



INTERROGATING ECONOMIC RE-BIRTH AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION OF THE SOUTHEAST STATES OF NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT: *What is now known as the Southeast region of Nigeria emerged as an outcome of the National Constitutional Conference convened by the late Nigeria Military leader, General Sani Abacha's administration, and held from June 1994 to June 1995. The Southeast region is currently home to five core-Igbo-speaking states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. These five states were major parts of the old Eastern Region of Nigeria, which witnessed sustained growth in diverse sectors of its economy before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967. Specifically, from the mid-1950s, small, medium and large scale industries had sprouted up in many parts of the region, particularly in the major towns of Aba, Enugu, Umuahia and Onitsha (mostly inhabited by the Igbo). The Golden Guinea Breweries located in Aba; the Cement Company located at Nkalagu, near Enugu; and many other enterprises (mainly private sector-driven) had commenced manufacturing of goods, as trade and services flourished, but the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil war in July 1967 aborted the visible economic growth in Igboland. However, although the Igbo (who lost the war) were "reintegrated into Nigeria" when the war ended in January 1970, they have found it very difficult till date to recreate their glorious economic past. Since 1970, most Igbo-owned industries, investments and firms are located in areas outside Igboland, which has impacted negatively on the economic growth of the region. It is against this background that this paper interrogates the question of economic rebirth and economic integration of the southeast region of Nigeria. Adopting the eclectic research method, it highlights the problems inhibiting the trend, examines the prospects, and proffers solutions, which, if implemented, could lead to the economic resurgence and integration of states in the Southeast region of Nigeria by 2030.*

KEYWORDS: Southeast, Economic Re-birth, Reintegration, Problems, Prospects, Igboland.



INTRODUCTION

Historically, what are now the five Southeast states of Nigeria formed the greater parts of the old Eastern Region of Nigeria, which also included four of the states (Rivers, Cross River, Akwa-Ibom and Bayelsa) in the modern South-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It was the creation of twelve states in Nigeria by General Gowon's Federal Military Government in May 1967 that led to the disintegration of the region. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the old Eastern region was economically viable in the 1950s up till the end of the First Republic in January 1966. The Southeast region, our area of emphasis, is in Igbo land and it formed more than two-third of the old Eastern region of Nigeria, during which the resources of the region were proactively utilized by its political leaders to the extent that many industries were established, and there existed employment opportunities for the teeming youths in the region (Nwabughuogu, 1993:53).

In support of the above, Kilby (1969:203) confirmed the trend in the growth of small-scale industries across Igbo land, particularly in Aba, and concluded that the fastest growing sectors in the 1950s till the mid 1960s were manufacturing, processing, utilities and services. Specifically, the government of the old Eastern Nigeria established a Regional Conglomerate, the Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC), which harnessed the abundant resources of the region and utilized them for productive purposes. Igwe (2006:72) observed that a principal factor that facilitated the successes recorded by the ENDC was effective planning. Other factors were proper management of resources, in addition to purposeful leadership, which existed at all levels in the Eastern region during the period.

Our position in this paper is that the old Eastern region of Nigeria (of which Igbo land formed the bulk) had the potentials of attaining sustained growth that could lead to development, but the outbreak of Nigerian political crises in 1966 that culminated in the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War in July 1967 aborted it. Buttressing the economic successes achieved in Igbo land before 1967, Agwu (2000) confirmed that through the Eastern Region's Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Rural Development, poultry farming was encouraged in Igbo land, to the extent that the available quantity of eggs sustained the demands of Igbo land and the entire region, while some quantities were exported to Ghana in 1965. However, these economic successes achieved in Igbo land were scuttled by the Nigeria-Biafra War, and the people of Igbo land had to rebuild their economy at the end of war in 1970.

Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to dissect/appraise the knotty issue of Southeastern economic rebirth and integration (given the successes achieved before 1967), the problems therein and the prospects of actualizing economic integration of the five states in the Southeast geopolitical zone (Igbo land) of Nigeria. Without mincing words, the task before this paper is to unravel the problems hindering sustained economic growth and economic integration of Igbo land. Thus, in order to achieve the aim of this paper, it is vital to explain the Southeast or Igbo land as it is put to use herein because Southeast forms the core of Igbo land. In modern Nigeria, the Igbo occupy the Southeast geo-political zone of the country, made up of five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Nonetheless, Igbo-speaking people also form the major ethnic groups in Delta and Rivers states (although some of these claim they are non-Igbo).

