

THE ECONOMIC INEQUALITY; ITS IMPLICATIONS ON INSECURITY IN THE SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Economic inequality is the unequal distribution of income and opportunity among different classes in the society. Economic inequality favors the rich and the powerful while leaving the poor worst off. In the south eastern Nigeria, since after the civil war, there were deliberate attempt to sideline many people from eastern part of Nigeria from participating in the sharing of Nigeria commonwealth. The civil war ended on the note :No victor , No vanquish .This agreement was never respected by the supposedly victorious Nigeria Generals against the people of eastern Nigeria and thereafter economic policies to promote divide and rule were deliberately initiated to suppress the most enterprising ,productive and innovative spirit of the people from eastern region of Nigeria. Dr. Michael Okpara industrial revolution that made eastern Nigeria the fastest growing economy before the civil war was deliberately frustrated. Merit was sacrificed in the altar of nepotism and tribalism and these actions laid the foundation for economic inequality in the eastern part of Nigeria. Only those within eastern region who were ready to trade off their integrity and expertise were economically empowered through political appointments and juicy contracts as well as oil licenses.

For several years, insecurity has robbed the Region billions of dollars, scaring foreign and local investors from anchoring their economic interests within the Region. As a result of ugly security situation, even few companies that have managed to open shops have eventually closed down thereby leaving the youths stranded and unemployed. The objective of this work is therefore to explore economic strategy to permanently solve the problem of insecurity within the south east space.

1. Introduction

An effort to create economic prosperity and initiate even distribution of income as well as equal opportunity in the entire former eastern Nigeria was actually kick-started by Dr. Michael Okpara –the pioneer Premier of Eastern Nigeria from 1959-1966 (Okpara, M). According to Prof. Akalogwu (2023), ‘Dr. Michael Okpara economic revolution was anchored on manpower, agricultural and industrial development(s). It was the deliberate truncation of Dr. Okpara laudable economic program by Nigeria Government at the center after the civil war that created economic inequality and subsequently created avenue for agitations for uncountable reasons as well as insecurity. Now, let us examine Dr. Okpara economic strategy before it was stopped for obvious political reasons.

Starting with manpower development, Dr. Michael Okpara understood the importance of education and that was why he supported University of Nigeria, Nsukka established by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1960. Dr. Okpara tried to raise the standard at the secondary level of education to ensure quality feed into the university which would help develop well-trained workforce for the region. Dr. Okpara Administration also introduced universal free primary education in the Eastern region following the example of the Western Region where Chief Obafemi Awolowo in 1955 became the first Premier to implement the policy, Free Primary Education was such a big deal in the 60s as the primary school certificate was not only an entry point into teaching and other junior civil service jobs, but also the basic ladder to educational advancement.

On Industrial development, Dr. Okpara Government developed industrial clusters in the region’s major cities. For instance, the government invested in a number of industries organized around construction and building– Corrugated Iron sheets (Port Harcourt); Asbestos Roofing Sheets, Ceiling boards and Pipes (Enugu); Metal Door and Window frames (Port Harcourt); Bricks (Umuahia), Door Mats (Aba). It also actively encouraged private companies to go into household materials and décor such as mattresses, metal and wooden furniture, among others. Many industrial layouts were procured to encourage large scale production as well as small and medium enterprises.

The Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC) drove Dr. Okpara effort at industrialization and agrarian revolution and the following historical manufacturing entities were direct or indirect products of Okpara's leadership genius- Nigercem at Nkalagu, Nigergas and Nigersteel at Emene, Aba Textile Company, Golden Guinea Breweries and Modern Ceramics Industries, Umuahia, Standard Shoe Factory, Owerri, among others. The regime's wave of industrialization also spurred developments in tourism and hospitality which led to the establishment of hotels including the prestigious 4-star Presidential Hotels in Enugu and others.

