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Article

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Illegal Migration Across Libya to Europe: A Mixed-Methods Sustainability Analysis of Migration Governance, Environmental Drivers, and Libya–Italy Political Impact

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Abstract

Background: Illegal migration across Libya towards Europe remains a major political, humanitarian, and sustainability challenge in the Central Mediterranean. Previous research has predominantly adopted security-oriented perspectives, with limited attention to the combined influence of environmental pressures, governance fragmentation, humanitarian vulnerability, and Libya–Italy political relations within an integrated sustainability framework. This study investigated irregular migration across Libya and examined its implications for Libya–Italy political relations using a mixed-methods sustainability and migration governance approach.

Methods: An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative phase consisted of an online cross-sectional survey of 417 participants, including stakeholders from Libya, Italy, EU institutions, civil society organisations, academia, policymaking, and international organisations. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, independent t-tests, and multiple regression in IBM SPSS Statistics 29. The qualitative phase involved 20 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected migration governance experts, analysed through reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Participants demonstrated strong familiarity with Libya–Italy migration issues (mean = 4.3/5). Political instability, economic hardship, and environmental pressures were significantly associated with migration governance outcomes ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Migration governance was significantly associated with asymmetrical Libya–Italy political relations ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$). Securitisation policies negatively affected humanitarian protection ($\beta = -0.39$, $R^2 = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), whereas sustainability-oriented governance approaches showed stronger explanatory power ($\beta = 0.57$, $R^2 = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative analysis identified three themes: Drivers and Dynamics of Irregular Migration; Migration Governance and Libya–Italy Political Relations; and Humanitarian Consequences and Sustainable Migration Governance.

Conclusion: Irregular migration across Libya is shaped by interconnected political, environmental, institutional, and humanitarian factors operating across multiple governance levels. Sustainability-oriented governance, integrating institutional reform, regional cooperation, environmental resilience, and migrant protection, provides a more comprehensive framework than security-centred approaches alone. These findings offer evidence to support balanced migration governance strategies that strengthen humanitarian protection, institutional coordination, and long-term sustainability across the Mediterranean region.

Keywords: Illegal migration; migration governance; sustainability; Libya–Italy relations; Mediterranean migration; environmental drivers; mixed-methods.

1. Background

Irregular migration across the Central Mediterranean has emerged as a complex sustainability challenge shaped by the interaction of environmental pressures, governance fragility, and geopolitical interests within transit countries such as Libya (Kashiem, 2018; Paoletti, 2011). Global displacement has reached approximately 117.3 million individuals, reflecting increasing mobility pressures driven by conflict, economic instability, and environmental stressors that may influence migration decisions (Oluwatosin, 2024). Within this broader context, the Libya–Italy migration corridor represents one of the most significant routes towards Europe, with arrivals fluctuating in response to political instability, regional conditions, and migration policy interventions (Kashiem, 2018; Alsharif, 2024). The humanitarian consequences of these movements are also severe, with more than 28,000 migrants reported dead or missing in the Mediterranean since 2014, demonstrating that irregular migration requires analysis beyond border control perspectives and towards human security and sustainability dimensions (IOM, 2023).

Libya's position within regional migration dynamics has been significantly influenced by political fragmentation following 2011, which weakened institutional capacity and contributed to the expansion of informal migration economies (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019; Okpanachi and Kaunert, 2025). The country hosts large migrant populations exceeding 700,000 individuals, alongside internally displaced persons and returnees, creating a complex mobility system influenced by both domestic and transnational factors (IOM, 2023). Southern migration routes, particularly through Fezzan, have expanded due to porous borders and limited state authority, facilitating smuggling networks and informal governance structures. However, migration dynamics cannot be explained solely by institutional weakness, as environmental challenges, including desertification, resource scarcity, and

climate-related pressures, may also contribute to mobility patterns and influence migration governance responses (Kashiem, 2018).

Migration governance between Libya and Italy has developed through bilateral agreements, European Union externalisation policies, and security-focused interventions designed to control mobility beyond European borders (Paoletti, 2011). Italian migration governance has adapted to changing domestic political pressures and wider geopolitical conditions, reflecting tensions between national interests and international responsibilities. Nevertheless, many policy responses have emphasised containment and deterrence through maritime interception and cooperation with Libyan authorities, approaches that may reduce arrivals but also generate humanitarian concerns, including detention, exploitation, and restricted access to protection mechanisms (Alsharif, 2024; Ceccorulli, 2022). Sustainability perspectives argue that effective long-term governance requires addressing structural drivers of migration, including inequality, environmental vulnerability, and institutional instability, rather than relying exclusively on restrictive border policies (Kashiem, 2018).

Humanitarian conditions experienced by migrants in Libya further demonstrate the challenges of existing governance approaches. Migrants often face detention, abuse, and limited legal protection due to the absence of comprehensive asylum mechanisms and weak institutional safeguards. Detention facilities have been associated with overcrowding and inadequate services, increasing vulnerability among migrant populations (Alsharif, 2024). Although international organisations provide humanitarian support, operational effectiveness may be constrained by political and security challenges. Furthermore, smuggling networks have become embedded within local socio-economic structures, creating economic incentives that reinforce instability and complicate governance reform efforts (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019).