However, for the purpose of analysis, the Igbo as used in this paper denotes the group that speaks Igbo language (in diverse dialects) in the five Southeastern states of Nigeria. Similarly, the Igbo as put to use here have a lot of things in common, particularly their cultural outlook,



a common sense of being Igbo, being synonymous with migration and generally having the penchant to live in other parts of Nigeria, which made Ozigbo (1999: 117) to describe the Igbo as “a migrant race.” There is also a general consensus among the Igbo that they are marginalized in the political economy of the Nigerian state.

The Igbo in this discourse was a major part of the Eastern region of Nigeria that seceded from Nigeria and declared an independent state of Biafra. This secession of the Igbo and the whole of the old Eastern region of Nigeria led to the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War in July 1967. The war lasted for thirty months, but ended with the defeat of Biafra and its official surrender to the Federal Government of Nigeria on 15 January, 1970. The war was fought mostly on Igbo land, due mainly to the Federal Government of Nigeria’s war policy, which was characterized by the economic blockade of Biafra. Thus, the end of war saw the total devastation of Igbo land, the main theatre of war. The Igbo lost virtually everything at the end of war, their loved ones, and properties across Nigeria; they were dehumanized, but one thing was left for the Igbo at the end of the war in January 1970—they did not lose the Igbo “resilient spirit of survival in any situation.”

The Southeast is endowed with both human and natural resources. The discovery of petroleum resources in Southern Nigeria in the late 1950s opened up Igboland to the petroleum economy. Today, three Igbo states: Imo, Abia and Anambra (which was recently officially proclaimed a petroleum-producing state) are recognized oil-producing states in the country. Within the land mass of these three states, there are crude oil, phosphate, zinc, salt, lignite, gypsum, marquisate, limestone, and gold among others (Nenge, 2019). Although Ebonyi and Enugu states are not yet recognized officially as petroleum-producing states in Nigeria, there exist oil and gas resources in the states (although, not yet explored and exploited in commercial quantities).

The two states also have deposits of diverse solid minerals such as a large deposit of zinc ore found in Enyiagba, near Afikpo; large reserves of limestone and kaolin; and salt in Uburu, Oshiri and Okposi. Ebonyi State also has deposits of gypsum and gold in small quantities. On its part, Enugu State has deposits of coal, iron ore, limestone and gypsum, alum, tin ore, zinc ore and evidence of oil. No doubt, all these natural resources, if well utilized, will certainly transform the Southeast. It is also worthy to note that as at 2015, the southeast has an estimated population of 30 million inhabitants (www.wikipedia.org).

As observed above, the Southeast (Igbo land) was the theatre of the Nigeria-Biafra war, which devastated the whole of Igbo land, and survivors of the civil war began life afresh at the end of the war in January 1970. It is against this backdrop that this paper interrogates the economic re-birth of Igbo land from 1970 till 2023. Thus, for the purpose of analysis and clarity, other than this introduction, the paper is divided into the following subheadings: post-war reconstruction in Igbo land till 1975, and Southeast in the political economy of Nigeria; economic and social structure of Igbo land since 1970; contributions of the Igbo to Nigerian economic life since 1970; problems and prospects of economic re-birth and integration of the southeast; and a conclusion.



Post-War Reconstruction in Igbo Land till 1975 and Southeast in the Political Economy of Nigeria

At the end of the war, Igbo land had no option other than to accept to be known as East Central State, which was created in Nigeria with eleven other states by General Gowon on 27 May, 1967. Dr Ukpabi Asika, who General Gowon had appointed as its administrator in 1967, retained his position as post-civil war governor of the state. No doubt, after thirty months of intense fighting, the last shots of the Nigeria-Biafra war were fired and the short-lived republic of Biafra capitulated. By the time the war ended, Biafra was smoldering rubble. It has been difficult to place a definite figure of the casualties of the war, especially that of the Igbo. Alexander A. Madiebo (1980: xi) affirmed that in the end, the whole exercise of splitting and re-uniting Nigeria cost the nation over three million lives. Ngozi Ojiakor (2014: 2) believed that over five million lives were lost in the war on both sides, with the Eastern Region particularly the Igbo accounting for 90 percent of whatever figure that was reached. According to Chinua Achebe (2012: 227), the Igbo head count at the end of the war was perhaps three million dead, which was approximately 20 percent of the entire population.

