

On the odyssey of the irregular Ghanaian migrant: Risk framing, mitigation and resilience strategies in an uncertain venture¹

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Abstract

This paper qualitatively probed the risk framing, mitigation and resilience strategies of irregular migrants in a bid to unravel the paradox of how such actors, perceived to be poor and as such may lack ideational and financial agency, with no guarantees of success, can (persistently) operationalize and undertake costly, illegal and dangerous international journeys. Drawing on responses from Europe-based, deported and prospective first-time irregular migrants either hailing from or domiciled in the Bono East, Bono and Ahafo Regions of Ghana, the findings of this study demonstrate that all three categories of respondents were risk-neutral, had risk mitigation and resilient strategies enabled by, among others, involvement in informal/illegal solidaristic economic ventures, the utilization of extended family associational norms, trust in the efficacy of irregular migration service providers as against that of foreign missions and faith in providence.

INTRODUCTION

Ghana's reputation as a haven of democracy and economic growth (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2016) and a net-preferred destination in the Global South (Yayboke & Gallego, 2019, p. 38) belies its high level of irregular migrants made up of risk-neutral, male youths perceived to be poor and numb to cautionary admonitions by advocacy groups and (in)voluntary returnees with life-threatening experiences (The Sahara Hustlers Association, n.d.). Meanwhile, the estimated cumulative cost of traversing the 'dangerous passage' (Black, 2020) from West Africa

across the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast and Western Europe is conservatively pegged at 6400 Euros per person (Frontex, 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006, p. 24). The preceding begs a paradoxical question: how is it that poor people, akin to a 'trapped' population (Black & Collyer, 2014) and constrained by 'involuntary immobility', that is, lack the agency to operationalize a wish to migrate (Carling, 2002), can garner material resources and the requisite ideational agency can contemplate and operationalize costly irregular transboundary journeys with no guarantees of success and as pointed out by the UNDP (2019:92) are not deterred but rather emboldened and will persist in their quest even when endangered? Against the backdrop of scanty knowledge on how opportunity structures define the micro context decision-making horizon of the migrant,² this paper seeks to interrogate the risk framing, mitigation and resilience strategies of irregular Ghanaian migrants through a review of publications on the poverty-irregular migration nexus while highlighting the migrant's risk framing, mitigation and resilience strategies as a lacuna, a theoretical sketch of risk, mitigation and resilience, methodology and method, findings, conclusion and recommendations.

Literature review

Hein de Hass (2021, p. 2) used his 'aspirations-capabilities framework' to designate migration as 'a function of people's capabilities and aspirations to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures'. He also notes that the link between a wish and the ability to migrate is mediated by whether an individual's agential assets (capabilities) confer a power of choice as to 'where to live' (see also Gasper & Truong, 2010). This perspective aligns with the thoughts of Ton Dietz (echoed by Hans Ariëns (2018)), who debunked the theory of the 'migration hump' (see Martin & Taylor, 1996) by establishing a positive correlation between increasing per capita income and migration upsurge. Further, Hass's viewpoint that migration results from people's capacity to actualize where they wish to live 'within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures' implies that objective conditions mediate personal agential assets. Hence, against the background of a Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2022) study, which reports that the majority of African migrants circulate within the continent rather than outward to Europe, one may argue that the pattern of intra-African migration is animated by objective agential assets rooted in free movement protocols (in the case of regular migration) and/or irregular movement enhancing porous borders (Aniche et al., 2021).

Indeed, recalling Albert Otto Hirschman's (1978, p. 102) notion of 'exit' (migration), occasioned when people either do not have a 'voice' or 'don't agree with the existing situation in their countries', porous African borders enable people to 'vote with their feet' to escape economic insecurity, violence or environmental disruptions. Hirschman's ideas, re-echoed by Anne McNevin (2013: 257) as the nexus between the quest for security and migration, with the absence of the former resulting in the latter, is logically in tandem with the position of the rational choice thinkers who posit that migrants opt for low-risk destinations (see for example Brunarska, 2019; Simmons, 1987). However, to 'opt for low-risk destinations' is aspirational, and to the extent that it may seem a credible rational option, the irregular migrant may have gone through a cognitive and empirical phase(s) of risk assessment to conclude that a given destination is 'low risk'. Hence, what happens before a decision is as important as the decision itself.