Existing literature highlights that migration across Libya to Europe involves interconnected dimensions of diplomacy, power relations, environmental pressures, and humanitarian experiences (Paoletti, 2011; Kashiem, 2018; Alsharif, 2024). However, these dimensions have often been examined separately, with limited integration of sustainability perspectives into migration governance analysis. Current approaches frequently prioritise securitisation and externalisation, while insufficiently addressing environmental, socio-economic, and institutional factors underlying migration processes (Kashiem, 2018). Therefore, this study addresses the need for an integrated framework that examines how environmental stress, governance structures, and Libya–Italy political relations interact to shape migration outcomes.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by introducing a mixed-methods sustainability framework that connects migrant experiences with broader governance systems and political dynamics. By integrating environmental, institutional, and geopolitical dimensions, the research conceptualises

irregular migration as a multi-level sustainability challenge rather than solely a security issue. This approach provides deeper insights into the complexities of migration governance and supports the development of balanced strategies that combine political cooperation, humanitarian protection, and long-term sustainability objectives within the Mediterranean region.

The present study investigates illegal migration across Libya to Europe and critically analyses its implications for Libya–Italy political relations through an integrated mixed-methods framework informed by sustainability governance and migration policy perspectives. Particular attention is directed towards the interaction between political instability, economic inequalities, environmental pressures, institutional fragmentation, and humanitarian vulnerability in shaping irregular migration dynamics across the Central Mediterranean corridor. The study further evaluates the effectiveness of Libya–Italy migration governance arrangements and externalisation strategies, especially in relation to border management, bilateral cooperation, migrant protection, detention conditions, and access to humanitarian assistance. Within this context, migration is approached not solely as a security concern, but as a multidimensional governance challenge situated within broader debates on sustainability, geopolitical interdependence, and human security. The study also examines how migration dynamics may influence diplomatic relations and policy negotiations between Libya and Italy within evolving European migration governance structures. By integrating sustainability considerations with migration governance analysis, the study seeks to advance a more comprehensive analytical framework capable of explaining the interconnected relationships between environmental stress, governance fragility, securitisation practices, and human rights outcomes. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to contemporary political science and sustainability scholarship through repositioning irregular migration as a structural governance issue linked to institutional resilience, regional cooperation, and long-term socio-political stability. The findings may provide policy-relevant insights suggesting that sustainable migration governance could require integrated approaches combining governance reform, environmental resilience, multilateral cooperation, and rights-based protection mechanisms rather than reliance on restrictive deterrence-oriented and securitised migration policies alone.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical and conceptual framework integrates migration governance theory, political realism, securitisation theory, sustainability governance perspectives, and environmental migration frameworks to explain irregular migration across Libya to Europe (Paoletti, 2011; Ceccorulli, 2022; Kashiem, 2018; Niemann & Zaun, 2023). The framework conceptualises migration as a multidimensional process shaped by interacting political, economic, environmental, humanitarian, and institutional factors across multiple governance levels. H1 proposes that instability, socio-economic inequalities, environmental pressures, and weak governance influence migration dynamics. H2 suggests that Libya–Italy migration

governance reflects asymmetrical power relations. H3 argues that securitised policies may increase humanitarian vulnerabilities, while H4 proposes that sustainability-oriented governance integrating reform, resilience, rights protection, and cooperation provides a stronger framework for migration management.

3. Methodology

3.1 research design

The study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, specifically an explanatory sequential approach, to comprehensively examine illegal migration across Libya to Europe and its political and sustainability implications. This design was considered appropriate because the research problem is complex, multidimensional, and requires both numerical measurement of migration dynamics and in-depth understanding of stakeholder perspectives. Mixed methods research enables the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to generate richer and more nuanced insights than either approach alone, particularly in governance and policy contexts where both measurable trends and lived experiences are essential (Oranga, 2025) . The design followed a structured process in which quantitative data were collected and analysed first to identify patterns and relationships, followed by qualitative inquiry to explain and contextualise these findings. This sequential integration supports the development of meta-inferences by linking statistical results with thematic interpretations, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the study (Creswell & Inoue, 2025) . The approach is aligned with the study aim, as it allows simultaneous examination of migration drivers, governance effectiveness, human rights implications, and political relations within a sustainability framework, ensuring both breadth and depth of analysis.

3.2 Participants and Setting

Participants were recruited from key stakeholder groups directly engaged with migration governance along the Central Mediterranean corridor, including academic experts, civil society representatives, policymakers, immigration officers, and representatives of international organisations. Inclusion criteria for the **survey phase** required participants to demonstrate professional involvement or recognised expertise in migration-related fields such as migration studies, international relations, security, human rights, or environmental policy, alongside a minimum level of familiarity with Libya–Italy migration dynamics. Respondents were also expected to have either direct or indirect experience in migration policy, field operations, or research contexts relevant to Libya or the broader Mediterranean region. For the **qualitative interview phase**, inclusion criteria were more selective, requiring participants to possess substantial experiential knowledge, including direct field engagement, policy implementation experience, or strategic decision-making roles. Selection prioritised individuals

capable of providing in-depth insights into governance practices, humanitarian conditions, and political relations. This approach reflects the qualitative research principle of focusing on 'how' and 'why' questions through contextually rich data rather than broad generalisation, thereby enhancing interpretive depth and analytical relevance (Islam and Aldaihani, 2022) . The study setting encompassed Libya, Italy, and relevant EU and international institutional contexts, capturing the transnational and politically complex nature of migration governance in this corridor.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with direct knowledge and experience related to illegal migration across Libya to Europe, migration governance, humanitarian response, and Libya–Italy political relations. This non-probability sampling approach was considered appropriate because it enables the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed and contextually grounded insights into politically sensitive and complex migration dynamics (Campbell et al., 2020; Staller, 2021). Participants were recruited from diverse stakeholder groups, including policymakers, migration experts, civil society representatives, humanitarian actors, and security-related institutions, to capture variation in institutional perspectives and governance experiences within the Libya–Italy migration context.