There were other areas of devastation in Igbo land at the end of the war. Apart from the dead, many others were wounded and permanent physical deformity among the Igbo was common. Furthermore, there were cases of massive destruction of Igbo properties, looting, arson and other forms of aggression that were meted out on the people. These acts of aggression led to other heinous social conditions which included permanent dislocation of family ties as some members migrated to unknown places where they sought refuge and never came back. What is more? In the economic realm, the war led to a distasteful situation of massive unemployment among the Igbo people. Both the private and public sectors of the Eastern Region's economy grossly suffered. Major industries were either destroyed or closed down. Essential infrastructures were not spared in the carnage. Hospitals, communication facilities, transportation infrastructure, educational facilities, oil refineries, among others were laid to waste. Notable markets across Igbo land were destroyed. The Onitsha Main Market, which grew to be the acclaimed largest market in the West African sub-region, was reduced to rubble during the war.

Considering the foregoing, the military government of General Yakubu Gowon set out to attempt a reconstruction of the war-battered Igbo land based on the stated spirit of "no victor no vanquished." Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the federal military government (FMG) under the leadership of General Gowon introduced a policy of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (the 3Rs). As explicated by Olukunle Ojeleye (2010: 76), the thrust of the 3Rs was to create an atmosphere conducive for resettling those displaced and others who had fled their homes; reunite families and friends; rebuild physical facilities which had suffered some damage during the civil war; and place demobilized armed forces personnel in gainful employment in civilian life. Ojeleye further observed that in contrast to other post-civil war policies on the African continent, the 3Rs was multifaceted rather than being explicitly demobilization, disarmament and reintegration focused. It is claimed that the need for an overarching post-war policy in Nigeria, in contrast to an explicitly disarmament, demobilization and reintegration-focused policy, was informed by the difficulty of the federal government in identifying a Biafran combatant from a Biafran civilian.

The bedrock of the 3Rs policy was the Second National Development Plan 1970-74 (SNDP) for post-war reconstruction which had been under discussion during 1969. In a nationwide



broadcast on 11 November 1970, General Gowon stated that the plan was “another decisive step in the nation’s forward march to progress and stability” and the choice of a four-year period was anchored on the need to “enable the economy to recover fully from the strains and stresses of the war, and at the same time short enough to remind us of the challenges of post-war reconstruction.” About 40 per cent of the total net public sector programme of £780 million was devoted to the reconstruction element of the SNDP (Ojeleye, 2010: 76).

The federal government’s attempt to reconstruct Igbo land after the war has been variously appraised with the results of the effort eliciting mixed reactions. Paul Obi-Ani (1998: 11) believed that the efforts did not yield desired results. This situation may partly be blamed on the insincerity of the government of Gowon and the lack of empathy on the side of the Igbo leaders charged with executing the reconstruction programmes. As Paul Obi-Ani explicated:

...feeling of insecurity and despair prevailed among the Igbo. All of Igboland was studded with innumerable road blocks mounted by the victorious Nigerian Army. The people’s plight was confounded by a variety of other factors. First, the Administrator of East Central State, Mr. Ukpabi Asika, a Federal loyalist and General Gowon’s appointee, did not seem to appreciate the enormity of the plight of the Igbo people.

Generally, most Igbo share the view that full integration of the Igbo was not achieved contrary to Gowon’s pledges, as the Igbo were discriminated against in all the sectors of the economy such as employment, appointments, capital investment and so on. Worst of all was the implementation of the Banking Obligation (Eastern States) Decree of 1970. Ahazuem (2008: 212) opined that the decree was a form of demonetization of the Igbo, as the decree nullified all pre-war savings of the Igbo. In its implementation, a paltry sum of twenty Nigerian pounds was paid to each Igbo depositor regardless of the amount of his pre-war deposit balance. It was with this paltry sum of money that the average post-war Igbo family began a fresh life in a reunited Nigeria. Thus, Gowon’s sincerity at reconstruction of the country is questioned as his objective of separating the military from the politics of the country could not be met. In fact, the transitional programme to civilian rule initiated by him evaporated with the administration as the military junta was deposed in a military coup that saw General Murtala Muhammad’s ascendance to power in July 1975.

