

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN POST-CIVIL WAR IN OKIGWE URBAN, 1970 – 1996

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ABSTRACT

The post-civil war economic development in Okigwe (1970-1996) examines how the people of Okigwe urban coped economically after the civil war. The study focuses on strategies adopted for survival in the aftermath of a devastating conflict that lasted for three years and resulted in the loss of pf businesses and economic assets. With the end of the war, many residents returned home and were compelled to rebuild their livelihoods from scratch, primarily through agriculture and the sale of farm produce. Although the Federal Government proclaimed a policy of “No Victor, No Vanquished” and introduced the three Rs-Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, and Reintegration-these measures were inadequately implemented, thereby worsening the economic condition of the people. Like many other Igbo communities, the people of Okigwe took their fate in their own hands. Artisans established workshops to revive their trade, while traders engaged in small-scale commerce with limited resources. The Federal Government’s policy of issuing a flat payment of #20 to banks account holders, regardless of pre-war savings, further constrained economic recovery and contributed to the stagnation of the economy in Eastern Nigeria, including Okigwe Urban. However, within approximately five years after the war, the people demonstrated remarkable economic resilience and began to recover. This recovery can be attributed to a combination of individual enterprise, community efforts, and limited governmental support. Notably, the government of East Central State, alongside the Federal Government, contributed to development through the establishment of schools, agricultural institutions, and housing in Okigwe Urban.

KEY WORDS: *Okigwe urban, British colonial land, post-war, Nigerian civil-war, Policies, federal government, artisans social, economy, agriculture, community, Eastern Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Post-Civil War Economic Policies and Reconstruction Efforts in the Former Biafran Enclave: Okigwe Urban in focus

The Nigerian Civil War came to an end in 1970. This work had, in Chapter four trace the historic background of the war, also known in some quarters as the Nigeria-Biafra War. The war which lasted for about three years, 1967-1970, witnessed the killing of the people of former Eastern Nigeria in large numbers. Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu who led the war did not enjoy much international backing. Rather the international community backed the government of Nigeria in that war which has been described by many as a ‘Genocide.’ Ojukwu observed the rate of killing of his people, and the large-scale hunger caused by Nigeria blockade and shortage of food. Therefore, he decided with his commanders to surrender and end the war based on this factor and couple with other challenges of lack of ammunitions to prosecute the war further Ademoyega put it thus:

the balance which originally had been tilted to one side became very heavily loaded, all on the same side. The result was a classical illustration of the perfidy of taking up arms against a sea of troubles. It was hoped that the like of it would never happen again in this part of the world.¹

It was after Ojukwu had observed these situations against the new Republic that he fled, and asked his Chief of Staff, Major General P. Effiong to take over the reins of Government of Biafra. Therefore, on January 12, 1970, Effiong after negotiations with the federal government of Nigeria, and in a broadcast, declared total and unconditional surrender of the Biafran Armed Forces to Nigeria. Gowon accepted the surrender and declared what he called, ‘No Victor’s, No Vanquished’. Gowon went further to announce the three “R” mantra for the people of the former Biafra. These Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, and Re-integration. (The three Rs). Whether these were faithfully implemented or not, is a topic for another study.

Furthermore, every easterner who had any amount of money in Nigeria Bank before the war, was paid only 20 pounds, and not the total amount of money he had prior to the war. It was 20 pounds that the people of former Biafra started life once again.

The efforts of post-war economic policies and reconstruction in the former Biafran enclave in general and Okigwe urban in particular was a tedious one. Rather than the government the people took the bull by the horn in reconstruction and rehabilitation of their town. The people of Okigwe urban who took refuge in other Okigwe hinterland especially in Agbobo community and survived the war met their homes completely destroyed by federal troops when they returned back to their home. Therefore, the people began to find a way to first rebuild their houses through self-help as to bounce back economically, the people took advantage of their traditional market days of Eke, Orié, Afor and Nkwo and started all over again. They took their cash crops to the markets in Okigwe urban and beyond to sale and gradually started to make ends meet.