In addition, from a macro perspective, culture is said to enact 'geographical opportunity structures', which may frame the patterns of labour migration or responses to the allure of global value chains (Doan, 2023; Prinz, 2019; Lanati & Venturini, 2021). Others (see Doan, 2023; Lanati & Venturini, 2021: 801) also suggest that the density of bilateral trade in cultural items reflects the evolution of bilateral cultural affinity and migration patterns over time. Peggy Levitt (1998), with her micro-level notion of 'social remittances', also suggests that cultural traits framed by concepts, identities, actions and social capital tend to be transferred from migrant states to destination countries, culturally remoulded and recycled back to the home states of migrants. Going by Kevin Avruch's (1998:17) definition of culture as 'the derivatives of experience, ... organised, learned or created by the individuals..., including

those images or encodements and their interpretations ... transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves' one gets the impression that beyond culture as a value chain attractor, a determinant of migration patterns or a catalyst of 'social remittances', it can also inform the (psychological) considerations, preparations and how people enact an ambition to travel.

In all, one can conclude from the preceding that agential assets of individuals and/or objective enabling conditions positively correlate with a capacity to operationalize a wish to migrate and, as such, raises critical analytical questions about insights that suggest a direct link between poverty and migration (see for example Simpson, 2017). The same critical questions come up with Europe-oriented irregular migrants who either self-identify or are designated as poor and hence transactionally restricted by the agential liability of income scarcity. Reports on West Africa cite poverty as the primary reason why Ghanaian migrants, second after Nigerians, move to OECD countries (OECD, 2022), with Efam Dovi (2016–2017) also noting that Ghanaian irregular migrants ranked 11th in the number of people arriving in Europe by boat. Further, Rachel Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2007, p. 10) report that 53% of 123 returnee respondents who self-identified as poor before migration did not travel with official documentation.

Meanwhile, even though Hein de Haas (2007, p. 36–46; 2008) argues that the Maghreb, in its right, is a final destination for irregular migrants from West Africa and suggested in 2008 that there may have been more West Africans living in the Region than in Europe, others think of it as a transition zone to an *El Dorado* (see, e.g. UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, 2021). Marie-Laurence Flahaux and De Haas (2016, p. 13), Appiah-Nyamekye and Rocca (2019), de Haas (2008) and Jonsson (2009, p. 3) also detect a diverse pattern in African irregular migration to non-European destinations, in what is referred to as a 'declining 'colonial echo' (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016, p. 13).

It is evident from the sketched insights that the poverty of the irregular migrant, notwithstanding, (s)he can galvanize and operationalize agential assets such as fund-raising opportunities and destination choices. Going by John Illiffe's (1987, p. 7) point of view that the African poor rely 'less on institutions or organisations than on their own efforts, devious, ugly, cruel, and dishonest as these might be', it is to be anticipated that the poor migrant will opt for irregular, non-conventional means to actualize an ambition to travel. Indeed, the tendency to do so is implied in Karl Marx's assertion, as echoed by Ian Forbes (1990, p. 180), to the effect that unlike the destitute, the poor have agential scope beyond the domination of circumstance and chance. Illiffe's assertion implies that the options of low-income people are inherently dangerous. Therefore, the choices of people with low incomes will be well-conceived, given that any decision made in a hazardous context may have pivotal, long-term consequences for better or worse. Hence, Czaika et al. (2021, pp. 16–17) suggest the poor migrant's final decision move is contingent on their level of cognitive preparedness and risk calculus and made in a context of 'high and ... irreducible uncertainty'. Similarly, Jessica Hagen-Zanker et al. (2023, p.10) contend that the decision to migrate involves prior mental preparations anchored on tangible and intangible considerations, which eventually culminate into why, how, when and through what channels to travel.

Hagen-Zanker and Gemma Hennessey (2021, pp.10–35) draw on Noel B. Salazar's 'imaginaries' to reflect on the migrant's decisions in terms of the why, when and how. Imaginaries result from the fusion of meaning-making personal heuristics with communal representations of reality. It frames and mediates how people act and make sense of the world. The authors note that given personal risk attitudes and subjectively imagined consequences; migrants use concepts and stories to create hypothetical future scenarios, which they adopt as cues to inform the final decision to travel or otherwise. The imaginaries assertion of Hagen-Zanker and Hennessey mimics the ideas of Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins (2018, pp. 913–914), who, in a bid to highlight the 'forces and frictions' shaping the migrant's psychology beyond economic motivations, give priority to emotions and how they impact the decision to move or not and if they do, how it affects the migrant's social relations.