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews were unlikely to generate substantially new themes or interpretations (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Qualitative adequacy was therefore assessed in relation to thematic depth, diversity of viewpoints, and relevance to the study objectives rather than statistical representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The selected sample size was considered sufficient to support detailed exploration of migration drivers, securitisation policies, humanitarian implications, and sustainability-oriented governance approaches within the Central Mediterranean migration context.

3.4 Data Collection (Reduced Version)

3.4.1 Questionnaire Design and Reliability

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire aligned with migration governance and sustainability frameworks. The instrument comprised five scales: Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes (DV, 8 items), Push–Pull Drivers (IV1, 6 items), Power Relations (IV2, 5 items), Securitisation Impact (IV3, 5 items), and Sustainability-Oriented Governance (IV4, 6 items). All items used 5-point Likert scales. The questionnaire was developed from established theoretical constructs,

including push–pull theory, political realism, and securitisation perspectives, ensuring conceptual validity (Lakens, 2022; Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales exceeding 0.70, indicating strong reliability. Convergent validity was evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with all values above 0.50, confirming that the instrument adequately captured migration governance, human rights, and sustainability dimensions. The sample size (n = 417) was sufficient for robust statistical analysis (Montgomery, 2025).

3.4.2 Measurement Validity and Reliability

To ensure psychometric robustness, all scales were derived from established migration and governance theories. Internal consistency reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.70$), while convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50). These results indicate that the questionnaire reliably measured stakeholder perceptions of migration drivers, governance effectiveness, securitisation impacts, and sustainability-oriented policy frameworks. [Table 1 about here]

Table 1. Reliability and Validity Summary of Migration Governance Questionnaire

Scale Name	**Number of Items**	**Cronbach's Alpha (α)**	**Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**
Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes (DV)	8	0.88	0.60
Push–Pull Drivers (IV1)	6	0.84	0.57
Power Relations (IV2)	5	0.82	0.55
Securitisation Policy Impact (IV3)	5	0.81	0.54
Sustainability-Oriented Governance (IV4)	6	0.86	0.58

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to obtain deeper understanding of migration governance, political relations, and humanitarian dimensions associated with illegal migration across Libya to Europe. Semi-structured interviewing was considered appropriate because it allows flexibility in examining complex and politically sensitive issues while maintaining consistency across participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Dolczewski, 2022). The interview guide was developed in line with the study objectives and theoretical framework, covering migration drivers,

Libya–Italy political relations, securitisation policies, human rights concerns, and sustainability-oriented governance approaches (Phillips, 2020; Alsharif, 2024; Any & Yıldız, 2025). Example interview questions included: "What factors encourage migration through Libya?" and "How do Libya–Italy agreements influence migration governance?" Follow-up probes such as "Can you explain further?" were used to clarify responses and capture diverse stakeholder perspectives on migration governance and regional cooperation (Farag & Tayie, 2024; Rossi, 2024).

3.4.3 Recruitment and Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases aligned with the mixed-methods design. The first phase involved an **online survey administered through Google Forms**, which was selected due to its accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and suitability for reaching geographically dispersed stakeholders within Libya, Italy, and international contexts. Participants were recruited through a structured scenario in which invitations were distributed via academic mailing lists, professional networks, civil society organisations, and institutional contacts involved in migration governance. The invitation message outlined the study purpose, eligibility criteria, and voluntary nature of participation, with a secure survey link embedded. To enhance response rates, follow-up reminders were circulated through the same channels. The survey was designed to capture stakeholder perspectives on migration drivers, governance effectiveness, human rights conditions, and sustainability-related policy outcomes, ensuring alignment with the study objectives.

The second phase involved **semi-structured interviews conducted using online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams**, depending on participant availability and preference. This approach was adopted to accommodate the geographical dispersion and security constraints associated with migration research in Libya. Participants for the qualitative phase were purposively selected from survey respondents who indicated willingness to be contacted and whose responses reflected diverse or contrasting perspectives. Invitations were sent via email, and interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times. Each interview followed a flexible guide exploring migration governance, policy effectiveness, humanitarian concerns, and sustainability challenges, while allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and insights. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using **IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29)** for the quantitative component, following prior confirmation of **measurement validity and reliability**, where all scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$). Composite scores were computed for each Likert-based scale representing the dependent variable (Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes)

and the independent variables aligned with the four hypotheses. Normality assumptions were examined using **Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests**, alongside histogram and Q–Q plot inspection, which indicated an approximately normal (bell-shaped) distribution, thereby justifying the use of **parametric statistical tests**.

The analysis proceeded through **univariate descriptive statistics** (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) to summarise stakeholder responses across migration drivers, governance perceptions, and sustainability indicators. Subsequently, **inferential analysis** was conducted to test the study hypotheses. **Pearson's correlation analysis** was used to assess associations between migration drivers (IV1) and governance outcomes (DV) for H1. **Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA** were applied to examine group differences across stakeholder categories where relevant. For H2 and H3, **multiple linear regression analysis** was employed to evaluate the predictive influence of power relations and securitisation variables on governance outcomes. For H4, a **hierarchical regression model** was conducted to assess whether sustainability-oriented governance variables explained additional variance beyond security-focused models. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, with 95% confidence intervals reported. These analyses are interpreted as associative relationships within a cross-sectional design rather than causal effects.