On Agricultural development , Dr. Okpara embarked on massive plantations and farm settlements across the region which today encompasses 9 states- Cross River, Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Bayelsa, Abia, Ebonyi, Akwa-Ibom and Rivers States as Minister of Agriculture before Nigeria independence. And by the time Okpara became Premier in 1960, the plantations had begun to yield fruit at rate of 2.5 to 3.13 tonnes of bunches per acre. And while these were slightly below the projected yield of 3.13 to 3.37 tonnes of bunches per acre because of inefficiencies of Government plantation management, it still made the Eastern region a global leader in Palm produce and a mainstay of the Nigerian economy, along with Groundnuts, Cotton, Rubber, and other produce. The immense success of the palm plantations led Malaysia to Eastern Nigeria in 1961 to take their first palm seedlings for cultivation. A key component of the region's Agrarian revolution under the Premiership of Dr. Okpara was in the area of development of grains, particularly rice. Dr. Okpara's government invested substantial resources in the expansion of rice production in Abakaliki and other parts of the region which was boosted by the development of milling facilities such that by 1965, Abakaliki had become the main rice processing center in Nigeria handling massive deliveries from rice cultivating communities from other regions of the country. This helped turn rice which hitherto was exclusive to the rich, into a major staple of the region.

Livestock development was also a core component of Dr. Okpara's integrated agrarian revolution with primary focus on poultry farming and to a lesser degree, Pig farming. This involved recruitment of specialists in poultry development through a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) assisted program. By 1962, Eastern Nigeria was relatively self-sufficient in poultry meat with substantial surpluses of eggs which led to the government policy of one egg per person, per day.

In its effort to transform the agricultural sector, the Okpara administration adopted the leading technologies in crop science, animal husbandry and food processing with the goal of creating value chains to ensure sustainability. Little wonder the region was self-sufficient in food production and sought markets for her agricultural products in other parts of the country and beyond. The study focuses on the revolutionary economic policies of Dr. Michael Okpara before the war to justify that economic inequality is the reason for the present agitations and insecurity that have bedeviled South east in the current dispensation . It was the failure of Nigeria authorities in the post-civil war era to sustain Dr. Okpara economic development model that laid the foundation for the current confusion we have in the Nigeria system today.

The study therefore targets to address the fundamental issues viz;

- To establish that causes of economic inequality in the south eastern part of Nigeria.
- To determine the implications of economic inequality on insecurity in the REGION.
- To recommend measures to solve the insecurity in South Eastern Region.

2. The causes of economic inequality in the south eastern part of Nigeria

- i. **Economic Concentration:** There has been concentration of economic and political power in the hands of few people in Nigeria. Since the end of civil war till date, Nigeria has operated a constitutional arrangement that concentrated sharing of the country commonwealth at the centre. So, those powerful politicians in Abuja favour their friends in the south east thereby leaving majority of the populace unattended to.
- ii. **Inadequate Development:** There were deliberate efforts to deny south east of some key development that will induce investment, saving and consumption. Important federal roads were left in sorry state for decades. Many industries that were built under Dr. Michael Okpara were deliberately allowed to shutdown .2nd Niger Bridge has been in the drawing board for decades, though completed two years ago .Electricity, Water, Sewage projects etc were all abandoned causing more hardship to most households in South east.
- iii. **Tax Evasion:** Lack of reliable data has created a skewed and distorted distribution of tax liability that has created exit window for the rich. However, the system has empowered the rich and made the poor vulnerable. It is truism that the rich doesn't pay tax in the South Eastern part of Nigeria and this has created an economic

imbalance that rewards bad behavior and discourages good behavior. A good tax system should meet the following criteria; administrative ease, transparency, simplicity, adequacy and fairness. In South east, only less than 5% of the entire population control the supply of housing needs of the people and this signifies poor tax system.

