over to various guildsmen whose treatment varied as some were life threatening. At some point I wished I never travelled because I saw hunger, thirst and literally, death in the face, but as a man I had to survive and face it. Out of the seven of us that left Nigeria through Kano, only 3 of us made it back, 2 died at the desert while one died due to starvation and

the other sickness. It was not as easy as I was told by the initial sponsor before we left (**IDI-** deportee, 2018)

A victim summarized his response like this;

What made me travel outside the country was because my brother overseas used to send me money and other items and this motivated me to travel by road since the money for flight is very expensive. I never knew that the road will be very rough and dangerous. I felt that travelling via route will ease pain and bring me good luck. *“My brother, even you no go allow your enemy hit the road after seeing what I went through”*. Not that the country (Nigeria) is good, but the road is not better either, I saw death, suffering, sickness, thirst and many worse things. Survival was just God as women had no choice but to engage in prostitution at every point in transit, am glad to be back (Sobering) (**IDI-** returnee, 2018)

Another interviewee who was saved by an NGO avowed thus;

I was tricked by the trafficker who promised she will be taking me abroad to start selling clothes, shoes, weavon and others so as to make more money for myself. So I followed her from my village to Lagos from where we transited to our destination. At the point when we left Lagos to the various places of transition, language barrier was a major issue in the countries we passed through. At some point, I needed some explanation, especially as the attitude of the person my madam gave us too changed as soon as we left Lagos state. We were maltreated, starved of food, some sexually abused and some raped either by the transporter (the person carrying us) or some unknown person who accommodated us as we transited. It was really bad and after such experiences, I prayed for help until an NGO came to our rescue (**IDI-A** victim saved by NGO- 2018).

A victim of human trafficking said

What took me to Libya was because of money to make a better living: Peer influence also contributed to my journey as a trafficked victim due to the fact that most of my friends travelled. I also considered the plight of my family and in order to help them, I decided to travel. My experience was not pleasant at all, anyway I came back because I could not bear it anymore. There is suffering in Libya and many Nigerians are suffering and others dying there (**IDI-** returnee, 2018).



This secondary information is captivating as it exposed the situation of victims of trafficking or illegal migration and such experiences can often lead to voluntary return back home. It goes thus; a returnee from Libya said:

I left Nigeria and was actually heading to Europe but when I got to Libya, the person I paid money did not deliver it to the driver who took me there. So the driver had to sell us into slavery in order to recover his money. I spent 8 months in camp. It was hell, all the men that could not bring money were beaten and the women forced into prostitution. I travelled due to the condition at home, as my father was never there for us and my mum had to go through all the stress. Out there, I slept with dead bodies, ate only once daily and all inhuman condition. It was a woman who saved me by insisting that she can't leave without her husband and I don't know her (Richie Imasuen).

### **Re-Integration of Returnees**

The findings of the study revealed that there are mixed reactions on the side of the government (through their agencies) as most of the returnees claimed that they never felt the impact of government in the act of re-integration while some claimed to have benefited a little. This shows some inconsistency in the re-integration process as this could lead to dis-trust on the part of government by the returnees. On the side of the re-integration with relatives and communities, some of the returnees only felt secured within the family circle as distant relatives and friends in the community often had a negative assertion about their returning considering the new labour migration model by Stark and Bloom (1985).

This was affirmed in the revelation by respondents below:

On the side of government, I know of Edo State Taskforce Against human Trafficking who came to pick us at the airport. Although, the government is trying but on the aspect of re-integration, they are not doing enough. Yes, the government through its agency (Edo State Taskforce on Anti-human Trafficking) gave us money on arrival and stopped after some attempts, some persons were trained and it is not easy as most persons see you (the returnee) as a failure or underachiever and some disassociate from you because returnees have nothing to offer. That is the predicament we found ourselves (IDI- returnee, 2018)

Another interviewee mentioned:

For the governmental agency, I don't know much about them Edo state Taskforce Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT) and their activities. As for integration, they sent text messages to us to know how well we returnee are doing and am ok but it is only the International Organization for Migration that is engaging some returnee in business. For friends and relatives, there is this mind-set that returnees are underachieved and this has a ripple effect on the returnees after considering the inhuman condition and life threatening experiences, my life is really important and I don't see myself as a failure in any aspect. (**IDI**- returnee, 2018)

An interviewee further mentioned:

This is my second return, and if I have my way I will still go back. Nothing is working here and that was the reason I travelled. Someone graduated from the university and he/she will still be unemployed with huge expectation from the family that invested in you. I don't know if government has any re-integration process but I know they have agencies such as COSUDO, Idia Renaissance, ETAHT. As for relatives, I know most of their expectations were cut short and negative assertion usually comes in but "*I no send anybody*". One of my relatives told me "*bros, you no try oh!*" which connote failure. (**IDI**- returnee, 2018)

Yet another interviewee stated this;

Nigeria is a country where people only celebrate those who have achieved and look at the underachieved with disdain especially when there is a platform for *comparism*. Re-integration by government is unheard of, we are not in a welfare state and this business am doing now is on my own accord. Though my immediate family welcomed and accepted me after knowing what I went through, but friends and distant relative have a different view but it is none of my business. (**IDI**- returnee, 2018)

Another respondent said;