Further, the emotional dimension of migration may be induced by physical experiences resulting from tangible interactions, memories and feelings. The authors questioned the conventional depiction of the migrant's 'time' as 'linear and relatively compartmentalized' episodes of 'pre-migration, migration, and settlement or return'. Instead,

they made a case for 'time' to be viewed as 'temporally distributed': the migrant's aspiration is an ongoing 'socially situated' and 'future-oriented' process subject to punctuated progress and setbacks. Hence, 'time' is episodic and mediated by events without explicit implications for the migrant's aspirations. Other authors (see, for example, Tabuga, 2017; Ruedin, 2021) also interrogating the temporalities of migration suggest the decision to travel is not a binary choice between staying and leaving. Instead, it fluctuates in maturity and decisiveness informed by people's awareness of the complexities and dangers of irregular migration and hence the need to meticulously plan and navigate multi-layered decision-making domains by traversing dynamic, risky (cognitive) worlds characterized by inconsistent data and opportunities with no guarantees positive outcomes.

The paper draws inspiration from concerns raised by Aubrey D. Tabuga (2017, p. 2) and the admonition of de Hass (2021, p. 2). While the former called for a nuanced understanding of the preparatory initiatives migrants undertake before embarking on their journeys, given that such micro-level measures have escaped scholarly attention, the latter deems individual-level empirical 'facts' and insights into how structural tendencies define migration processes and impact the 'lives, identities, and experiences of migrants from an "emic"³ perspective' as worthy of attention.

Just as Tabuga (supra) observed in the Philippines, investigators in Ghana have not paid heed to the (irregular) migrant's cognitive patterns born out of risk evaluation, hedging and recovery.⁴ To the best of my knowledge, the only closest exception in this respect is the work of Sjoerd van Bommel (2019), who, in a study of the same spatial context as this paper, focused on 'the circulation and perception of risk information' and reported that even though his respondents were receptive of public education and aware of the perils of irregular migration, they did not feel deterred. This said, in what can be cited as a lacuna, Bommel's efforts stopped short of interrogating the experience of the irregular migrant as a risk mitigant and a resilient actor. Risk assessment is just one of several subjective considerations that may motivate migrants (not) to take the first step in their odyssey. Logically speaking, a risk assessor may also be a risk mitigant and a resilient actor in the event of initiatives undergoing several rounds of trials, reversals and retrials. Hence, this study seeks to extend Bommel's insights beyond risk awareness and assessments to highlight the calculus of hedging and recovery.

Theoretical framework: The mosaic of risk framing, mitigation, and resilience

'Risk' refers to likely circumstances with no specific adverse outcomes. Even though risk outcomes are generally associated with the quest for opportunities, exposure to risk episodes may create opportunities themselves (Kahneman & Frederick, 2005). Risk may be categorized in many ways (see Lupu, 2019) but R. Max Wideman (1992, pp.1-2) goes by the taxonomy of:

- a. Knowns: complete insights about causes and absolute certainty about the nature of outcomes
- b. Known-unknowns: incomplete knowledge about triggers ranging from specific to general uncertainty about the nature of outcomes
- c. Unknown-unknowns: zero insights about triggers and absolute uncertainty about the nature of outcomes.

Unlike knowns and known-unknowns, individuals facing unknown-unknown decision horizons cannot imagine or have no heuristic markers to code the scope of options. All said, a person's information about (b) and (c) types of risk translates into 'knowledge about lack of knowledge' and hence, to the extent that it defines the framing of decision horizons and structures personal actions, 'knowledge about lack of knowledge' is suffused with risk mitigation considerations. Risk mitigation is a systematic, practical, post-evaluative process of risk identification across space and time. It also involves the planning for countermeasures and tailored 'actions' to prevent or reduce the impact of disruptive events or conditions (Aven, 2016). If individuals survive disruptive risk events, they may adopt strategies of resilience to aid recovery or put them in a pole position to re-enact previously disrupted

endeavours (Sapountzaki, 2022; Kasperson et al., 1988, p. 185). Hence, resilience reflects the capacity of actors to adapt and reset to (a status quo of) normalcy before or after a disruptive event. Resilience is not a condition of optimum recovery; it is an ambiguous transitional phase that may be characterized by 'dysfunction or distress' (Norris et al., 2009, p. 2191).

