

INTEGRATING IGBO DIASPORA COMMUNITIES INTO THE SOUTH-EAST ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The South East zone of Nigeria have a significant Diaspora population that are visible in the various sectors of the global economy, but their knowledge and expertise remains underutilized in the economic development of the zone. This paper ex-rays the importance, challenges and strategies of integrating the Igbo Diaspora communities into South East economic development. The paper also posits that the integration of the Igbo Diaspora communities into South East economic development will promote the economic well-being of the zone. However, the integration of the Igbo Diaspora communities into South East development is plagued by challenges of elite consensus/political will, insecurity, and limited access to information among others. To curb these challenges, the paper recommends the establishment of South East Diaspora Commission, unification of development objectives and strengthening of communities and networking platforms. The paper concludes by calling on South East governors to take measures that will make the Igbo Diaspora communities a part of the development process in the zone.

Keywords: Integration, Diaspora, South East, Igbo Communities and Economic Development

Introduction

The Igbo people of the South East comprising of the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo State can be described as a mobile race that can be found in all parts of the world. The Igbo Diaspora communities can be found mainly in United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, many parts of Asia and South Africa making crucial contributions to the economies of their resident countries.

The itinerant tendency of Igbos that makes them to travel out of their homeland in search of greener pastures is traceable to the tribe of Dan in the Bible which constitutes the cradle of the Igbos that settled in Nri the present day Anambra State which explains their endemic diasporic tendency (Onuakulasi, 2021).

The South East region of Nigeria with rich reserves of crude oil, coal, natural gas, palm oil, rice, soyabean, kaolin, iron, silica, limestone, lead, zinc, cassava, yam, cashew nut, maize and so on. It also has a large population of skilled workforce with significant number of them in the Diaspora. The Igbo Diaspora communities have made huge financial contributions in terms of remittances to support their families back home which can be leveraged to improve the economy of South East. This is in line with the views of Kapur and Mchale (2005) whose work has shown that Diaspora remittances have significant impact on economic growth and development.

The five Governors of the South East have made some efforts towards the economic integration of the zone through the South East Governors forum, South East Economic Commission (SENEC) among others. In doing so, there is no conscious effort on their part to incorporate the Igbo Diaspora communities into South East economic development. It is the opinion of this paper that if the expertise of the Igbo Diaspora communities is well harnessed and utilized, it will kick starts an economic revolution in the South East region of Nigeria.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the importance and challenges of integrating Igbo Diaspora communities into the South East economic development and to identify strategies for effective integration.

Statement of the Problem

The first attempt towards the economic development of the South East region was conceived by the African Institute for Applied Economic (AIAE) in a workshop held at Enugu in 2006 where the South East Nigeria Economic Commission (SENEC) was formed (Nwogbaga, 2011). The commission comprises the five Eastern States of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states with an organizational structure of board of trustees, economic advisory council, board of directors, executive directors and non-executive directors. According to AIAE (2006), two main reasons why SENEK was established is that the South East zone has common development challenges and opportunities which border on infrastructure, human capacity building and industrial development.

Secondly, the common development challenges and opportunities cannot be adequately explored by individual states and private sectors agencies alone but through concerted efforts. The contents of the targets and objectives of SENEK is focused on collective sustainable development through inter-Governmental co-operation especially in the area of investments and infrastructure. This robust development initiative was driven by the private sector without government involvement.

However, in 2016 the South, East Economic summit began with the establishment of the South East Development company (SEREDDEC) by the South east governors in conjunction with the Department for international Development (DFID). The first and the second summit in 2016 and 2017 respectively focused on identifying projects to deploy in the South East that will aid rapid economic development. In subsequent years SEREDDEC proposed a regional resort hospital, Enyimba Economic city, regional rail network, regional gas pipeline project. The summit also discussed the ease of doing business in the region, integrated regional planning, attracting investment to the South East, regional Centre of excellence for science and technology, creating South East wealth fund, financing ICT and strategies for infrastructural development among others (Uzodimma, 2019).

In all of these laudable development initiatives undertaken by both the private sector and the south east governors, the Igbo Diaspora communities have not been included as development actors. The Igbo Diaspora communities can be a potent force for the development of the South East region through the promotion of trade and investment, improved access to foreign capital markets, research and innovation, skill/knowledge and technological transfer. This study focuses on the inclusion of the Igbo Diaspora communities for the socio-economic development of the South East.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the integrated approach expressed in the Public-Private Partnership Model as a realistic alternative towards the economic development of the South East of Nigeria. A Public Private Partnership is defined as collaboration involving actors and /or funding from business, non-profit and Governmental organizations where costs, risks, resources and skills are shared in jointly developed ventures/initiatives that benefit the partners and the community served (Agbo, 2009). Partnerships enable the public sector to benefit from commercial dynamism, innovations and efficiencies harnessed through the involvement of

private sectors who contribute their capital, knowledge and technical expertise. Public and private sectors have differing and complementing roles in engendering economic prosperity of a nation. Partnerships tend to deliver quality services by bringing new innovations and investment as well as improved management structure. In partnership programs, a public participant which in this case is the five Eastern governments are expected to set the legal, framework, funding, land, physical infrastructure and an enabling environment to enhance the partnership with Igbo Diaspora communities. On the other hand, the private state holders which is the Igbo Diaspora communities are to contribute knowledge and skill, technical expertise and funding to augment government resources. It is believed that public. Private partnership model is the most suitable for integrating Igbo Diaspora communities into South-east economic development.