Those who were mechanics, bicycle repairers, carpenters, and all manner of workmen before the war, started again and opened their workshops along the present Owerri road Okigwe urban. It is on record that, while returnees started to open shops along the major roads and market places, there was still Nigerian Army base in Okigwe town, the military personnel also began to patronize these shops. In turn people's confidence was restored, and with that situation, other people from other towns started to migrate back to Okigwe town. So much so that companies, and factories began to sprang up in Okigwe urban at no distant time. It was striking, and worthy to note that in less than one year after the war, life started to boom in Okigwe urban, and indeed the entire local government area again.

However, that was not without the efforts, and contributions of the government of East Central State through the introduction of well-articulated economic policies, and programmes². The government undertook a number of measures to enhance the economy of the area. To achieve economic development and physical development, the government of East Central State embarked on the reconstruction of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure destroyed during the war in the entire East Central State³. The government also made efforts to revive agriculture especially the farm settlements, and provision of inputs to farmers in Eastern Nigeria. On the industrial sector, the government encouraged the people to build factories and cottage industries, and also to invest in textiles, cement, and food processing. It was through this government encouragement that a company known as Dengroup. Co. owned by one Denis Nwachukwu who had been in the business of granite mining since 1940,⁴ in Lekwesi and Amuro Okigwe urban was established. The man later returned back to Okigwe urban to continue his granite excavation. The government within the period under review, rehabilitated the famous Okigwe Pottery, which provided gainful employment to the people of Okigwe urban and beyond⁵.

In the area of health, the government rehabilitated the Okigwe General Hospital, and called back Doctors and Nurses⁶ to address the healthcare needs of the people, which were highly important to the people after the war. Investments were also made by the government in the areas of education, restoration of electricity, water supply and telecommunications. All these policies were aimed at stimulating economic growth, promoting self-sufficiency, and improving the living standards in the war-torn region. Therefore, within a few years, the social and economic, including critical infrastructure in Okigwe urban, were, to a reasonably extent, improved upon.

Growth of Key Economic Sectors in Post-Civil War Okigwe Urban

The war destroyed most of the cottage industries and ruined the commercial activities in Okigwe urban, during the period under study. Businesses were closed down and agricultural farms were left unattended to by the people of Okigwe urban people who became refugees in the hinterland of Okigwe, and beyond. However, after the return of the people to their homes after the war and with the help of the reconstruction work done by the government of the East Central State. After the war, there were efforts made by the people and the government of the day that enabled the growth. In 1975, the federal government in order to improve agricultural production in the country established, the National Horticultural Research Institute (NIHORT) in Ibadan, with a sub-station in Mbato Okigwe urban, and Bagauda, Kano State, the same year⁷. NIHORT is a research and demonstration centre for fruits, vegetables, spices, and ornamental plants. The objectives for establishing these centres include developing improved agro-techniques for horticultural crops production. The idea is to research into the genetic improvement, production, processing, and storage, utilization, and marketing of fruits, vegetables, spices, and ornamental plants in the entire Okigwe urban and beyond. It created employment, young people got engaged in the various departments of the institute, as farm managers, technical experts and marketers, which guaranteed gainful employment of the people and improved their well-being, especially the indigenes of the communities where the institute is located.

To improve the business of Housing, the Imo State Government in an effort to improve the housing deficit occasioned by the war, and to exploit the large clay deposit in Okigwe in 1979, the then Governor, Chief Sam Mbakwe established the Clay Products Company Limited (DPL) in Ezinachi Okigwe, which was a boost to the economic development of Okigwe urban after the war. It has been argued that:

The company was incorporated in 1979, principally to carryout the business of manufacture of bricks, tiles, pottery, and earthen ware of all kinds. The production capacity of the plant is put at 30 million of various types of burnt bricks.⁸

It should be noted that the major raw material, (clay) is in abundant supply at the factory site. That was the major consideration in locating the project in Ezinachi. One of the elementary reasons for the location of industries had always been the availability of raw material near the factory. However, it is unfortunate that the factory has shut down since 1991, due largely to management problems and lack of working capital, including total neglect by subsequent administrations after the administration Chief Sam Mbakwe. The bricks revolution which the Clay Products company limited set out to accomplish in the state in general and Okigwe urban in particular is still very relevant, especially as cement and its products are now selling at prices that are not affordable.