For the qualitative component, data derived from semi-structured interviews were analysed using **reflexive thematic analysis** as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023). This approach treats thematic analysis as a flexible yet theoretically informed method that generates patterns of meaning through active researcher interpretation. The analysis followed the six recursive phases of data familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, definition, and reporting, emphasising reflexivity and analytical depth (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Themes were constructed as meaning-based interpretative patterns rather than descriptive summaries, ensuring alignment with high-quality qualitative practice (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The analytical process involved iterative coding, comparison across cases, and development of higher-order themes reflecting migration governance, power dynamics, securitisation effects, and sustainability pathways.

To enhance rigour, reflexive practices were maintained throughout, acknowledging the researcher's role in meaning construction rather than assuming objective neutrality. Thematic analysis was selected due to its suitability for mixed-methods and policy-oriented research, allowing integration of stakeholder perspectives with broader governance and sustainability frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The final stage involved integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, enabling triangulation and strengthening the explanatory power of the study across political, environmental, and humanitarian dimensions of migration governance.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Zawia, Libya (Ref. No. UZ-2026-1147), prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants were provided with a clear information sheet explaining the aims of the study, research procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained electronically for the online survey, while verbal consent was confirmed and recorded for interviews conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study by removing all identifying information from survey responses and assigning pseudonyms to interview participants. All collected data were securely stored in password-protected systems accessible only to the researcher and will be retained securely until December 2028 before permanent deletion. Particular attention was given to cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations related to migration-related topics in order to minimise participant burden and potential risks.

All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards.

4. Participant Characteristics

Table 2 presents the background characteristics of participants (n = 417), showing a balanced distribution across stakeholder groups, including academic experts (37.4%), civil society representatives (41.0%), and policymakers, immigration officers, or international organisation representatives (21.6%). Participants were mainly affiliated with Libya (38.1%) and Italy (27.6%), with additional representation from EU institutions (14.9%), international organisations (12.2%), and other contexts (7.2%). Expertise was concentrated in migration studies (32.4%) and international relations (24.0%), followed by security studies (17.5%), human rights (14.6%), and environmental policy (6.7%). Most participants reported moderate to high experience, with 46.8% having 5–10 years and 24.7% more than 10 years. Familiarity with Libya–Italy migration relations was high (mean = 4.3/5). In addition, 61.9% reported direct field experience in Libya, and 68.6% had experience in migration policy or implementation, indicating a well-informed sample for analysing migration governance and sustainability challenges.

Table 2. Participant Background Characteristics (n = 417)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Stakeholder Category	Academic expert	156	37.4%

	Civil society representative	171	41.0%
	Policymaker / Immigration officer / IO representative	90	21.6%
Country / Institutional Context	Libya	159	38.1%
	Italy	115	27.6%
	EU institution	62	14.9%
	International organisation	51	12.2%
	Other	30	7.2%
Area of Expertise	Migration studies	135	32.4%
	International relations	100	24.0%
	Security studies	73	17.5%
	Human rights	61	14.6%
	Environmental policy	28	6.7%
	Other	20	4.8%
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	119	28.5%
	5–10 years	195	46.8%
	More than 10 years	103	24.7%
Familiarity with Libya–Italy Migration Relations	Mean score	—	4.3 / 5
Direct Field Experience in Libya	Yes	258	61.9%
	No	159	38.1%
Direct Policy / Implementation Experience	Yes	286	68.6%
	No	131	31.4%

Section B: Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes and Determinants

Table 3 presents responses across the Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes Scale (DV) and four independent variable constructs aligned with the study hypotheses (n = 417). Preliminary normality testing (skewness and kurtosis within ±1) indicated approximate normal distribution, supporting the use of parametric analysis. Overall, mean scores clustered around moderate levels, suggesting a balanced perception of migration governance outcomes. The effectiveness of Libya–Italy migration policies was rated relatively low (M = 2.6, SD = 0.8), while human rights protection in Libya recorded one of the lowest scores (M = 2.2, SD = 0.7), indicating persistent concerns. Political cooperation showed a

moderate level (M = 3.1, SD = 0.9), whereas sustainability of governance approaches remained limited (M = 2.5, SD = 0.8).

Within **H1 (Push–Pull Drivers)**, strong agreement was observed for political instability (M = 4.3, SD = 0.6) and economic hardship (M = 4.2, SD = 0.7), indicating high consensus (>75%) on structural drivers of migration. Environmental pressures also demonstrated notable influence (M = 3.9, SD = 0.8). For **H2 (Power Relations)**, respondents moderately agreed that migration is used as a bargaining tool (M = 3.8, SD = 0.7) and that EU influence shapes Libyan policy (M = 3.9, SD = 0.6), suggesting recognition of asymmetrical governance dynamics. In **H3 (Securitisation)**, security policies showed moderate effectiveness (M = 3.2, SD = 0.8), **however** negative impacts on human rights were strongly perceived (M = 4.1, SD = 0.7), with over 70% indicating adverse outcomes. **In contrast**, **H4 (Sustainability Governance)** recorded the highest agreement levels, particularly for institutional strengthening (M = 4.4, SD = 0.6) and multilateral cooperation (M = 4.3, SD = 0.7), indicating broad support (>80%) for integrated governance approaches. These patterns suggest that while current governance is perceived as limited in effectiveness, sustainability-oriented strategies may offer more coherent explanatory and policy value.

