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Imo's Service Economy: OPPORTUNITIES & OUTLOOK



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The Promise of a Service-Oriented Developing Nations
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Editorial Team

Professor Kenneth Amaeshi
Editor-in-Chief

Ikechukwu Odigbo
Fabian Onyekachi Anyanwu
Adaeze Ashaheme
Research Analysts

Jovita Agwu
Prince Eze Ugochukwu
Adaeze Nwaka
Business Development Correspondents

Honorable Declan Emelumba
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Sir MacDonald Ebere, PhD
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Professor Ikechukwu Dozie
Dr. Bola Adigun
Editorial Advisors

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All correspondence to:
The Editor-in-Chief
Office of the Chief Economic Adviser to the Imo State Government,
Governor's Office, Owerri.



Governor's Message

Economic history tells us that the world has witnessed several economic revolutions. Until today, three are the most significant: the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, and the information revolution. Today the world is witnessing another economic revolution which does not displace any of the dominant three but enriches and expands them in a significant way. Welcome to the service-economy revolution.

What this revolution entails is that today, the service economy is poised to be the new oil, accounting for a huge chunk of the economy beyond manufacturing, agriculture, trade, and food processing. Let us take a look at our country's economic statistics and trends in the last twenty years and see the decisive rise in the input of the service economy. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports that in 2003, agriculture held a 25.34% share of the economy while manufacturing contributed 9.71%, trade 9.36%, and the service economy (professional & technical services and information and communication) held only 6.76%.

> ***The Imo State government is also leading the way in the digital revolution. We are the only government that has created a full ministry to develop and manage the digital economy.***

By 2013, the service economy had gained ground significantly, coming up to 18.49%, overtaking trade and manufacturing at 16.62% and 9.92%, respectively, and standing next to agriculture, which in the meantime had dropped to 23.33%. By 2023, it had consolidated its grounds and now stands at 22.93%, same with agriculture, overtaking manufacturing, trade, processing, et cetera. Clearly, if the trend continues, it means that by the next decade, the service sector will overtake all the other sectors of the economy. The service sector is the new undisputed revenue mainstay of the economy.

The service economy encompasses all the non-tangible economic activities and services paid for on a daily basis to make life and business smoother and better. They include professional services like banking, insurance, accounting, auditing, legal and consulting. Other services are information and communication technology (ICT), internet services, telephony, healthcare, education, training, transportation, entertainment, leisure & recreation, tourism, gaming & gambling, beautification, conferencing, luxury, et cetera. Entertainment, for instance, includes items like sports, music, clubbing, drama, movies, comedies, show business et cetera. The list is endless. What is important is that these intangible services contribute significantly to economic growth and development.

The Imo State government, under my watch, understands the immense potential of the service economy and its rapid contribution to economic growth. This is why we are massively investing in this sector, to consolidate the position of Imo State as a market leader in the sub-region. With over three hundred hotels and relaxation centres, innumerable natural tourist attractions like caves, rivers, hills and natural attraction sites, an abundance of cultural heritages and indigenous festivals, Imo State is the tourism and hospitality hotspot in the South-East and South-South Region of the country. Records show that the state is currently attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over the country during the year, which peaks expectedly during festive seasons like Christmas and Easter. We are also bringing down the leading global brands in hoteling and hospitality management, which will boost the hosting of international and high-calibre conferences, seminars, and workshops.

The Imo State government is also leading the way in the digital revolution. We are the only government that has created a full ministry to develop and manage the digital economy. The state is training 300,000 youths in the various aspects of information and communication technology (ICT), a scale beyond what any other government is doing in Africa. Our aim is first to empower our youths to become key players in this sector and, secondly, to reposition Owerri to become the Silicon Valley of the Southern Region. ICT is the key to the future. It is behind the possibilities of hundreds of thousands of direct and indirect jobs. Here in Owerri, our young people will be receiving payment locally and across the globe for IT services offered while working from local tech hubs and from the comfort of their homes.

In like manner, we also appreciate the value of health and education as key components of the service economy. With our health insurance healthcare program, we are investing in the health of Imo citizens. By improving the health infrastructure and medical personnel, Imo State can become a point of health tourism attracting people from beyond our borders. In the same vein, education is receiving a lot of attention from the primary to the university level, hoping through it to groom knowledgeable and skilled workforce to drive the economy of the state.