While the Company lasted, it boosted the economy of Okigwe urban people and beyond, as many indigenous people of the area were employed. This improved the economy of many families, and enhanced the physical landscape in Ezinachi Okigwe urban, this is because the factory edified the community, more so the company provided Ezinachi community with 24 hours power supply while it was operational.

The Okigwe Local Government Council, in order to enhance the economic wellbeing of the people, in 1984 and 1987 respectively, upgraded the Eke Agbara and Abakpa markets, these two markets situate in the city centre of Okigwe urban. This involved, the building of many shops to accommodate the influx of traders to the two markets. For accessibility, the Council designated the Abakpa market for tailoring and sale of allied materials, such as cloths, thread, and needles, including electrical wares⁹. Through this process, Abakpa became a specialized market, more or less.

The Eke Agbara market was expanded also in 1984, as earlier stated, to accommodate all types of traders. During the pre-colonial period, the market held every Eke day. The market is the traditional market of Amano people of Okigwe town, while Abakpa is the traditional market of Ubaha people. Unlike Abakpa market, Eke Okigwe accommodates all kinds of goods and services, ranging from food stuff travelling boxes, drinks, and provisions¹⁰. The expansion of these two markets was an effort on the part of the Council to boost the key economic sectors in post-war Okigwe urban. This was because with the two markets fully developed, many people from other towns and communities outside Okigwe urban, migrated to the town in droves. The implication was that it boosted the social and economic life of the people of Okigwe town and beyond. It made the people to recover fast from the impact and devastation occasioned by the war of 1967-1970.

Furthermore, during the period under review, the major Okigwe-Owerri Road was where most artisans had their workshops, especially motor mechanics, and timber dealers, which made the town untidy. In order to give the town a face lift and decongest the urban, the local council, as a matter of economic policy, decided to relocate motor mechanics and allied trades, including timber dealers from the town¹¹. In 1983, therefore, the Council relocated the two business concerns to Umuchima Layout, along the Enugu-Port Harcourt Express Way on land already donated to the Imo State Government by the people of Umuchima for development purposes. These two economic hubs escalated the economy of Okigwe urban. This was because the mechanic village in Okigwe urban was built as a modern, well-planned layout, and situated at the ever busy Enugu-Port Harcourt high way. The implication was that vehicles that developed faults on the express way had access to mechanics for repairs. This also boosted the economy of the mechanics and other allied dealers. This is because with the establishment of a well-organized mechanic village of that sorts, it attracted so many allied trades' men as many people moved to the village and got engaged in one type of business or the other. Again, because it situate at a busy highway many vehicle owners from other towns who plies the road, comes in to do one repair or the other, hence the daily income of both individuals and local government increased. The Okigwe motor park was one of the facilities that enhanced economic recovery in Okigwe urban after the war. The motor park was situated at the centre of the town during the period under review.

Although the old Okigwe motor park had been in existence before the 1967-1970 war, it was expanded to take in more vehicles and passengers. It served as land mark for every visitor and the people of Okigwe urban. Now known as Old Park, the park was removed in 1983, and relocated along the express road as part of the decongestion

and expansion efforts of the town by the Council, that action enhanced the economic base of the council. All these achievements, were as a result of good leadership during the period under review by the government of old Imo State and the Okigwe local government council administration. Chief Mrs. Maria Ibeagi was the Councilor who represented Okigwe urban in the Council and attracted the expansion of the Eke Okigwe market in 1984¹². This is in line with Emeka Chinweuba's assertion that "for human formation to thrive, an enabling environment has to be created through functional leadership."¹³