General Murtala Muhammad’s rule as Head of state was short-lived, as he was assassinated in February, 1976—less than seven months in office. However, he earlier created seven additional states in Nigeria that brought the states in Nigeria to nineteen. Igbo land had two of these states as the old East Central state was carved into two: Anambra and Imo States. Igbo land benefited from state creation in 1991, when both Anambra and Imo states were each split into two, which resulted in the emergence of Enugu State with its capital at Enugu, and a new Anambra state with capital at Awka (from the old Anambra State). Abia state with headquarters at Umuahia was carved out from the old Imo state. In 1996, the military regime of General Sanni Abacha created six new states, one of which is Ebonyi, located in the southeast, which brought the number of states in the southeast to five. The state creation exercise of 1996 brought the total number of states in Nigeria to thirty-six (36). It is worthy to stress that the concept of geopolitical zones in Nigeria was suggested by the late former Vice President of Nigeria, Dr. Alexander Ekwueme, at the 1995 National Conference of Nigerian nationalities, and interest groups were convened by General Abacha, the Head of Nigeria’s military government. It was unanimously accepted by delegates and, from then, Nigeria became a federation of thirty-six states, carved out from six geopolitical zones.



Ironically, Southeast Nigeria consists of just five states, other zones consist of six states, excluding Northwest, which consists of seven states. This anomaly has made scholars and commentators to argue that Southeast, compared to the other geo-political zones of the federation, is marginalized in all ramifications (Igwe, 2010). The structural anomaly in state creation against the Igbo in Nigeria has serious financial implications. In this regard, since the states have been operationalised as the basis for the sharing of material and political resources through the federal character principle since 1979, the region with lesser number of states must necessarily lose out in the distribution of resources. It therefore appears to be an act of injustice to deny a major ethnic nationality in the country equality in state creation.

Similarly, with respect to local government creation, the Southeast zone (Igbo land) has the least, just 95 (Abia - 17, Anambra - 21, Ebonyi - 13, Enugu - 17, and Imo - 27), out of 774 local government areas in Nigeria (12.27% of the lot), whereas the Northwest zone with seven states has 181 local government areas or 23.69% (Ohaneze, 1999:6). This shows that the Igbo are generally marginalized in the political economy of the Nigerian state. With few local government areas, the Igbo have the least of federal constituencies among the geopolitical zones.

This means that with few local government areas, the Southeast zone receives the least annual revenue from the Federation account, as other than monthly allocation of revenue to states, there is also monthly allocation of revenue to the local government areas from the federation account. The Igbo through the auspices of the pan-Igbo socio-cultural group, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, presented a series of their marginalization to the Human Rights Violation Investigation Commission of Nigeria (Opota Panel), which was constituted by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999. Nonetheless, till date, the marginalization of the Igbo in Nigeria's political economy remains.

Economic and Social Structure of Igbo Land since 1970

Generally, from primordial times, agriculture was and remains the mainstay of Igbo economy. The overt importance the Igbo attached to agriculture is probably borne out of the uncertainty that surrounded trade and manufacturing. While trade and manufacturing were directly influenced by the market forces, agricultural production and the insurance against starvation were largely determined by the people's willingness to cultivate the land. Victor Uchendu (1965) had this to say of the Igbo as regards their prioritization of agriculture over other sectors of the economy:

To remind an Igbo that he is ori mgbe ahia loro, 'one who eats only when the market holds' is to humiliate him. This does not imply that traders are not respected: all it means is that the Igbo see farming as their chief occupation and trading as subsidiary not a substitute for it.

This shows that throughout history, the Igbo hardly trust another means of livelihood other than that which they directly provide for themselves through the cultivation of the soil. This does not however mean that the Igbo abhorred trading but it explicitly portrays the self-sufficiency of the Igbo man. This trait obviously informs the contemporary attitude of the average Igbo man towards working for another person for wages. The belief is that no one should determine when they "eat" or not. With this mindset, the people are prone to struggle for their own business enterprise where they will be able to determine the flow of their wealth. The foregoing development may have informed the contemporary Igbo's inclination for trade,



manufacturing and services, as Nigeria's economy kept de-emphasizing agricultural productivity. That is why in the Igbo states one finds a great number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as well as an appreciable number of large-scale enterprises (LSEs) owned by the indigenous people of the states.

The small and medium enterprises that emerged in Igbo land after the war were witnessed in the cities of Aba, Nnewi, Onitsha, and some other areas, where local artisans through indigenous raw materials and metal wastes fabricated categories of personal and household needs. Specifically, artisans in Aba have perfected shoe making to the extent that shoes and other products made in Aba became popular in many parts of Nigeria. It is due to the dexterity of these artisans who manufactured diverse products that are even exported to other countries in West Africa, that the acronym "**made in Aba**" became popular. In recent times, especially since the 1990s when the craze for foreign products became high in Nigeria, some products like shoes and hand bags manufactured in Aba were labeled with foreign countries as their places of production.