Table 3. Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes and Determinants (n = 417)

Scale	Item	Mean ± SD
DV	Effectiveness of Libya–Italy migration policies	2.6 ± 0.8
	Human rights protection in Libya	2.2 ± 0.7
	Political cooperation between Libya and Italy	3.1 ± 0.9
	Sustainability of governance approaches	2.5 ± 0.8
	Balance between security and humanitarian concerns	2.7 ± 0.8
	Addressing root causes of migration	2.4 ± 0.9
	Institutional capacity for migration management	2.8 ± 0.8
	Overall governance improvement	2.6 ± 0.8
IV1 (H1)	Political instability increases migration	4.3 ± 0.6
	Economic hardship drives migration	4.2 ± 0.7
	Environmental pressures influence migration	3.9 ± 0.8
	Lack of employment opportunities	4.1 ± 0.7
	Weak border controls facilitate migration	3.7 ± 0.9
	Smuggling networks enable migration	4.0 ± 0.7
IV2 (H2)	Libya uses migration as bargaining tool	3.8 ± 0.7
	Italy exerts pressure on Libya	3.6 ± 0.8
	Agreements reflect unequal power relations	3.9 ± 0.6

	EU influence shapes Libyan decisions	3.9 ± 0.6
	Migration affects diplomatic relations	3.7 ± 0.7
IV3 (H3)	Externalisation reduces migration	3.0 ± 0.9
	Security policies improve management	3.2 ± 0.8
	Interception increases vulnerability	4.0 ± 0.7
	Securitisation harms human rights	4.1 ± 0.7
	Policies prioritise security over rights	4.2 ± 0.6
IV4 (H4)	Institutional strengthening improves governance	4.4 ± 0.6
	Environmental action reduces migration	4.1 ± 0.7
	Rights-based approaches more effective	4.2 ± 0.6
	Multilateral cooperation is essential	4.3 ± 0.7
	Long-term development reduces migration	4.2 ± 0.7
	Balanced sustainability approach required	4.5 ± 0.5

Hypotheses Testing Results

The final stage of statistical analysis examined four hypotheses relating to migration governance across Libya to Europe and its political and sustainability implications. Prior to hypothesis testing, data were assessed for normality using the Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests, alongside visual inspection of histograms and Q–Q plots. Results indicated approximate normal distribution across all composite variables, with skewness and kurtosis values within acceptable thresholds (±1), supporting the assumption of a bell-shaped curve. This justified the application of parametric tests, including Pearson's correlation, independent samples t-tests, and multiple linear regression. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, with 95% confidence intervals reported. Reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency across all scales (Cronbach's α ranged between 0.81 and 0.89), indicating acceptable measurement validity.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposed that migration flows are significantly associated with political, economic, and environmental push–pull factors. Pearson's correlation analysis supported this hypothesis, demonstrating strong positive associations between the Push–Pull Drivers Scale (IV1) and Sustainable Migration Governance Outcomes (DV) ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Among the components, political instability and economic hardship showed the strongest correlations ($r = 0.52$ and $r = 0.49$ respectively, $p < 0.001$), while environmental pressures demonstrated a moderate but significant relationship ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that structural drivers may play a substantial role in shaping migration patterns, consistent with push–pull and environmental migration frameworks.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) examined whether migration governance reflects asymmetrical power relations between Libya and Italy. Pearson's correlation indicated a significant relationship between the Power Relations Scale (IV2) and the dependent variable ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$). Independent samples t-tests further revealed significant differences between stakeholder groups, particularly between policymakers and civil society actors ($t = 3.87$, $df = 415$, $p < 0.001$), with policymakers reporting higher perceived effectiveness of diplomatic arrangements. These findings may suggest that migration governance is influenced by unequal bargaining dynamics, aligning with political realism and power relations theory.

Hypothesis 3 (H3) proposed that securitised and externalised migration policies are associated with increased humanitarian risks and reduced protection outcomes. Correlation analysis confirmed a significant negative relationship between Securitisation Policy Impact (IV3) and human rights-related components of the dependent variable ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$). Multiple regression analysis further indicated that securitisation variables significantly predicted lower human rights protection scores ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.001$), while explaining a meaningful proportion of variance ($R^2 = 0.29$, $F(1, 415) = 85.62$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that security-focused approaches may be associated with adverse humanitarian outcomes, consistent with securitisation theory.

Hypothesis 4 (H4) examined whether a sustainability-oriented governance framework provides a stronger explanatory model than security-focused approaches alone. Multiple regression analysis supported this hypothesis, with the Sustainability-Oriented Governance Scale (IV4) showing a strong positive relationship with migration governance outcomes ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$). The model explained 42% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.42$, $F(3, 413) = 98.14$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a higher explanatory power compared to securitisation-focused models. Components such as institutional reform and multilateral cooperation demonstrated the strongest contributions, suggesting that integrated governance approaches may offer more effective explanations of migration outcomes within a sustainability framework. [Table 4 about here].

Table 4. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results (n = 417)

Hypothesis	**Statistical Test Used**	**Result**	**Significance**	**Interpretation**
H1: Push–pull factors are associated with migration flows	Pearson's correlation	$r = 0.48$	$p < 0.001$	Supported
H2: Migration governance reflects power asymmetry	Correlation + t-test	$r = 0.44$; $t = 3.87$	$p < 0.001$	Supported

H3: Securitisation increases humanitarian risks	Correlation + Regression	$r = -0.46$; $\beta = -0.39$; $R^2 = 0.29$	$p < 0.001$	Supported
H4: Sustainability framework explains outcomes better	Multiple regression	$\beta = 0.57$; $R^2 = 0.42$	$p < 0.001$	Supported

Table 5.1 presents the characteristics of the qualitative participants included in the study. A total of 20 participants were recruited from diverse stakeholder groups involved in migration governance, humanitarian response, security management, academic research, and policy development related to irregular migration across Libya to Europe. Male participants represented the majority of the sample, while policymakers, humanitarian actors, academics, and security officials provided varied institutional perspectives on migration governance and Libya–Italy relations. Most participants were within the 35–54 age range and possessed postgraduate qualifications alongside extensive professional experience in migration-related fields. Participants were drawn primarily from Libya, with additional representation from Italy and international organisations, reflecting the transnational nature of migration governance in the Central Mediterranean context. All participants reported direct professional or field experience related to migration governance, humanitarian response, border management, or migration policy implementation.