On the other hand, there were individuals who contributed their quota to the growth of key economic sectors in post-war Okigwe urban, especially in the areas of commerce and industry. In 1974, a prominent son of Umulolo Okigwe urban, who later became the traditional Ruler of the Community, Eze G. I. Osu, established the Ifeanyi Chukwu Osondu Transport Limited in Lagos and Okigwe urban, with many luxury buses that plied from Okigwe to Lagos daily as it route¹⁴. That feat was not a mean achievement for the town, for it was the first of its kind in the entire old Okigwe zone, which included the present Ohaozara, Isuikwuato, Mbano and Etit. People from these areas, including the people from the Okigwe local government area, who moved to Lagos after the war, travelled with these buses.

That single effort by an individual contributed in no small measure to the economic development of Okigwe urban. Many indigenes were employed in the various sectors of the transportation company as managers, drivers, conductors, secretaries and accountants. The story of Ifeanyichukwu Osondu Transport Company was one of perseverance, innovation, and legacy of one man. What he began with a few buses became a transport empire that impacted economically on many people of Okigwe urban, especially his people of Umulolo who were pulled out of poverty after the war of 1967-1970.

In another effort by the same individual, (Eze G. I. Osu), in 1985, established the Limca Bottling Company Okigwe urban. It was a medium-scale industry established to produce a range of three brands of soft drinks, namely, Limca Gold Spot, Limca Cola and Pearle Soda.¹⁵ The plant is located along the Enugu-Okigwe-Port Harcourt express way. This soft drink bottling company also boosted the economy of Okigwe urban, through employment, and revenue to the government. However, the two companies were closed down in the 1990s, as a result of poor management.

To add impetus to the economic development of Okigwe urban after the World 2nd War, TotalEnergies EP Nigeria Limited, arrived in Nigeria on June 1, 1956, and opened one of its Petrol Stations in Okigwe in the 1960s¹⁶. However, the station was destroyed during the Nigeria-Biafra war, but was rehabilitated immediately after the Nigeria-Biafra war 1970. This station was the first to sell petroleum products to the people of Okigwe urban and other motorists on transit through Okigwe urban. The station no doubt contributed to the economy of Okigwe urban through employment, and the supply of the energy needs of the people. Njikoka Petroleum limited, now (Jouk) was next to open a petrol filling station in the busy Owerri road Okigwe. As expected, that station contributed its quota in employment and was one of the key economic development efforts in Okigwe urban after the Nigeria-Biafra war 1970.

There was also the Onyekaba Palm Oil Mill located at Umulabia, Okigwe urban, which started operation in the production of high-quality palm oil in large quantities after the war. The giant Sab Motors Limited Okigwe urban, owned by an Uturu Okigwe born businessman, Chief Sab Ejimofor was established in Okigwe urban, in 1979, along the Okigwe Port Harcourt express –way. It was indeed one of the highest key economic drivers in post-war Okigwe Urban. The company was a major distributor of Peugeot Auto Nigeria (PAN), which was the manufacturer of the Peugeot brand of saloon, wagon cars, and pick-up vans. It contributed highly to the economic development of Okigwe urban during the period under review. Many young school leavers were employed in the company to earn a living for themselves and their families. On the other hand the company paid tax to the local government Council which aided the Council in its development efforts after the Nigeria –Biafra war in 1970.

The Banking sector was another major driver of the economy of Okigwe urban in the post-war era. The African Continental Bank Limited, (ACB), a bank established by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, in 1949¹⁷, reopened its branch in Okigwe urban, opposite the Abakpa Market, after the war. According to John Douglas, banks provide an efficient mechanism to pool funds to finance economic activity¹⁸. The Okigwe branch of the ACB championed the economic drive of the town after the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970, by pooling resources together for the benefit of the people. Every business and even government agencies in Okigwe urban, used the bank and its services for transactions, and some businesses were granted loans to enhance economic growth and development in the urban. In the area of employment, the bank offered jobs to young people from the town, to work in various sectors of the Okigwe branch of the Bank as cashiers, security men and supervisors. That enhanced the economy of those

individuals employed by the Bank. Of course, there was the Co-operative and Commerce Bank Limited (CCB), which served as the second banking institution to have its branch in Okigwe in the early 1980s. The bank had its office opposite Eke Okigwe market. The bank also contributed to the economy of the residents of Okigwe urban during the period it operated in the town, by way of employment and the granting of loans and other banking services to the people¹⁹.