METHOD

This study is centred on the Bono East, Bono and Ahafo Regions of Ghana (see Figure 1 below), which have a famous reputation as the epicentres of irregular migration (Ghana Business News, 2019; IOM, 2019).

The study spanned four punctuated phases: January to April, September to December in 2021, February to June 2022 and validation interactions from August to December 2022. It recruited 102 male respondents through the strategy of non-probability referential sampling with the following profiles: 12 Europe-based successful irregular migrants, 22 self-identified first-time prospective irregular migrants, 13 irregular migrant deportees from Spain, Italy, Britain and Germany and 55 involuntary irregular migrant returnees from post-Gaddafi Libya. The first respondent, an indigene of Kwame Danso (Bono East Region) and an Accra-based former tertiary student of mine, a first-time prospective irregular migrant, facilitated recruitment and trust-building assurances. The interaction processes, with an average duration of 42 minutes per session and based on Chatham House Rules, were sequentially unstructured and, therefore, different from the enumerated pattern of respondent profiles. Also, the number of respondents participating and the duration of interaction sessions fluctuated. The Europe-based respondents engaged in 3 pragmatically arranged call-based focus group discussions with a participation rate of 4, 7 and 5 respondents in that order. Three respondents of this cohort



FIGURE 1 Bono East, Bono and Ahafo Regions of Ghana (adapted from VectorStock, 2024).

testified via phone because one requested to be excused during the second meeting, and 2 missed the last session. The rest of the interaction sessions were patterned as follows: interactions with the 22 prospective irregular migrants took the form of 2 respondents granting audience in Nkoranza, 11 in Atebubu, 4 in Kwame Danso (all in Bono East) and 5 in Sunyani (Bono Region). The '13 deportees' were in Accra for a focus group discussion. The 55 returnees were scheduled to participate in focus group discussions with 12 respondents in Nkoranza, 15 in Atebubu, 10 in Kwame Danso and 18 in Sunyani. However, I discontinued engaging with this cohort after the first meeting in Nkoranza because the respondents asked me to do them favours such as assisting them in finding 'work and pay' car deals: a scheme where cars are sold to drivers for commercial/ride-hailing services with payments made in bits on a daily or weekly basis until the entire cost is settled. Others also requested that I help them get accommodations on the main campus of the University of Ghana at Legon in Accra for people they know.

The interactions were in the form of open-ended narrative inquiries (Bell, 2002) modelled on the 'River of Life' method (The On Being Project, 2019): an approach requiring a respondent to be prompted to consider and reflect on unique personal influences and experiences and in the context of this study, on issues related to migration. The preliminary phase of the interaction involved the orientation of participants to metaphorically use the imagery of a river or road to imagine life as a 'movement' interposed with pivotal moments like inspirational encounters, challenges, critical junctures, mitigation measures and redemptive strategies under contemplation, to be contemplated or had been contemplated. Subsequently, the respondents, on invitation, framed their perspectives and experiences on emigration risks in the broad context of their life experiences. The respondents also reflected on profile-adapted risk, mitigation and resilience questions. For example, the lead questions were framed as follows:

- a. Europe-domiciled migrants and (involuntary) returnees: what did you think would be the outcome of your journey?
- b. Aspirational first-time migrants: what would be the outcome of your initiative to migrate?

Finally, I invited the respondents to undertake an evaluative retroactive reflection of their testimonies and share their final thoughts. I then transcribed audio recordings of both English and English-translated Twi⁵ responses, all recorded with the respondents' explicit written and verbal approval.⁶ After reading the texts several times to gain familiarity with the data, I conducted an inductive, coded thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. I processed the data informed by the analytical protocols of reflexivity, the imperative of, among other things, drawing out meanings by focusing on two analytical levels: the semantic and latent. While the former involves the exploration of surface-level connotations and mapping out easily discernible patterns, the latter is about distilling intrinsic meanings. Latent-level analysis is informed by a researcher's ontological and epistemic orientation (Mauthner & Andrea, 2003), which, in my case, is qualitative critical realism (Fletcher, 2017). The method used is weak in several ways. For example, the effects of 'groupthink' consensus seemed apparent during all the focus group discussions. The temporally staggered sessions may have undermined spontaneous testimonies. This is much more so given that the respondents, being a closed group with high information circulation velocity, may brief others yet to participate in interaction sessions.