Methodology

The method of data collection for this paper is from secondary sources which include books, journals, newspapers as well as the internet. In order to elicit the information relevant to the paper, the contents of literatures gathered were thoroughly read, simplified, summarized and assessed to draw conclusion based on interpretations and logical inference.

IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING IGBO DIASPORA COMMUNITIES INTO THE SOUTH EAST ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic Benefit

Some members of the Igbo Diaspora communities have large business empires and interests in various fields of human endeavour which can be leveraged to enhance economic growth and development in the South East. Some of the Diaspora members have accumulated some funds that are idle which can be invested back home if there is an investment friendly environment in the South East. Evidence has shown that repatriated fund from the Diaspora can positively aid economic growth and development (Kapur and Mchale, 2005). It is estimated that Nigeria received \$24.3 billion in repatriated fund from the Diaspora in 2018 making it the largest recipient of Diaspora repatriated fund in Africa (World Bank, 2019). The Igbo communities in the Diaspora have the largest number of its Diaspora citizens from Nigeria. It is estimated that the Igbos in Diaspora repatriates between 55% and 65% of total remittance into Nigeria (Mbama, 2015). This translates to \$13.37 billion to \$15.80 billion using the official figure for 2018. This repatriated fund has brought a lot of relief to most families and ensured that the South East is relatively stable economically.

It is the opinion of this paper that there is need for the South East Governors to synergize with the Igbo Communities in the Diaspora by providing an enabling environment to attract investment from them to the South East. This can be done through joint venture partnership involving both parties where the governors will provide the land, infrastructure, funds and an enabling environment while the Igbos in Diaspora provides their own counterpart funds as well as technical expertise, and managerial skills. Suffice me to say that if this partnership is explored and harnessed, it will help to kick – start an economically viable South East of Nigeria.

Human capital

The Igbo Diaspora communities have seasoned professionals in virtually every profession abroad. It is projected that human capital will surpass material capital as the dominant force in economic development in the near future (Mbama, 2015). The Asian tigers achieved tremendous economic growth using mostly human capital and most of them leveraged on the technological expertise of their Diaspora to do so. The South-East governments can borrow a leaf and synergize with the Igbo Diaspora communities to fast-track the development of the south east. The Igbo Diaspora communities have many experts in health technology, ICT, education technology and top management experts whose expertise can be leveraged by the southeast governors to tap fully the benefits of the 4th industrial revolution where the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing and robotics are used to solve human problems and to accelerate economic development.

Material Capital

The South East of Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural resources such as crude oil, natural gas, lead, zinc, limestone, coal and white clay. It is also blessed with vast arable land with nearly an all year round rainfall. In many parts of the region, with little or no effort, palm nut, yam, cassava, cocoyam, banana, plantain, okro, melon and various types of vegetables can be grown with maximum yield. The integration of Igbo diaspora communities into the South East economic can help in harnessing these materials resources to earn the much needed foreign exchange for the south east region given their knowledge and expertise.

Cultural Exchange and Presentation of Igbo Culture and Tradition

The integration of the Igbo Diaspora communities into the South East economic development could help to promote cultural exchanges and to preserve our rich cultural heritage. Members of the Igbo Diaspora communities that have mingled with the citizens of the host countries have picked different cultural traits and experiences like the culture of hard-work, honesty, time consciousness, and integrity. These values could be transmitted to our local communities to enable our local communities develop good work attitudes which will aid socio-economic development. Similarly, the integration of the Igbo Diaspora communities into the South East development will ensure that our rich cultural heritage does not succumb to the forces of acculturation. This is because the partnership between the Igbos in the Diaspora and the ones at home will help to preserve the cultural bond between the two.

CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING IGBO DIASPORA COMMUNITIES INTO THE SOUTH EAST DEVELOPMENT

Lack of Elite Consensus/Political Will:

There is a seemingly disjointed leadership and lack of elite consensus among the South East governors and leaders because of political party affiliation, personal perception and selfish interest. It is only when the South East governors have a consensus on the development needs of the region that they can partner with the Igbos in the Diaspora to chart a new course for South East development. Also, there is lack of political will on the way development should be handled by the South East leaders.