Generally, the industrial sector in Igbo land is mostly private sector driven. Though, in the 1980s and the 1990s, state governments in the Southeast established few industries; the attempted reactivation of the Nkalagu Cement Industry, the attempted reactivation of Aba textile industry, and the attempted reactivation of the Golden Guinea and Premier breweries all collapsed due to the human factor. Consequently, in present day Southeast Nigeria, the private sector controls virtually all thriving industries, whether small, medium or large-scale industries.

Among these are Innoson Automobile Manufacturing (IVM) located at Nnewi, manufacturers of vehicles, with about 50% of vehicle parts locally sourced, and Intafact Beverages Limited, owned by SabMiller, a multinational brewery and beverage conglomerate, producers of Hero Larger beer, Budweiser, Castle milk stout and Beta malt located in Onitsha. There are also many plastic fabrication firms such as Millennium Industries limited, Awka and Gincol Group limited, Owerri, among others. Other private sector-controlled industries in Igbo land include those engaged in pharmaceutical manufacturing such as Juhel (Nig.) limited based in Awka; chemical industries like Intercolor Industries limited, Enugu; aluminum and roofing sheet manufacturing; food processing industries; and firms that manufacture household products and toiletries, etc.

With regards to trade, this has been a major economic activity of the Igbo since the 1970s. Other than the traders within Igbo land, migrant wage earners, that includes itinerant Igbo traders abound throughout the thirty-six states of the Nigerian federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. In many cities across Nigeria, Igbo entrepreneurs dominate the import of vehicle spare parts and accessories, as well as import of pharmaceutical products. To date, Nnewi is popular as "the Mecca" of automobile parts, not just for the Igbo, but for the entire nation (Igwe, 2010: 124). Igbo traders are known to be the major distributors of goods and services to different states in Nigeria. The post-war survival instinct of the Igbo, with the introduction of "luxurious buses" on Nigerian roads as from the mid-1970s, made it possible for Igbo traders to convey diverse goods via the buses, even on night trips to areas where those goods were needed in Nigeria. This trend continues till date, and the introduction of electronic monetary transfer has facilitated the movement of goods by these Igbo traders.

In the service sector, the Igbo have not been found wanting; they have also contributed to the development of the motor transport industry in Nigeria since 1970 (Njoku, 2001: 145). A



notable post-civil war transport magnet was Chief Augustine Ilodibe (1932-2007), founder, Ekene Dili Chukwu Nigeria Limited, whose passion for and unwavering commitment to the success of road transport business contributed to the emergence of other transport companies in Igboland. He was the pioneer of modern “luxurious buses” on Nigerian roads.

In later years, other inter-state luxurious bus transport companies emerged in Igboland. In this category are Izuchukwu Transport Company, Chidiebere Transport Company, New Tarzan Transport Company, The Young Shall Grow Transport Company, among many others (Iweze, 2013). It was from the late 1990s that the state governments in Igboland became involved in road transport business, although, in recent times, mini-buses are common in inter-state travels from Igboland to other parts of the country.

Social and infrastructural development in Igbo land since 1970 has been a mixed grill, because most Igbo communities have imbibed the philosophy of “self help” to provide for their needs, with minimal contribution from the government. Most communities in Igboland during the period under review adopted the “community development method” in the provision of their basic infrastructure. Thus, Nwabughuogu (1993, 302-303) opined that the community development method not only utilizes traditional means to achieve modern result, but also economizes on scarce resources and strengthens the ties joining members of the community. Specifically, “the community development spirit” is in vogue throughout Igbo land, as it is common to see visible signs of projects in every Igbo community initiated and completed by the people, coordinated by their Town Unions, which became popular and was embraced by each Igbo community as from the 1970s.

Contributions of the Igbo to Nigerian Economic and Social Life since 1970

The preceding sections of this paper analyzed a series of economic, social structures of Igbo land from 1970 till 2023. No doubt, our analysis highlighted aspects of the Igbo during the period that was hitherto neglected. Thus, the sum total of our discussion in the previous sections showed that the Igbo (despite their defeat in the Nigeria-Biafra war) have made immense contributions to national economic and social life since 1970. In the economy, the ingenuity of Igbo traders in Onitsha and Nnewi markets in Igboland, the Alaba International market in Lagos and across other cities in Nigeria has revolutionized the import trade with Asian countries such as China, Pakistan, India and Taiwan.