When the oil and gas installations in the Ohaji-Egbema axis are completed, not only will our petrol and gas needs be met and surpassed, but thousands of direct and indirect jobs will be created. In addition, scores







of oil servicing firms will spring up, bolstering the economy of the state.

In this edition of the Imo Economy Digest, which focuses on the service economy, I invite the good people of Imo State to take advantage of the opportunities being created by our government to improve themselves economically. I also invite private sector players to invest in Imo State in any of the critical sectors of the economy.

This is our chance to create our desired Imo economy. Let's do it together!

Senator Hope Uzodimma, CON
Executive Governor of Imo State

Imo State, the Heartland of Service

We are pleased to present the June 2024 edition of the Imo Economy Digest (IED) from the Office of the Chief Economic Adviser to the Imo State Government. In line with our mission to stimulate economic development in Imo State by shedding light on various aspects of the economy, this edition focuses on the service economy in Imo State. Service Economy refers to any intangible economic activity people can pay for, usually distinct from manufacturing, processing, or agriculture. Here, you get support activities like accounting, auditing, entertainment, acting, tourism, training, estate management, hoteling, beautification, education, health, consulting, recreation, gambling, comedy, decoration, et cetera. It is huge.

Empirical evidence suggests that hitherto neglected services have come to challenge and displace manufacturing and agriculture as the money-spinner. In this edition, we ask whether Imo State has what it takes to be a leader in the service economy within the sub-region and whether it can focus on realising this agenda in the short or long term. This edition also tells the story of the service industry in Imo State and sets the ground for its expansion and growth.

> *He captures the significant and transformative development projects on oil/gas around the Egbema-Ohaji axis, such as the Anoh Gas Plant ...*

From our assessment of the landscape through the many submissions for this edition, we conclude that the current strides of the Governor Hope Uzodimma-led government are moving Imo State to its destiny of being the service hub in the sub-region. As narrated by Prince Eze Ugochukwu, there are at least four key sectors where current government efforts are contributing hugely to the growth of the service sector: oil & gas, health & wellness, transport & logistics, as well as ICT. He captures the significant and transformative development projects on oil/gas around the Egbema-Ohaji axis, such as the Anoh Gas Plant and the Watersmith Refinery. When fully operational, the



investments in oil and gas will support a substantial service-sector economy such as equipment leasing, logistics & transport, technical & training services, and other sundry services. Its economic value will be immense.

As you will also see in this edition, the information and communication technology (ICT) industry is another area where Imo State is repositioning itself well to dominate the service industry in the sub-region. The government is also leading the way with massive investments in training 300,000 youths in digital skills through the SkillUpImo programme championed by the State's Ministry of Digital Economy and E-Government. The government's prioritisation of this initiative has attracted other actors, such as the Coca-Cola Foundation, to show interest in the Imo digital economy. In this edition, Nwamaka Onyemelukwe, Senior Director at Coca-Cola, narrates the impact of the Coca-Cola Foundation's sponsored youth digital training programme in Imo State.

Today, thousands of our youths are equipped with digital skills to create meaningful jobs and provide the critical mass of talent that can drive innovative business start-ups and provide services internationally without barriers. ICT is already deep in the finance sector, education, information availability, retailing, and health, and will soon become helpful for security and more. With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and robots, there is no sector of society where ICT will not dominate shortly.

Imo State is also witnessing a revolution in the health sector made possible by several factors, the most important of which is the current Health Insurance Scheme for Imo people. The Executive Secretary of the Imo State Health Insurance Agency, Dr. Uchenna Ewelike, narrates how the project benefits the people. Beneficiaries in the 27 LGAs include civil servants, students, and the general public. The number and quality of hospitals are also increasing, translating into better healthcare for the people. It is even projected that Imo State will significantly and strategically support nearby states if its health facilities continue improving. Read through and see what is going on in the Imo State service economy, in the finance sector, transport & logistics, tourism & recreation, entertainment and conferencing, et cetera.