For instance, since the inception of South East economic summit in 2016, there have been proposals to embark on regional gas pipeline, regional railway network, Enyimba economic city and so on, but sadly, none of these projects have taken off. These are projects that they supposedly have total control and authority but the will to do it is lacking.

Insecurity:

With the exception of human and material capital, nothing works against development like insecurity of lives and property. Investors always desire an investment friendly environment where they can freely transact their businesses without any fear or molestation. The fear of insecurity can sometimes be more deadly than insecurity itself. The menace of IPOB, Unknown gunmen, MASSOB, ESN and other non-state actors responsible for the wanton destruction of lives and property, kidnappings, murder, rape and other despicable acts have progressively set the South-East backward economically. As a result of globalization of the world economy, investors usually analyze the risk/return on investment and they usually back off in areas with high risk in terms of security.

The South East governors should understand that a fairly secure environment is needed to maximize the opportunity of attracting the Igbo in Diaspora communities as partners in the development of the South East. Therefore, concerted efforts should be put in place to reduce insecurity in the zone to the barest minimum.

Infrastructure:

In the South Eastern part of Nigeria, there is serious infrastructural deficit as a result of neglect from the Federal Government. The South East Governors have not done enough on their own to address the infrastructural problems in the zone. The road network in the South East with the exception of Anambra and Ebonyi States is in serious disrepair. The energy situation totally epileptic and the water and mass transportation system virtually non-existent it will be totally unfair to blame the South East governments for lack of energy but they can develop good road network and water systems.

Investors usually look at the level of infrastructural development in an area to determine whether it is cost effective to invest in such areas. Infrastructure, therefore, is a panacea for economic development and lack of it usually puts a country or region at economic disadvantage in terms of attracting the right investment. To this extent, the South East governors need to tackle the infrastructural problems in the South East to enable them partner with the Igbo Diaspora communities in the development of the region.

Limited Access to Information

The Igbo communities in the Diaspora are greatly hampered by lack of access to information and resources which prevents them from participating in the development of the South East zone. According to Eze (2018), many Diaspora members do not participate due to lack of access to information and resources. For example, there is no information on availability of land, business opportunities, tax incentives, and funding as regards to setting up of new businesses in the South East. This hinders the Diaspora members from setting up or expanding their businesses to the South East.

CONCLUSION

The integration of Igbo Diaspora communities into the development of the South East region is vital to achieving the economic well-being and prosperity of the zone. The importance of engaging the Igbo Diaspora communities in the South East economic development will improve the fortunes of the zone through job creation, technological transfer, human and material development, increased investment, cultural exchange and preservation. This can be achieved through collaboration between the South East governors and the Igbo Diaspora communities.

While there are challenges to integrating the Igbo Diaspora communities into the South East economic development such as insecurity, infrastructural problems, limited access to information and resources and so on, it is the opinion of this paper that these challenges can be overcome through the establishment of South East Diaspora Commission, unification of development objectives, enhancement of communication lines and network channels among others. By partnering with the Igbo Diaspora communities in the development of the South East, we can build a more prosperous future for our region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Unification of development initiatives of the south east states:** The first step in integrating the Igbo Diaspora communities into the south east development is to get the five south east governors to unify their development initiative. This requires the cultivation of strong political will among the states through legislation, policy framework and organizational structure. This will enable them to harmonize the development priorities of the south east states and identify the areas where they can execute common projects.
2. **Establishment of south east Diaspora commission:** There is need to establish the south east Diaspora commission which will be responsible for constructing a data base of all skilled professionals of south east origin whose intellectual and managerial capabilities will be tapped for the development of the south east. The Diaspora commission will have clearly defined roles which will include organizing, regulating and co-ordinate the skills and knowledge of Igbo Diaspora communities into south east economic development.
3. **Enhancement of Communication Lines and Network Channels:** There is need to enhance communities lines and network platforms for Diaspora engagement aimed at capturing the offshore skills of our Diaspora contingent for development purposes. Communication tools such as e-mail, Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media platforms and mainstream media could be used to attract investment from the Igbo communities in the Diaspora into the South East. This is consistent with the views of Iruegbu (2020) that the establishment of effective communication channels can help to bridge the gap between the Igbo Diaspora communities and the South East region of Nigeria.
4. **Advocating for Investment Friendly Policies:** Policies like tax holidays, tax rebates and low interest loans could help to create an enabling environment for Diaspora participation in the economic development of the South East region. According to Ude (2018) policies that aid diversity and inclusivity can help to bring Diaspora investment and accelerate economic growth in the South

East region. Generally, collaborative effort is needed between the Igbo Diaspora communities and the South East governors to attract the right investment into the South East region. To this extent, the Diaspora should be part of the South East policy think tank and there should be regular Diaspora engagement through online means on strategic policies for South East development.

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