Some of these Igbo traders have received trademarks of some firms in Asia, and commenced the replication of similar products in Nigeria (a sort of transfer of technology), while some had through their experiences established small/medium scale industries, thereby contributing to the nation’s quest for industrialization. Many Igbo entrepreneurs have also invested in various sectors of the Nigerian economy that have had a positive impact on the nation. Realistically, the political economy of the Igbo had been self motivated. The significant fact is that the war-time technological efforts laid the basis for Igbo innovations that came in later years. Recall that during the heat of war, the federal government cut off Biafra from the outside world through its effective economic blockade. Consequently, Igbo people’s traditional technological ingenuity was rejuvenated.

Thus, to solve its military and industrial needs in the wake of the blockade, the Biafran government constituted some of its best scientists and technicians into the Research and Production Board (RAP). Accordingly, Madiebo (1980) opined that RAP worked with the



belief that no problem was impossible to solve. RAP worked with local resources and contents, and delved into virtually all areas of needs in Biafra, from the building of refineries; they developed and built the Uli airstrip, believed to be one of the busiest airports during the period. RAP's developed indigenous arms industry served the immediate needs of Biafra in that period of war. It can be argued that the war-time industrial efforts of Igbo land (Southeast) implied that the blueprint for the industrial growth of the region was laid in the late 1960s.

Without doubt, some aspects of the social contributions of the Igbo manifest is their propensity as a migrant race, settling among other ethnic groups in Nigeria, and as well contributing to the socio-economic growth and transformation of such areas. For instance, it has been noticed that some of the valued properties (real estate) in Abuja belong to the Igbo (Igwe, 2010: 129). Many Igbo also own "choice" properties in many state capitals and cities across Nigeria. It is not in doubt that this Igbo attitude of investing all over Nigeria has facilitated national cohesion and socio-cultural integration. In the field of entertainment, the Igbo entrepreneurs and artists have launched the Nigerian movie industry on the global landscape. Of course, they played a pivotal role in the development of the brand, "Nollywood". The roles of renowned filmmakers, such as the late Amaka Igwe and Kenneth Nnebue, ensured the establishment and popularity of Nollywood across the globe. Musical acts such as P-Square, Phyno, and Flavour effectively made their marks in an environment where Yoruba influence formerly dominated the Nigerian music scene.

Until recently, there existed statistical evidence to support the claim that in terms of the contribution of the private sector (informal, non-formal and formal) to national wealth, Southeastern entrepreneurs all over the country (from Lagos to Abuja, Maiduguri to Port-Harcourt, etc) account for a far greater percent of non-oil Gross National Product than any other ethnic group in Nigeria (market surveys and interviews). However, in most recent times, especially from the year 2015, the economic fortunes of businesses of people from the Southeast extraction in Nigeria began to decline. This got worse in the year 2020, with the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted international trade transactions and had generally adverse effects on the global economy. Other than this, some economic policies of the central government in Nigeria; and general adverse socio-political cum insecurity problems have generally affected the economy of the five states in the Southeast, in particular, and Nigeria, as a whole. What then are the options for the Southeast (Igbo land) to bounce back to its former economic growth as witnessed before 1967?

Towards Southeast Economic Re-birth and Integration: Problems and Prospects

As observed in the preceding section, activities of entrepreneurs of Southeast extraction dwindled in recent times. However, although popular literature and opinions have harped on the robust activities of persons of Southeast extraction in the Nigerian economy since the end of civil war in 1970, the truth remains that the roles of these Igbo entrepreneurs are mainly outside the Southeast. The geographical zone known as Southeast Nigeria has realistically not witnessed sustained growth in any aspect of its economy since 1970. Southeast's economic potential is constrained by many structural issues, such as inadequate infrastructure and low capital formation of many businesses within the region.

Other factors that have also inhibited sustained economic growth of Igbo land include adverse government policies, i.e., inconsistencies and policy somersault of successive governments in the Southeast which have led to over-taxation of the few existing industries and businesses,



inadequate machineries in the few industries in the Southeast, non-availability/limited foreign exchange, and lack of confidence in the national currency, which has consistently dwindled when compared with other national currencies; general insecurity within the region that became well noticed in the last six years, which has constituted an obstacle to investment in the southeast; and ineffective leadership and high level of political corruption at all levels of governance in the southeast (though also a general problem in Nigeria).