FINDINGS

Europe-domiciled irregular migrants

The responses from this group suggested a risk-neutral mindset before departure from Ghana. Like van Bemmel's (2019, p. 54–55) findings, the respondents knew that irregular migration is a life-threatening risky

venture. Hailing from a context saturated with cautionary public education, the respondents' outlook was unsurprising. The risk-neutral mentality of this group was latently illustrated in the testimonies of one respondent who laced his reflections with Twi adages such as *wo suro aaa wondi* 'a fearful person does not win', *Oyame ma wo yare a, oma wo aduru* 'when God infects one with a disease, he also gives one the medicine with which to cure it' and 'even though *anomaa* "a bird" is aware that hunters are always on the look-out to shoot it, *waa antu a, obua da* "if it does not fly out in search for food, it will to bed on an empty stomach". Another also noted that *abrabo* "life or living" in and of itself is risky and that the events that can cause the death are all around us so what is the point in one sitting still in disgrace for death to come unannounced either by lorry accident or robbery?'. Further while congratulating himself for having taken 'the wise decision' to irregularly migrate to Europe, a respondent noted that if one were to add the cost of multiple visa applications, the emotional stress of expectancy to hear the decisions of visa applications which come with no right of appeal or explanations when rejected, the several episodes of shock and disappointment triggered by rejected applications, one would come up with a figure equal to the risk of irregular migration. While commenting on this perspective, a respondent posed a rhetorical question: 'Two people walking in the rain, one with an umbrella and the other without; which of the two will get wet ... first?'. He answered his question by saying that even though irregular migration is risky if well-planned with the right people, it has no danger of 'bouncing'⁷ whatsoever. Further, prospective migrants with the ambition to get to Europe via irregular means have a better chance of success than people who opt for the legal approach. When I invited him to elaborate further, he used himself as an example. He testified that he was once a second-hand mobile phone vendor and a 'betweenner'⁸ who used his latter experience to identify and utilize the services of credible but pricy traffickers. Hence, he noted that people exposed to the most risk are impatient, have a 'cheap side' mentality, and thus fall prey to criminals.

To elicit perceptions on risk framing, I invited the respondents to share their views on their certainty of success before departure. One respondent noted no concrete guarantees of success, and he did not even know his specific European destination. Nevertheless, he was sure he would get to the 'promised land' since he put his 'life in the hands of God almighty' for protection. In what seemed to depict the mindset of the others, the respondent who self-identified as a 'betweenner' (supra) said he was sure he would make it to Europe since he was 'dealing with' trustworthy people. Another respondent noted he was confident of success before departure because the organizers of his journey asked him to mail his passport (he had two with different names) by courier to their agent, who had promised to get him a visa from an Eastern European country from where he will transit to Western Europe. He said that after his contacts confirmed that they had secured his visa, his uncertainties waned even though he had no proof that it was genuine. Indeed, he successfully got to Eastern Europe, where he transitioned to his current location in Western Europe.

On the risk mitigation strategies adopted (if any) before and during their departure from Ghana, the respondents testified as follows: one said that before departure, he used his savings from his salt retail enterprise (sourced from Ada in Greater Accra and sold in Nkoranza, Bono East) and foodstuff (obtained from Bono East and sold in Accra) to convert the living room and two other rooms of his *abusua fie* 'family-owned house' into a crèche for his wife to operate. Further, being a local leader of a political party, he used his connections to secure a catering contract for his wife from the Government of Ghana Schools Feeding Programme. In addition, while one respondent said he bought a second-hand shipping container for his wife to rent out, another said he set up corn milling and palm nutcracker machines at market centres for his father and brother to manage. Another respondent also testified that he relocated his spouse, a seamstress in Accra, Ghana's capital, to live and work with (not for) his mother, a vendor of 'indomie' in Nkoranza.⁹ One other respondent also intimated that he topped up his spouse's contribution to her 'susu'¹⁰ group in a bid to increase her share of monthly accumulated funds. Another also attested that he underwent spiritual fortification and sought *akwankyerε* 'directions' from his pastor, who advised him to travel in 2010, the conducive year sanctioned by God. One other respondent also said he planned his journey in utmost secrecy to avert the risk of jealous family members and friends ruining his plans through evil spiritual attacks. A respondent pointed out that he had to delay his exit until after he had performed the final

funeral rites of his mother because he feared that if he left without giving his mother a 'peaceful rest', *ɔbɛ di yaw* 'she would be bitter' and withhold her blessings from him.