I left this country because I wanted a better life; I am a professional iron-welder but sold all my equipment and other materials to embark on the journey abroad by road.. After returning, I was given #20,000 (twenty thousand naira) and was told it came from the State government. I don't know if there is any re-integration programme but my mother welcomed and accepted me and that is the most important and not

what other relatives and friends think. I know my society see returnees as failures and underachieved while those who remit money as achievers. (IDI- returnee, 2018)

A respondent mentioned

I know of Edo state Taskforce Against Human Trafficking, an agency of the government, I know about them as they are against illegal migration and human trafficking, the team brought us back from Lagos and they are doing pretty well. They are trying but re-integration is more of a family thing not government, therefore I will say my family accepted and welcomed me upon arrival but my street and neighbourhood friends had a different perspective about my return which is not good and is discouraging. (IDI- returnee, 2018)

### **Coping Strategies Adopted by Returnees**

In examining the coping strategy of returnee and their wellbeing in Benin City, the finding of the study revealed that most of the respondents are just living by the day waiting for another opportunity to migrate as adjusting into the condition or situation back home is becoming difficult for the returnees. This could not have been the order of the day, if there was a structured social welfare system that takes proper care of citizens especially the returnee or deportees. This is revealed in the following interview below;

Since I was returned, life has not been easy as things are really difficult. I sold my materials and machines to embark on my Libya journey and after facing life threatening challenges in rebel camp (prison), I was returned voluntarily. So everything I had vanished (got lost) and survival is really difficult, how I manage is by God grace. This is the reason why most of us (returnees) hardly stay after seeing that life outside the country is sweet if not for the crisis in Libya. Returnees are not faring well at all as they feel excluded from their immediate society (friends and family) (IDI- returnee, 2018)

An interviewee also stated;

Coping as a returnee is like a life of suffering. How do you expect a returnee to cope when all he/she had was taken in foreign land and his people back home see him as an alien? As you can see, I am trying to learn something (a trade) and it is not easy as the condition and environment for striving in this country is not available. We returnees are suffering and nobody cares about our welfare, your survival solely

depends on you. Though, we (returnees) once heard that the government was giving some returnees some stipend but it never lasted. (IDI- returnee, 2018)

Yet another interviewee stated; (*Pidgin English*)

*My brother, I no go fit stay this cursed country where nobody send who dey alive not to talk of who die. Since I come, nobody don ask me wetin I go eat, how I dey take survive not to talk of my daughter I born for Libya. We returnees are suffering my brother and no government send you, my people no even know say them deport me. My welfare and that of my daughter is nothing to write home about. Na God eye we dey look. (IDI- returnee, 2018)*

One of the interviewees stated;

Coping as a returnee is like going back to that thing or factor that made you migrate. When I returned, nobody cared about me as they were expecting me to dish out money, not minding what I went through and when the money was not forth coming they see you the returnees as failure and that makes you alien in your own house and even the community you lived. All this affect the wellbeing of we the returnees (IDI- returnee, 2018)

Another interviewee stated thus;

Why will the government ask for us to be deported when it cannot care or provide for her citizens? Just look at me, a graduate of the College of Education Ekiador without a job and all eyes are on me to sustain the family but nothing to show for it. All this factors led to my travelling, until I was deported. Upon arrival, nobody cared about my welfare as I am just living by the grace of God, not knowing what tomorrow holds. See my dear, if by tomorrow an opportunity to leave comes; I will gladly grab it with my two hands as my very good friend just did last week. (IDI- returnee, 2018)

Another interviewee mentioned;

No returnee will say he/she likes the life he/she is living back home after seeing all the good things overseas. See, we in this country are not living; we are just existing. How we are coping is just by Gods' grace and our welfare is nothing to write home about as we are suffering and nobody wants to associate with us. Some churches

and associations do care but not to the extent that can change our lives totally. (IDI-returnee, 2018)

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined challenges of re-integration and welfare of returnees in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The study findings revealed that the returned migrants had some challenges while in their point of transit or destination and on their return most experienced mixed reactions from relatives and friends. The study further revealed that coping with the reality has been difficult for the returnee or deportees as many wished to go back if opportunity springs up again. The study concluded that returnees often find life difficult as adapting to the former ways of living is never the same and the level of acceptability by friends and relatives is often below expectation, thus having a ripple effect on their chances of staying back or migrating when the opportunity re-occurs. The re-integration of returnees is usually within the families as government and friends have little or no role in the process and this often affect their welfare and day-to day living.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested;

- i. Government should engage the youth by employing and empowering them as this will make them busy and add positive values to themselves and their society at large.
- ii. There should be implementable economic policies that will cause a dynamic revolution on the developmental stride within the state as the youth will be very busy contributing their quota to their society.
- iii. The Nigeria porous borders should be tightened as this will reduce the excess rate of illegal or irregular migration that has led to the death of many Nigeria youths who would have added value not only to themselves, but also to their families and the society at large.
- iv. Government should revitalize the idea of agriculture among youth as it had once been the main stay of the Nigeria economy, due to its arable and fertile land that is rich for agricultural purposes, in addition the moribund industries should revitalize to drive the economy of the state and country at large as this will go a long way to cause unusual transformation the country.

- v. Community leaders should ensure that the values of hard work are encouraged and appreciated as this will deter youth from taking shortcuts to success and will also spur them to be better persons in the community, also families and household heads should instil in their children the need to be hard working as it is the only way to be successful in life.

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