Table 5.1 Characteristics of Qualitative Participants (n = 20)

Variable	**Category**	**n (%)**
Gender	Male	13 (65.0%)
	Female	7 (35.0%)
Stakeholder Category	Policymaker / Government official	5 (25.0%)
	Academic / Migration researcher	4 (20.0%)
	Civil society / Humanitarian representative	5 (25.0%)
	Security / Border management officer	4 (20.0%)
	International organisation representative	2 (10.0%)
Age Group	25–34 years	4 (20.0%)
	35–44 years	8 (40.0%)
	45–54 years	6 (30.0%)
	55 years and above	2 (10.0%)

Education Level	Bachelor's degree	7 (35.0%)
	Master's degree	9 (45.0%)
	Doctoral degree	4 (20.0%)
Country / Institutional Context	Libya	13 (65.0%)
	Italy	4 (20.0%)
	EU / International organisation	3 (15.0%)
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	3 (15.0%)
	5–10 years	8 (40.0%)
	More than 10 years	9 (45.0%)
Direct Experience with Migration Governance	Yes	20 (100%)
	No	0 (0.0%)

Table 5.2 presents the qualitative findings organised into three main themes reflecting participants' perspectives on illegal migration across Libya to Europe and its relationship with migration governance and Libya–Italy political relations. The first theme, Drivers and Dynamics of Irregular Migration, captures participants' accounts of the political, economic, environmental, and structural pressures shaping migration movements, alongside the role of smuggling networks and weak border governance. The second theme, Migration Governance and Libya–Italy Political Relations, reflects discussions surrounding migration externalisation, asymmetric political relations, institutional fragmentation, and governance limitations affecting migration management. The third theme, Humanitarian Consequences and Sustainable Migration Governance, highlights concerns related to migrant protection, detention conditions, and humanitarian vulnerability, while also identifying proposals for more sustainable and rights-oriented migration governance approaches. Together, these themes illustrate how participants connected migration flows with governance structures, political interests, humanitarian conditions, and long-term institutional challenges within the Central Mediterranean migration context.

Table 5.2: Themes, Sub-Themes, and Sub–Sub-Themes Related to Illegal Migration Across Libya to Europe

Main Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Sub–Sub-Theme / Code**
1. Drivers and Dynamics of Irregular Migration	1.1 Push Factors and Structural Pressures	Political instability and insecurity
		Economic hardship and unemployment

		Environmental and climate-related pressures
	1.2 Migration Networks and Transit Dynamics	Smuggling and trafficking systems
		Weak border governance
		Libya as a transit corridor
2. Migration Governance and Libya–Italy Political Relations	2.1 Externalisation and Power Relations	EU influence on Libyan migration policy
		Migration as a political bargaining tool
		Unequal institutional dependence
	2.2 Institutional and Governance Challenges	Fragmented governance structures
		Weak coordination and enforcement
		Limited institutional capacity
3. Humanitarian Consequences and Sustainable Migration Governance	3.1 Human Rights and Migrant Protection	Detention conditions and abuse
		Vulnerability of women and children
		Lack of legal protection mechanisms
	3.2 Sustainability-Oriented Governance Approaches	Rights-based migration governance
		Regional and multilateral cooperation
		Long-term development and resilience strategies

5.X.1 Theme 1: Drivers and Dynamics of Irregular Migration

This theme reflects how participants described the structural, political, and socioeconomic conditions shaping irregular migration across Libya towards Europe. Participants consistently linked migration

movements to armed conflict, political instability, unemployment, poverty, and insecurity within countries of origin and transit. Several participants suggested that migration decisions were frequently driven by the perception that Europe offered greater stability and economic opportunity, while deteriorating living conditions in parts of Africa encouraged outward movement. One participant explained that "many migrants leave because they feel there is no future in their own country anymore, especially with unemployment and insecurity increasing every year" [P4, Male, Academic Expert]. Another participant stated that "for some people, migration is no longer a choice, it becomes a survival strategy linked to conflict and poverty" [P9, Female, Civil Society Representative]. Environmental pressures, including drought and declining agricultural livelihoods, were also identified as contributing factors increasing migration pressures in several African regions.

Participants additionally described Libya as a major transit corridor due to weak border governance, political fragmentation, and its geographic proximity to Europe. Smuggling and trafficking networks were repeatedly identified as influential actors facilitating migration flows across southern Libya and coastal regions. One participant noted that "smuggling groups benefit from weak state authority and control important routes through the desert and coastal areas" [P12, Male, Immigration Officer]. Another participant indicated that "many migrants rely on informal networks and false promises from traffickers during the journey" [P6, Female, International Organisation Representative]. Overall, migration dynamics were portrayed as interconnected with broader governance failures, regional instability, and transnational trafficking systems.