- iv. Inequitable Distribution of the factors of Production: Inequalities of income and wealth result from inequitable distribution of the means of production. The major means of production in South east is capital. Capital is exclusive reserve of the rich and politicians while there is no institutional framework to ensure that people have equal chances of accessing capital at affordable rate for production. The privileged economic and political elites have access to capital and have used the window to accumulate so much wealth while the working class and lower class have no such opportunities. Nigeria Banking system has made borrowing an exclusive commodity for special class, hence the gap in the supply of money. The cost of money, even when available, is too high that it kills production initiatives. The second important means of production is Land. In Thailand, Canada, Brazil etc, land is made easily available to anybody who wants to go into farming or production by Government. But, in the South east, Government is not interested in providing this means of production. In Anambra State for instance, several organizations like Good Governance Multi-purpose Cooperative Society ltd has written a letter to Government requesting for Agricultural land to facilitate food production and assist in reducing unemployment rate in the State but State Government through Commissioner for Land advised the Cooperative to hold on as Government has not acquired farmland from community . However, it should be noted that there is no deliberate public policy to encourage food production in the entire South East like Dr. Michael Okpara did during his own time. A viable Agricultural model has the capacity of employing millions of young men and women .Sadly, in the south east, there is no provision for long term borrowing at affordable rate to fund small and medium enterprises as well as food production initiatives.
- v. Unemployment and Underemployment: For decades, there is no deliberate effort to create job opportunities in large scale at sustainable basis in south east. All the economic revolutionary programs initiated by Dr. Michael Okpara before the civil war were all destroyed either by federal government policies or corruption at the State level . Of course, jobs cannot be created in a consumption driven economy. More than 80% of both public and private jobs in the eastern Nigeria do not pay competitive salaries, in other words, their workers are underpaid and abysmally motivated. - In the entire South Eastern Nigeria, unemployment is soaring very high because of lack critical infrastructure like strategic roads, constant power and public water supply needed to create jobs. This failure to create economic opportunities by the government despite several promises has widened the income inequality among the people in the Region. With the high rate of youth unemployment, all manner of crimes such as the activities of kidnapping and other vices were to be expected. Young people are hopeless and economically stranded and that is why those with violent intentions can easily employ them. It is a known fact that despite the healthy growth of the economy in the last five years, unemployment has been rising alongside the increased incidence of poverty. Armed robbery, kidnapping, gangsterism and other vices are not unrelated to the high rate of unemployment across the South Eastern Nigeria. No sane Society can afford to have millions of unemployed youths with no deliberate plan to encourage production. This army of the unemployed can become a nuisance to society. It is a time bomb that must be diffused. It is sad and disheartening to see sound graduates of engineering, physics, mathematics being unemployed for about eight years after graduation from even our first generation universities or to see them selling recharge cards. Millions of Graduates working in south east are underemployed .An average graduate working in Government office earns less than N50,000 monthly while those in private companies make less than N30,000 monthly .
- vi. Low Productivity: Low productivity keeps the income levels of the people low. A worker with low productivity cannot earn more and thus remains poor. And the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen because the rich has been able to increase their income continuously. Production started nose-diving after the civil war. Every effort was made to discourage production. The reward system was too poor that people prefer idling their time to being productive. Out of school graduates would have loved to be productive and earn a living in the south east but the wage system and the value of local currency are most disappointing and discouraging .In UK, a graduate from south east work for 12 hours per day because of value of pounds and favourable reward system as well as good working conditions and friendly environment. Low productivity is deliberate effort to keep the poor in vicious web of poverty.

- vii. Lack of Quality Education: A Quality education cure ignorance and promotes sound and rational reasoning .Over the past four decades, the quality of education in the south east has greatly deteriorated that institutions have continued to produce certificate tigers. Our university Graduates cannot use their education to solve societal problems or facilitate production in the eastern Nigeria.
- viii. Non Provision of social security system: Social Security is the protection that Government provides to individuals and households to ensure access to health care and to guarantee income security, particulars in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity or loss of a breadwinner. When there is no provision for social security, income inequality widening with its attendant consequences.
- ix. Poor Reward and Sanction System: A good reward system encourages a competitive working environment, increases output and high performance. While poor reward system gives dissatisfaction, discourages hard work and creates low productivity and low motivation. In south east, low reward system has made many government offices begging centers, others at privileged positions have use their offices to extort money from the public. No Government in south east can effectively fight corruption in both civil and public services without an encouraging reward system .Government will have the moral right to sanction bad behavior if the welfare of her workforces are taken care of. In other words, a fair reward system will attract a corresponding sanction for any wrongdoing.

3. Implications of economic inequality on insecurity in the Region.

If Dr Michael Okpara revolutionary economic model was meticulously and systematical pursued and sustained by the political class of eastern Nigeria , majority of young men and women during the early 70s who are adults now would have gotten economic and mental stability to reason and make sound decisions and judgment . Dr Okpara vision was to engage the abundant human resources in South east for industrial and agricultural development. The engagement would have kept millions of youths and adults in south eastern Nigeria busy as an idle mind is devil workshop and that is the current situation starring us on our faces today.