Perhaps the emergence of Dr. Elebeke Onyejekwe in 1987 as the Chairman of Okigwe Local Government Council could be described as a turning point in the economic growth of Okigwe town. A gentleman and an honest Engineer from Ubaha Okigwe urban, he was persuaded by his people to contest for the position under the non-party system introduced by self-acclaimed President Ibrahim Babangida On assumption of office. The non-party local government election system in Nigeria during the period under review in the late 1980s, specifically during the Third Republic. This was part of a broader plan to transition from military to civilian rule, with the aim of creating a more inclusive and decentralized political structure.²⁰ Engineer Onyejekwe as Chairman, undertook the construction of almost all roads in Okigwe urban such as, Umuchima Road, Ubaha Road, Rev. Mann Avenue, Agiriga Road, Imo Hotel Road, Abattior Road, including bridges, and many more. Those enhanced the economic and physical development of the town. Engr. Onyejekwe also, as a matter of policy provided in Okigwe Pipe-born water. The fact is, he is the father of the modern development of Okigwe urban, and indeed the entire old Isuikwuato/Okigwe local government area. His administration touched every aspect of the economy of the people. He was a case of the saying that when the righteous is on the throne, the people rejoice, as the people of Okigwe, cannot forget his good deeds in the economic and Infrastructural development of the entire Okigwe urban and beyond.

Therefore, with government's economic policies and the provision of the enabling environment, and the desire of the people to return back to normal life, it did not take long for the economy of Okigwe urban to pick up more than expected after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1970.

Challenges to Economic Development in Okigwe Urban

The economic development of Okigwe urban like in other local government areas in East Central State of Nigeria after the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970 encountered some challenges as it concerned economic interactions. The challenges of personality clash have always been an issue in human social, political and economic development. It should be noted that personality conflicts in politics are numerous and complex. Personality traits can significantly influence an individual's political attitudes and behaviors. In Okigwe urban, the quality of persons in leadership posed some challenges during the period under review. Sound leadership is needed for any meaningful economic development.

The old Imo state was created in 1976, with Isuikwuato/Okigwe Local Government Area as one of its local governments also created in 1976, with Okigwe urban as the headquarters, by the military government in Nigeria²¹. In October 28, 1977, the federal government of Nigeria decided to site one of its Unity Schools, known as the Federal Government College in Okigwe. However, the school was taken to Orlu through the manipulation of some personalities from that area. The move was to deny Okigwe urban the school, as originally conceived. Okigwe urban people moved and made sure that the school was returned to its present site at Okigwe urban. The restoration of the school back to Okigwe was spearheaded by some personalities, which included, but not limited, Chief Sylvester Enwerem, Chief Abel Agiriga, Engr. Elebeke Onyejekwe, Chief Sab Ejimoffor, Chief Amaefule Ikoru, Prof. Adiele Afigbo, Chief Felix Offor, Chief John Egogasi, Eze J. I. Osu, and many others, under the auspices of the Okigwe League, a socio-cultural platform for Okigwe prominent citizens, who championed the cause of Okigwe during the period under review²².

In 1980, the federal government again under the National Low-Cost Housing programme, by the then President Shehu Shagari,²³ approved the building of some numbers of low-cost housing in Okigwe. Chief Joe Ezekwem was the Presidential Liaison officer in-charge of the execution and allocation of the houses to low-income earners in Okigwe urban and beyond. In the course of discharging his duties he encounters some problems ranging from, acquisition of land for the project, and allocation to the people. Chief Ezekwem an honest personality, discharged his duties efficiently without bias. There was the issue of where to site the project. The people of Isuikwuato wanted the housing project in their area, instead of its present site at Umulabia Okigwe urban, but Chief Ezekwem, insisted and got the project sited in Okigwe urban. In all, it is on record that Chief Ezekwem did not allocate even one plot to himself, but insisted it was for low-income people in the society.