5.X.2 Theme 2: Migration Governance and Libya–Italy Political Relations

This theme reflects participants' perspectives regarding migration governance and its influence on political relations between Libya, Italy, and the European Union. Participants frequently described migration governance as shaped by unequal political influence, externalisation policies, and institutional fragmentation within Libya. Migration was often portrayed not only as a humanitarian issue, but also as a political instrument affecting diplomatic negotiations and regional security cooperation. One participant explained that "migration has become deeply connected to political negotiations between Libya, Italy, and the European Union" [P15, Male, Policymaker]. Another participant suggested that "European governments focus heavily on border control while Libya struggles with fragmented institutions and weak coordination" [P2, Female, Academic Expert].

Participants also highlighted the influence of European externalisation strategies on Libyan migration governance. Several participants argued that migration agreements frequently prioritised European security concerns over sustainable governance and humanitarian protection. One participant noted that "Italy and the EU provide support mainly to reduce arrivals to Europe, not necessarily to improve conditions for migrants inside Libya" [P18, Female, International Organisation Representative].

Similarly, another participant stated that “migration cooperation reflects unequal power relations because Libya depends on European political and financial support” [P7, Male, Civil Society Representative]. Institutional fragmentation, overlapping authorities, and limited enforcement capacity were repeatedly identified as barriers restricting effective migration governance and long-term policy implementation.

5.X.3 Theme 3: Humanitarian Consequences and Sustainable Migration Governance

This theme reflects participants’ accounts of the humanitarian implications associated with irregular migration management alongside discussions concerning more sustainable governance approaches. Participants consistently described serious human rights concerns affecting migrants inside Libya, including detention conditions, exploitation, trafficking, violence, and lack of legal protection. Vulnerable groups, particularly women, children, and asylum seekers, were considered especially exposed to abuse and insecurity. One participant explained that “many migrants experience violence, detention, and exploitation because there are very limited protection mechanisms available” [P11, Female, Human Rights Representative]. Another participant noted that “women and children are among the most vulnerable groups, especially inside detention centres and smuggling routes” [P14, Male, NGO Representative].

Participants frequently linked humanitarian risks to security-focused migration policies and weak institutional oversight. Several participants argued that current approaches concentrated heavily on border control and interceptions while neglecting long-term protection and development strategies. One participant stated that “security measures alone cannot solve migration problems because the root causes remain unresolved” [P1, Male, Academic Expert]. Another participant suggested that “sustainable migration governance should combine security, human rights, environmental resilience, and economic development together” [P19, Female, Policymaker]. Regional cooperation, institutional reform, legal migration pathways, and local development initiatives were repeatedly identified as important components of a more sustainable governance framework capable of reducing migration pressures while limiting humanitarian risks.

5. Discussion

The present study examined illegal migration across Libya to Europe and analysed its implications for Libya–Italy political relations through a mixed-methods sustainability and migration governance framework. A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted to integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence concerning migration drivers, governance structures, securitisation policies, and sustainability-oriented approaches. Quantitative data were collected from 417 participants representing multiple stakeholder categories, including academics, policymakers, civil society representatives,

immigration officers, and international organisation actors. In parallel, qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected participants possessing direct expertise and field experience in migration governance, humanitarian protection, border management, and regional political relations. The qualitative sample size was considered appropriate for thematic depth and analytical saturation within a relatively specialised participant group, consistent with contemporary qualitative methodological guidance (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2021). Quantitative findings identified statistically significant relationships between push–pull factors, migration diplomacy, securitisation policies, sustainability-oriented governance, and migration governance outcomes. Thematic analysis further generated three interconnected themes concerning migration drivers and transit dynamics, Libya–Italy governance relations, and humanitarian consequences linked to sustainable migration governance approaches.

Quantitative findings supported H1, demonstrating that political instability, economic hardship, and environmental pressures were significantly associated with migration governance outcomes. These findings suggest that irregular migration across Libya is influenced by interconnected structural push–pull factors rather than isolated causes. Political and economic pressures showed the strongest associations, while environmental stressors also contributed to migration vulnerability. This interpretation aligns with migration literature indicating that Mediterranean migration flows are shaped by overlapping political, socio-economic, and environmental drivers (Alsharif, 2024; Kashiem, 2018). Consistent with push–pull perspectives, insecurity, unemployment, governance weakness, and livelihood deterioration remain important migration determinants (Any and Yıldız, 2025). Qualitative findings reinforced these results, with participants identifying insecurity, unemployment, environmental decline, fragmented authority, and trafficking networks as major migration drivers. These findings correspond with studies highlighting the role of governance fragmentation and informal migration economies in facilitating irregular migration through Libya (Phillips, 2020; Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019). Therefore, sustainable migration governance may require integrating economic development, environmental resilience, and institutional stabilisation alongside border management.

Findings also supported H2, indicating significant relationships between migration governance outcomes and perceptions of asymmetrical power relations between Libya and Italy. Differences among stakeholder groups suggested that perceptions of governance effectiveness varied according to institutional positions. These findings reflect political realism perspectives, which argue that Mediterranean migration governance is influenced by unequal bargaining relations shaped by European security interests and Libyan institutional dependency (Paoletti, 2011; Ceccorulli, 2022). Similar conclusions were reported by Okpanachi and Kaunert (2025), who emphasised the influence of instability, fragmented authority, and external political pressures on Libyan migration governance. Qualitative evidence further indicated that migration agreements are often perceived as instruments of

diplomatic negotiation influenced by European externalisation priorities. Participants highlighted weak coordination, institutional dependency, and limited governance capacity as barriers to sustainable cooperation. These results suggest the need for more balanced Libya–Italy partnerships based on institutional strengthening, transparency, and shared responsibility.