It is unfortunate that most people, perhaps political Leaders fail to address the issue of insecurity from economic point of view. A society makes conscious and deliberate efforts to produce good people. It is not about how religious an individual is claiming to be but the ability to differentiate bad from good. The political Leaders have over the past decades created hatred among the people through their divide and rule policy .The State policies have made the people economically handicapped that employment and appointments into public offices are left for highly connected individuals in the south east. Bank loan is exclusive reserve of the rich and the powerful that income gap continues to widen. Decent housing becomes far-fetched while food is luxury. Three basic needs of man viz food, shelter, and health are in short supply to the majority of people in the eastern Nigeria. It is ironical that a region which boasted of being the fastest growing economy in the entire Africa could not feed her populace but had to depend on the North for food supply perhaps at cut throat prices. Sadly, housing supply is in firm control of less than 5% of the population who have made money through government patronages and hardworking entrepreneurs. In health, people had to depend on miracle for survival; human life has become meaningless, hence the presence of miracle centers in the entire south eastern region.

The economic inequality is so obvious that State Actors have lost control of their hold on the citizens. A cursory study of the situation in South East has shown that more than 80% of the entire populace hardly recognize the presence of government and have never benefited anything from government. The implications of this economic inequality could be seen in the following insecurity cases below;

- i. Kidnapping; The skewed distribution of income including juicy federal and state appointment (s) have created a dangerous gap between the rich and poor. Most young people that were involved in kidnapping activities are as a result of economic inequality which have created unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, greed ,poor parentage ,moral decadence. When the society cares for the citizens by providing them with basic needs of life like food, shelter, health, the rate of kidnapping will surely be reduced to minimum level.
- ii. Cult Related Crime: Government has created unfavorable economic conditions that struggling for survival has become the order of the day. Powerful Cabals now set up different cult gangs to control government revenue windows thereby creating monsters that will poise as future security challenge. Money rules our society that nobody cares to know the source of wealth of anybody. Chieftaincy titles are given to people with questionable characters, however, the struggle to control the sources of sharing wealth has assumed

- another dimension by the introduction of occult groups. These groups have contributed to insecurity in south eastern region.
- iii. Violent Agitation for Biafra- When the civil war ended on 15th of January 1970, the conditions for surrender have not been kept by Nigeria government till today .The agreement that any future constitutional arrangement will be worked out by the Representatives of the people of Nigeria was disregarded and the present 36 States were arbitrarily created by successive military regimes and not by the representatives of the people as envisaged by the instrument of surrender. Even the pronouncement of 3Rs which is Reconstruction, Reintegration and Reconciliation was never implemented and this had laid the foundation for economic inequality in the eastern Nigeria. The present crop of young people who did not witness the war but read stories of how Biafrans refined crude oil under war conditions ,how they achieved technological advancement during the war and how Nigeria has marginalized them since after the war , took to the street to agitate for a new state of Biafra. Instead of Nigeria using political solution to manage the issue of agitation, military men were redeployed to quench all form of agitations. Military intervention to Biafra agitation is what gave rise to armed struggle in form of guerrilla warfare and this is why sit at home was successful in the last few years.
 - iv. Drug Addiction- Parents whose primary responsibility are to nurture their children to responsible adulthoods are kept in a rat race-like situation struggling to make both ends meet because of poor economic conditions. Bad parenting can cast a long shadow over a child's emotional and psychological well-being, hence drug provide safe haven to fill the needed emotional gap. Government failures to provide guaranteed economic prosperity has made most parents to be desperate in search of greener pasture abandoning their primary domestic responsibilities. There is positive relationship between drug and criminality.
 - v. Cybercrime (Yahoo-Yahoo) - Lack of economic opportunities has led millions of young people into cybercrime. According to the Executive Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Ola Olukoyede (Punch, 14 Feb 2025): "Nigeria has lost over \$500m in one year due to internet fraud. It is no longer just about scamming people .They are now into kidnapping, banditry and ritual killings. Some of our investigations have uncovered horrifying details, including cases where young female victims were used for rituals. If we don't act decisively, in the next 10 years, we may not have a generation we can confidently hand over this country to" . The firsthand account from Chief Crime Fighter in Nigeria indicating that many of our youths are not meaningfully engaged and something urgent has to be done.