With the sole exception of one respondent who intimated he had the cell phone number of a relative working with the Ghana Immigration Service on hand to call for assistance when needed, all the respondents had no personal risk mitigation measures in place during the migration process. Four of the respondents, however, put in place measures to hedge their dependents from disruptions that may ensue in the interregnum between departure and final destination. For example, a respondent testified that he was cash-strapped and could not pay his daughter's outstanding school fees at the time of his departure; hence, he negotiated a deal with her school authorities to allow her to attend classes. Another respondent also noted that he apportioned his cocoa farm and charcoal production land between his wife and brothers.

The deported thirteen

Except for one respondent arrested and deported from Spain in 2013 for being an illegal resident, all the respondents in this category were detained and deported during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The members of this group were risk-neutral: they knew illegal migration was a dangerous venture but harboured distinct reasons why their risk perception did not constitute a basis for inaction. One respondent indicated that three of his primary school classmates illegally migrated to Europe successfully. Another also said that he saw no real danger in irregular migration, for if it were, the phenomenon would have stopped long before he was born. Also worthy of note is the perspective of a respondent who noted that he had to choose between two risks: first, staying in Ghana and risk of exposure to humiliation from a case he lost in a law court, and second, migrating illegally to escape same. He said he chose the latter option because he was confident the former option would have resulted in social opprobrium he could not withstand.

The respondents expressed their thoughts on post-deportation risk mitigation resilience: They all live off money saved in Ghana from earnings while in Europe. They have also pooled funds to create a bank account, which they rent for fees ranging from 150 to 500 USD to people needing bank account statements to support visa applications. The group also renders advice and facilitates contacts between prospective irregular migrants and traffickers for a fee. While some freelance as travelling and insurance agents assisting passport applicants, others also vend agriculture inputs and operate a stone quarry. The group members pointed out that they grow the bank account for rent by topping it up with the profits they make from their economic activities and that they intended to devise a scheme to use their funds to finance their next attempt to migrate.

Prospective first-time irregular migrants

All the respondents of this set were not perturbed even though they were aware of the perils of irregular migration. A respondent indicated that he was sure of success because, first, his exit was engineered by decades-old gold-purchasing customers who made part payments for acquisitions and kept the balance to settle the cost of services rendered to him for his departure. He noted that efforts by the Government of Ghana to disrupt *galamsey*¹¹ convinced him it was best to secure his future out of the country and that the option of staying, given the looming crisis at the time, was relatively riskier than illegally migrating. Two respondents also intimated that they used falsified medical referral letters to secure visas to two Mediterranean countries and transited to Europe by persons and means unknown to them at the time. A respondent affirmed public outreach on the dangers of irregular migration 'fake news' fabrications of NGOs commissioned to 'cause fear and panic' and frustrate the ambitions of people. He wondered why people do not discern the hypocrisy of NGOs when the negative messages they propagate are contradicted by the success stories of irregular migrants in his locality. In concurrence,

a respondent named two individuals who left Ghana via unauthorized means after gaining local fame and fortune from campaigning against illegal migration.

On the risk mitigation regimes under consideration or adopted, two respondents said they were undergoing spiritual consultations with a mallam¹² to know their *hyεbrε* 'destiny' and ascertain the appropriate date to migrate. Five others were engaged in setting up income-generating ventures for their spouses. For example, a respondent said he had bought canopies and plastic furniture for his spouse to rent out for outdoor events. Another also said he was renting out his coconut trees and training his junior brother to correctly monitor, quantify and value harvested fruits with the proceeds for his upkeep and savings. The galamsey miner respondent (supra) also said he is saving profits from 15 slot machines¹³ he intended to sell when he was sure of his departure date.

Analysis of findings

The prohibitive monetary and emotional cost of official migration processes animated the risk-neutral mindset portrayed by the Europe-domiciled respondents. It seems the emotional stress of expectancy before the announcement of visa application decisions, the lack of a fee refund policy for unsuccessful applications and the impossibility of recovering the ancillary costs of applications make the recourse to irregular service providers a less risky option. Their reflections also suggest the conviction that informal service providers are a sure bet if one is diligent, trusts in God and is ready to pay the high price of credible facilitators. Furthermore, informal economic activities enacted around extended family relations provided a risk mitigation social shield the respondents utilized to protect their immediate family from the likely disruptions of the decision to travel. This finding may explain Stein Monteiro's (2022) quantitative insight in Nepal, suggesting that husbands with extended family links would likely travel without their wives.