Given the above scenario, how can Southeast economic re-birth and economic integration be actualized in the future? The answer to this lies in the hands of the people of the region: the indigenes, the three levels of governance in the region: community, local and state governments, major stakeholders within and outside the region; and peoples of the Southeast in the diaspora. Firstly, from the bottom-top approach, there must exist **harmonious living** among the communities, as constant intra/inter community crises have had adverse socio-economic effects on the region. The constant crises among communities in the Southeast have had adverse effects on economic activities in the hinterlands and have affected supplies of food crops to the cities.

Secondly, there is a need to **reactivate/revitalize the Igbo apprenticeship system**, which is almost non-existent in the southeast in recent years. The get-rich syndrome occasioned by the “yahoo-yahoo/internet business” has created a new culture of laziness in many youths in Igbo land to prefer questionable wealth to hard work, which characterizes the Igbo apprenticeship system. Parents, the school and religious organizations in the Southeast have roles to play to ensure that our youths imbibe the good cherished morals of Igbo society that will enable them to be proactive in life.

Thirdly, there is a need for governments at the local and state levels **to create an enabling environment for businesses to thrive** in the Southeast through proactive policies that could encourage both local and foreign investors to the Southeast. Fourthly, Southeastern entrepreneurs in other parts of the country **should look inward and recreate what they have created in other places in Igbo land** for the benefits of our people and the economic growth of the Southeast. Fifthly, there is a need for **a holistic development strategy** for the Southeast. This implies a comprehensive approach to the development of the Southeast. This entails that Igbo land must be integrated via transport and communications, inter-state highways, industrial estates, and common agricultural plantations. In this direction, what is needed urgently is a **Conglomerate** for the whole of the Southeast, like the defunct Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC) of the old Eastern Region of Nigeria, which proactively harnessed the resources of the old Eastern Nigeria and put them to productive use.

Sixthly, there must be **good governance** within the states in the Southeast. It is the attainment of good governance that can actualize all the laudable recommendations above. Governors in the region must be proactive and be servant-leaders, ready to make available democratic dividends to the people and proactively harness the resources of the states for productive purposes. It is only proactive leaders with unity of purpose that can form a conglomerate, which, as suggested, will enhance the economic integration of the southeast. Seventhly, Igbo leaders at all levels must work towards the **collective welfare of the people**. If this is obtainable in the Southeast, there is no doubt that the socio-economic crisis often witnessed among the people will drastically reduce.



Finally, there is a need for the **re-invention of a leader for the Southeast**, who would be acceptable to the people. He may act as both a political and economic leader of the Southeast. It should be stressed that since the demise of late Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Igbo have not had a regional/national leader. The Southeast needs such a leader to be a rallying point and steer and harness the human resources of the region, chart a new course of Southeast economic and political re-birth, and, of course, the economic integration of the Southeast, which is the desire of most people in the region.

CONCLUSION

It is no mean feat that the Igbo were able to dust off the rubbles of war within a short time after they were forced into what could be described as war of attrition. As could be seen in the paper, the federal government's post-war policies did not help to ameliorate the plight of the people; instead, in some instances, it appeared to have exacerbated it. Even though the Igbo lost some admirable traits which they were known for in the pre-war years, they went on to imbibe a culture of self-help, which could be said to be responsible for some growth since the mid-1970s. Igbo entrepreneurs are visible in other parts of Nigeria till date, but they have not been able to recreate this in Igbo land.

Generally, although the Igbo have contributed immensely to Nigeria's economic and social transformation, much still needs to be done by the Igbo in Igbo land, especially in the provision of basic amenities and an enabling environment that guarantees peace and security for businesses and enterprises to thrive. There is the urgent need for the government and the private sector in the Southeast to cooperate in the provision of adequate functional infrastructure that could help to reinvigorate productivity in the rural areas, which will enhance the socio-economic growth and development of the region. Finally, the Igbo should not remain "good ambassadors abroad" while minimal signs of development persist at home. Given the recommendations above, if proactively implemented by our leaders at all levels, and with the commitment of the people, both at home and in the diaspora, the envisaged economic re-birth and integration of the Southeast are achievable and could be possible by the year 2030, in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030.

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