4. Measures to Solve the Insecurity in South Eastern Region

1. Access to fund- We know that monetary policy is managed by federal government but the south east Governors can use creative means to provide cheap funds for the people of south east .Funding is considered a major challenge of small business promoters which is the engine room of job creation . A State Governor can raise long term and cheap fund from bond market to fund industrial and agricultural villages which will actively engage thousands, if not millions of idle youths. Idle minds breed criminals' tendencies. South east Governors have abandoned their primary responsibility of intervening in several gaps that have existed in the economy of south east since after the civil war.
2. Access to affordable housing- Shelter is one of basic needs in Maslow hierarchy of need. Sadly, South East Governors have not considered building massive low cost housing for the middle class and lower class in the Region. They have outsourced this physiological needs of young people to exploitative hands of capitalist elements. Deliberate program to provide massive shelter for South Eastern people will restore the dashed hope of many young people and begin to restore their confidence in Government. When people feel sense of security, they will not go the way of crime. A good housing program will attract funding from our people across the globe.
3. Access to food – To achieve this, the Governors of south east should copy Michael Okpara food production strategy. This is not a rocket science even in the face of technological advancement. Organizing the value chain in food production, processing and marketing will keep our youths busy and productive. Hunger can push young people into crime.
4. Access to affordable and stable electricity- Industrialization cannot be possible without guarantee electricity supply at affordable rate. Many factories in the region have shut down because of poor and epileptic electricity supply. Governors can sustain the availability of this critical infrastructure in partnership with

private sector. This will ensure massive and sustainable development of the region. Insecurity will be reduced to the barest minimum if people are empowered with economic opportunities. Sincerity of purpose from south east leadership will no doubt fix this critical infrastructure ,reduce cost production and create millions of quality jobs that will keep the people of south east busy and productive.

5. Strict enforcement of law and order:-Corruption in police, other law enforcement agencies and judiciary have discouraged economic growth and investment. This is made worst when the agency that has the constitutional obligation to enforce law is under exclusive list of the constitution. However, a Governor who can mobilize his people to do good and ensure that political power belongs to the people will surely and easily enforce law and order even when the constitution is flawed.
6. Living wage for all fixed income earners- A laborer with any form of education makes an average of N8000 per day amounting to about N250,000 monthly and this is about \$150 per month.\$150 is what a student makes per a day in USA while minimum wage is average of N40,000 monthly in South east. South East Governors must find creative ways of putting money in the people’s pockets. If performance target on service delivery is set for all workers in public offices and a minimum wage of N300,000 with housing ,car allowances is paid, government will definitely induce consumption , saving and investment .
7. Partner with federal authority to ensure price stability as well as exchange rate stability-Price stability and exchange rate management are macroeconomics goals under the supervision of federal government. Because Nigeria depends majorly on imported goods, any little shock on the exchange rate will affect the purchasing power of naira. South East Governors can as a matter of urgency commence massive investment in the area of Agricultural and industrial villages. South East Governors can organize these sectors in partnership with private sector to achieve a productive environment and this gesture will stabilize local prices .An increase in local production will cushion the effect of high exchange rate. However, partnership will federal government will increase foreign exchange earnings and assist to stabilize exchange rate as well as general market prices and this will create economic prosperity.
8. Insist on true federalism in Nigeria and the need for a competitive regional development. There is no doubt that the present feeding bottle federalism cannot guarantee a fair and competitive economic environment to millions of unemployed and underemployed youths in South Eastern Nigeria. Therefore, to achieve a productive environment, the present ‘unitary’ federalism must be replaced with a competitive system where Regions/ States will be allowed to control their resources and pay tax to the central government.
9. Social Security Benefit- To ensure that the people of south east enjoy the dividend of democracy as well as welfare distribution, State Governments in the south east should execute biometrics social identification registration in partnership with national identity management commission. Already, Abia State Government has started building this important database which will be used to implement objective socio-economic planning and intervention programs. Such interventions will give young people hope that government cares and this will reduce crime to the barest minimum.

5. Conclusion

South East Governors should play the politics of good governance and industrial revolution to attract genuine investors within and outside Nigeria. Again, corruption should be tackled with every determination so as to punish bad behavior while good behavior should be rewarded and promoted. Insecurity will be reduced to the barest minimum if young people are gainfully employed with the high hopes of attaining to the zenith of their profession based on merit.

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