H3 was also supported, as securitisation-oriented migration policies demonstrated a significant negative relationship with humanitarian protection outcomes. Quantitative results indicated that stronger security-focused approaches were associated with lower protection indicators, suggesting potential humanitarian consequences of restrictive migration governance. These findings align with securitisation theory and previous research showing that migration control strategies frequently prioritise border enforcement over human rights protection (Farag and Tayie, 2024; Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019). Concerns regarding detention conditions, exploitation, forced returns, and limited protection mechanisms have also been documented in Libya (Alsharif, 2024; IOM, 2023). Qualitative findings reinforced these concerns, with participants reporting detention, trafficking, violence, and insufficient legal safeguards affecting vulnerable groups. The findings indicate that excessive reliance on securitisation may intensify migrant vulnerability and highlight the importance of stronger protection systems, humanitarian monitoring, and safe migration pathways.

Finally, H4 findings demonstrated that sustainability-oriented governance approaches provided stronger explanatory power than security-centred models alone. Institutional reform, environmental resilience, multilateral cooperation, and rights-based governance were positively associated with improved migration governance outcomes. These results support scholarship advocating integrated approaches that address structural migration drivers and humanitarian challenges simultaneously (Rossi, 2024; Creswell and Inoue, 2025). Similar arguments were presented by Any and Yıldız (2025), emphasising that migration governance in Southern Libya requires development initiatives, institutional reform, community participation, and regional cooperation. Qualitative findings further highlighted the importance of combining humanitarian protection, environmental adaptation, employment opportunities, and governance reform. Overall, the study suggests that effective Libya–Italy migration governance requires multidimensional strategies integrating sustainability, institutional resilience, regional cooperation, and human rights protection rather than relying primarily on restrictive deterrence approaches.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Contemporary migration governance literature highlights that irregular migration across the Mediterranean cannot be fully understood through security-based approaches alone, particularly in fragmented transit states facing institutional and humanitarian challenges (Paoletti, 2011; Phillips, 2020; Ceccorulli, 2022). This study advances the debate by integrating sustainability governance,

migration diplomacy, securitisation theory, and push–pull perspectives within a mixed-methods framework. Findings indicate that political instability, economic pressures, environmental stress, and governance asymmetries influence migration outcomes, while institutional fragmentation and limited protection mechanisms increase migrant vulnerability. The study contributes by framing irregular migration as a multidimensional governance challenge requiring integrated policies combining reform, protection, resilience, and cooperation.

7. Limitations

Several methodological and contextual limitations may influence the interpretation of the present findings. The cross-sectional quantitative design captured stakeholder perceptions at a single point in time, limiting the ability to assess changing migration dynamics or evolving Libya–Italy political relations over extended periods. Although the survey sample included diverse stakeholder groups, unequal institutional access may have affected representational balance, particularly among policymakers and security actors operating in politically sensitive contexts. The reliance on self-reported perceptions may additionally introduce response bias, social desirability effects, or politically cautious responses regarding migration governance and humanitarian conditions. Qualitative interviews provided substantial contextual depth; however, conducting interviews within migration-sensitive environments may have restricted participants' willingness to discuss controversial political arrangements or informal governance practices openly. Furthermore, direct access to migrants, detention facilities, and active trafficking routes remained operationally difficult due to security concerns and institutional restrictions. Despite these limitations, integrating survey and interview evidence strengthened interpretive depth and enhanced triangulation across governance, humanitarian, and political dimensions.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may benefit from adopting longitudinal and comparative research designs capable of examining how migration governance dynamics evolve across different political phases within Libya and the broader Mediterranean region. Comparative studies involving additional transit states such as Tunisia, Morocco, or Egypt could provide deeper understanding regarding similarities and differences in migration governance structures, securitisation practices, and humanitarian outcomes. Further investigation involving migrants themselves, particularly women, children, and trafficking survivors, may additionally strengthen understanding of lived migration experiences that remain underrepresented within institutional analyses. Quantitative studies incorporating larger multinational datasets and advanced structural modelling techniques could also improve understanding of the interactions between environmental pressures, political instability, and migration diplomacy. Greater integration of local governance perspectives, municipal actors, tribal communities, and non-state institutions may further

clarify how migration governance operates beyond formal state structures. Future interdisciplinary studies combining environmental science, political geography, and migration policy analysis may also contribute towards more integrated sustainability-oriented migration governance frameworks.

9. Conclusion

The present study has examined illegal migration across Libya to Europe and has analysed its implications for Libya–Italy political relations through a mixed-methods sustainability and migration governance framework. Quantitative findings have demonstrated that political instability, economic hardship, environmental pressures, securitisation policies, and asymmetrical governance relations have significantly shaped migration governance outcomes. Qualitative findings have further revealed how institutional fragmentation, weak border governance, trafficking networks, and humanitarian protection gaps have influenced migration experiences and policy effectiveness. Sustainability-oriented governance approaches integrating institutional reform, regional cooperation, environmental resilience, and rights-based protection have demonstrated stronger explanatory value than security-focused approaches alone. The study has therefore contributed to ongoing debates concerning Mediterranean migration governance by highlighting the interconnected relationships between migration, sustainability, political power, and humanitarian protection within fragile governance environments.

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Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Zawia, Libya (Ref. No: UZ-2026-1147), prior to data collection. All participants received clear information about the study aims, procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained electronically for the online survey and verbally for interviews conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing identifying information and assigning pseudonyms to interview participants. All data were securely stored in password-protected systems accessible only to the researcher and will be retained until December 2028 before permanent deletion. All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made

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