The 'prosperity signal effect' of irregular migration on the 'deported 13' is similarly reported by Auer and Schaub (2023) in Senegal and Gambia, where they note that respondents with no travel experience were risk-averse because they perceived economically unsuccessful deported returnees from Europe as evidence of the perils of irregular migration. Against this background, one would have expected 'the deported 13' to have the same risk-averse mentality as the Senegalese and Gambian respondents, given that they directly suffered the misfortune of banishment. Perhaps the difference in the risk assessment of the Senegalese and Gambians and the 'deported 13' may be explained by the latter's initiatives to attenuate the adversity of expulsion by crafting (i) a viable symbiotic post-deportation risk mitigation scheme; (ii) a resilience regime energized by a solidarity-based network of informal economic activities; (iii) a knowledge brokerage collective based on insights of the irregular migration ecology.

The preceding contradict the works of Pierluigi Musaro (2019), Jasper Tjaden and Felipe Alexander Dunsch (2021) and Jasper Tjaden and Horace Gninafon (2022), who indicate a positive correlation between public education and the risk aversion of irregular migrants. Even though the Ghanaian respondents hailed from a region saturated with cautionary public education and were aware of the dangers of irregular migration, the historical persistence of the phenomenon, the allure of travel prompted by signs of economic success associated with irregular migrants and informal opportunities made prospective first-time migrants cynical and risk-neutral. Indeed, given that (state) sponsors of anti-irregular migration outreaches are said to be challenged in the quest for trustworthiness vis-à-vis other sources of (mis) information (Brandle, 2022), the perception of Ghanaian first-time prospective irregular migrants that campaigns are paid NGO 'fake news' initiatives to 'cause fear and panic', means that the said quest for trustworthiness has failed. This assertion is validated in the testimonies of the Europe-domiciled respondents, who did not trust formal entities and processes even though they had been conscientized about the dangers of the phenomenon and (contrary to the findings of James Dennison [2022]) actively sought, contacted and used the logistics of irregular migration service providers.

All three cohorts of respondents seem to have felt ontologically secure in the informal sector and the protection of providence. As Nicholas Harney (2012) and Orit Gazit (2021) noted, informal ontological security provisions

the requisite cognitive bandwidth to hedge against uncertainty and its ancillary risks. Hence, the respondents exuded confidence in their abilities to navigate uncertainties by leveraging various forms of social currency such as family constitutive norms. Kurt Thoennessen's (2020) assertion that individuals take the first step in risk management by engaging in careful, time-consuming planning by drawing on their social assets finds expression in the informal sector, given its low entry and exit barriers. This trait facilitates the easy fungibility of knowledge into the forging of trust networks. The irregular migrant's risk-neutral mentality may be due to the ease with which informal social capital can be accessed.

Further, the ontological security of risk-neutral irregular migrants who believe in the protection of providence is illustrated by Priya Deshingkar and Doudou Dièye Gueye's (2022, p. 43) study of Senegal and report that 'although migrants are fatalistic, their actions are also full of hope' because their Islamic faith 'gives them a way of finding meaning in the decision to migrate despite known risk'. Faith in providence may be understood as a cognitive placebo marking a mental point of inflection when the irregular migrant is facing an 'unknown unknown' decision horizon: (i) it indicates the limit of cognitive and empirical risk assessment cum management capacity, which, contrary to a pullback or inaction, as one would expect from a rational assessment, results in exit because (ii) the placebo cognitive effect of faith in providence works as a mental switch from rational risk assessment to empirically unfiltered risk neutrality and recovery in the event of failure. Hence, Auer et al. (2023) note a positive correlation between faith in the protection of providence, risk aversion and persistence in the quest to undertake illegal migration. To what extent did faith in providence account for why only 1% to 2% of 3069 respondents of which 93% experienced danger while en route to Europe in a UNDP (2019:16; 88) study claimed they would have made a different choice if they had been better informed about the dangers of the irregular migration and the realities of life in Europe?