Another significant personality challenges, was the struggle for the leadership of the Isuikwuato/Okigwe local government council. In 1987, there was the issue of who was to be the elected chairman of the local government

under the non-party system by the self-acclaimed President Ibrahim Babangida. This led to personality, cum communal crisis over who would be the Council's chairman of the Isuikwuato/Okigwe local government. It became fierce competition between two individuals namely, Engr. Elebeke Onyejekwe from Okigwe urban, and Dr. C. Chukwu from Isuochi clan, who were candidates in the election. Abusive words were exchanged between the two candidates, as they sought for votes from the people. Chief Leo Eke described the campaign leading up to the election as the "fight of the titans"²⁴. The communities of Okigwe town and Isuochi clan nearly engaged in physical war during and after the election. Eventually, Engr. Onyejekwe won. It took the intervention of well-meaning citizens of larger Isuikwuato/Okigwe local government area to restore peace between these two individuals and their respective communities through political intervention.

Abia State was created in 1991, and the issue of boundary adjustment arose between the old Imo State, and the newly created Abia State, which was exercised from Imo State. That exercise moved Isuikwuato, Uturu, Umuchieze, Isuochi, and Nneato from their mother local government area to Abia State. As a result, there was a need to have a clear boundary between the new Isuikwuato local government area and Okigwe local government area, and also, to determine whether the then Imo State University, Okigwe was within Okigwe or Uturu now (in Isuikwuato local government area). There was a series of clashes between Uturu people and their Ihube brothers over the issue of ownership of the University land. However, the federal government white paper and the Boundary Adjustment Committee's Report indicated that the University was in Uturu Abia State²⁵. The reports did not go down well with people of Ihube, but they had no choice than to respect the decisions of the committee.

Conclusion

The economic development of Okigwe during the period under review can be understood through the combined efforts of the federal, state, and local governments, as well as contributions from private individuals who played key roles in developing critical economic sectors. At the federal level, the government contributed to agricultural development through the establishment of the National Horticulture Research Institute (NIHORT) at Mbato in Okigwe. In addition, the siting of a Federal Government College and the implementation of a low-cost housing scheme significantly enhanced the town's economic growth and physical expansion. The government of the former East Central State, and later Imo State from 1970, also embarked on road rehabilitation programmes in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War to stimulate economic recovery and facilitate trade and mobility within the area. During the administration of Chief Sam Mbakwe, the Ezinachi Clay Factory was established, producing bricks for housing and related construction needs, thereby contributing to local industrial development. At the local government level, the construction and rehabilitation of township roads, markets, motor parks, mechanic villages, and timber sheds further stimulated economic activity within Okigwe Urban. Collectively, these interventions by government and private actors contributed significantly to the economic and physical transformation of the area.

However, certain policy failures also affected post-war development in Okigwe Urban. One notable example is the relocation of the Okigwe Local Government Headquarters to a hilltop site outside the central town area. This decision limited accessibility and created a degree of administrative isolation between the government and the people of both the urban centre and surrounding communities. Another policy challenge was the relocation of the central motor park from the town centre to the Enugu–Port Harcourt expressway. This shift disrupted transportation flow to neighbouring towns such as Isuikwuato, Afikpo, and Bende. As a result, travellers were required to first access the expressway before continuing their journeys, increasing transportation costs and reducing commercial activity in central Okigwe.

In addition to institutional interventions, the contributions of private individuals also played a crucial role in the economic advancement of Okigwe Urban. These individuals invested in manufacturing, trade, and other productive sectors, forming the foundation of post-war economic recovery and development. Overall, the period under review reflects a combination of government initiatives, private sector contributions, and infrastructural challenges that together shaped the economic trajectory of Okigwe Urban.

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