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study, conducted in Ghana's Bono East, Bono and Ahafo Regions, investigated the micro-level decision-making context of irregular migrants from the perspective of risk framing, mitigation and resilience. Its respondents either hailing from or domiciled in the three regions were made up of successful Europe-based and 'deported 13' irregular migrants as well as prospective migrants yearning to travel for the first time illegally. The findings show that all the respondents had a risk-neutral mentality anchored in a sense of ontological security and agency enabled by the following: informal economic ventures and solidaristic relations such as social capital/obligations born nuclear and extended family norms, belief in the protection of providence, trust, emotional and financial cost-benefit analysis of the services rendered by diplomatic missions vis-à-vis irregular migration facilitators and a cynical reception of public education messages and messengers. It seems the risk-tolerant mindset of the respondents is explicitly framed around the logistical issues of irregular migration given that, in the case of the Europe-domiciled and prospective first-time irregular migrants, the respondents took active steps to shield family relatives from any likely disruptive consequences that may ensue upon departure. This implies that risk exposure and mitigation strategies are articulated concerning the family. Based on this, one can logically conclude that irregular migrants may not embark on a journey if they cannot engineer strategies to contain the risks their families may be exposed to by the decision to travel. It is worth noting that Christian Dustmann et al. (2023) report an opposite tendency in China, where it is the family's perception of migration risks that may motivate or discourage an individual from travelling. They note that, among other things, individuals embark on rural-urban migration in China if family members are either risk-tolerant or if the distribution of risk is not concentrated. One can make a similar deduction from the testimonies of the 'deported 13': they dispersed the disruptive shock of expulsion by forming a scheme of collective resilience, brokering the knowledge they individually have about illegal migration and pooling funds to migrate again illegally. The question, however, remains whether they will still individually harbour and pursue the wish to migrate irregularly without the collective resilience and risk mitigation approach they have adopted.

All said, quantitative studies like those of Jasper Tjaden (2022, p. 221) and Dustmann (supra) provide a scientific context for this study in two different ways and suggest further empirical investigation. On the contrary, this study's discoveries may indicate why, for example, Tjaden's work on prospective irregular migrants in Senegal and Guinea uncovered a 'consistent and strong association between risk perceptions' and aversion to irregular migration. In contrast, Dustmann's work shows that this study is limited because it draws on the one-sided testimonies of irregular migrants. Hence, further research is needed to illuminate how the risk framing, mitigation and resilience strategies of actors such as the customary norms of an irregular migrant may affect the decision to exit. This recommended line of inquiry can be structured to specifically interrogate how, for example, the differing inheritance principles of matrilineal and patrilineal lineage regimes impact the decision horizon of the irregular migrant. The inheritance rights of patrilineal lineages are derived from paternity family membership while those of matrilineal cultures are established through affiliation with one's mother's family (Kutsoati & Morck, 2016). Further, one can conjecture that irregular migration service providers are heterogeneous, with differentiated legal, illegal and extra-legal 'products' on offer (see, for example, Salt & Stein, 1997) and as such, they may potentially affect the risk framing, mitigation and resilience strategies of their clients.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13381>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

- ¹This paper's content was first presented at the 18th Biannual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration Conference (IASFM), held at the University of Ghana from 26 to 30 July 2021, on the theme *Disrupting Theory, Unsettling Practice: Towards Transformative Forced Migration Scholarship and Policy*.
- ²See for example Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche/horizon europe/Le site français du programme européen, 2022.
- ³Emic is an approach to the study of cultural forms with emphasis on in-situ structuring effects (see Morris et al., 1999).
- ⁴See, for example, Yayboke & Gallego, 2019, pp. 38–46; Tanle, 2012.
- ⁵Twi is a widely spoken local dialect in the study areas.
- ⁶The written approvals are of two kinds: individuals and that of an individual chosen by focus group discussion members to sign the permissive note on their collective behalf.
- ⁷Rejected visa application.
- ⁸Human trafficking agent.
- ⁹Indomie is a brand name for noodles popularly used in Ghana for cooked instant noodles mixed with vegetables (Alomenu, 2013).
- ¹⁰Susu is the local Ghanaian name for a rotating welfare-enhancing savings and credit not-for-profit association, which was formed by women in this case. See (Boachie & Adu-Darko, 2022).
- ¹¹Galamsey is a local Ghanaian slang for small-scale, illicit gold mining (Ohene, 2017).
- ¹²A *mallam* in Ghana is a Muslim cleric believed to be an expert in mediumship with the power to manipulate events. See (Abdulmoomin, 2019).
- ¹³Slot machines are wooden contraptions said to have been made by Chinese people and usually operated by cheap alcohol vendors. See Odame, 2022.

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