This edition also updates us on the One Kindred One Business Initiative (OKOBI) movement, spreading like wildfire. Championed by the Office of the Chief



Economic Adviser to the State Government, it is being promoted globally and taking roots locally. International donors and development agencies are queuing to support various OKOBI businesses in Imo State. Today, there are many investment opportunities up for grabs for rural OKOBI businesses. Its job-creation and wealth-generation potential are immense.

Our tradition is to promote entrepreneurship in this magazine, hoping other people can learn something new. So, in this edition, we bring samples of promising businesses that typify the solidarity economics that OKOBI is promoting within the communities. There is an interview with the members of Mater Farms of the Catholic Diocese of Ahiara and the Okpofe Youths Development Cooperatives, which are good examples of local business ventures that are making waves.

We hope you will enjoy this edition as usual. So, happy reading. We look forward to your feedback on how we can improve the magazine.

Editorial Team



Governor Uzodimma Begins Second Term On A High Note

As Governor Hope Uzodimma's second term in office takes off in earnest, he has put down his feet on the throttle. Imo State is experiencing significant growth and development. He has achieved a lot during these few months since he was sworn in for his second term. Here are some of the most outstanding achievements in this timeframe.

1. HEALTH

Recognising the importance of a robust healthcare system, the government has consolidated its achievements in health. He invested heavily in improving medical facilities and services across the state, primarily through the health insurance scheme. This has resulted in enhanced access to quality healthcare for the people of Imo State, ensuring their well-being and contributing to a healthier and more productive population. The governor is committed to universal health coverage, ensuring the poor and vulnerable can access free healthcare services through insurance schemes. Over 84,900 individuals were enrolled during the first term, and an additional 40,000 will be covered in the current phase, expanding the safety net for vulnerable populations.

Imo State has taken a significant step forward in combating viral hepatitis with the launch of the Hepatitis B Control Program by the Imo State Primary Healthcare Development Agency (ISPHCDA) in Owerri. This initiative demonstrates the state government's commitment to improving the health and well-being of its citizens. The program aims to prevent and treat hepatitis B, which can lead to liver cirrhosis, liver cancer, and death if left untreated. With effective treatments and screening tests now available, Imo State is poised to make significant progress in controlling and eliminating this disease, ultimately creating a healthier and thriving community.

2. TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Strategic infrastructure development has been a priority for Governor Uzodimma. The administration has undertaken ambitious projects to improve the state's transportation network, including constructing and rehabilitating roads, bridges, and other vital infrastructure. All the key routes coming into and leaving the capital city of Owerri have been reconstructed. Currently, the Assumpta Cathedral/Control Post Flyover Project is ongoing. It is a crucial infrastructure development aimed at alleviating traffic congestion at the Control Post junction, thereby enhancing economic vitality in Imo State. This project addresses the ongoing traffic issues and frustrating delays for motorists travelling through Owerri, Anambra, and Rivers State.

3. ELECTRICITY AND POWER GENERATION

Another notable achievement of the administration is power generation. Recognising the importance of a reliable and sustainable energy supply, Governor Uzodimma has invested in power infrastructure to ensure uninterrupted electricity for the people of Imo State. Early in the year, Governor Uzodimma

visited Cairo, Egypt. This trip was fruitful; he perfected collaborations with organisations such as Hassan Allam, Elswedey Electric, ADES, and Orascom, whose partnerships are set to revolutionise Imo State's industrial landscape, injecting vitality into the economy. Imo State also achieved a significant milestone by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government-owned Orashi Electricity Company and Madkour Group, an energy equipment and solution provider based in Cairo. This partnership is crucial for reliable and efficient power supply in the state. With Madkour Group's expertise and cutting-edge technology, the objective of generating, transmitting, and distributing electricity across the state is expected to be achieved by January 2025. The enactment of the Imo State Electricity Law is a tribute to the visionary legacy of the Late Dr Sam Mbakwe. This law was made possible by transferring electricity generation to the concurrent list of the constitution. This move is expected to boost economic growth, especially in rural areas, by improving access to reliable power and encouraging entrepreneurial ventures. The transfer of the Electricity Generation Plant at Ohaji Egbema LGA to the state, approved by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, further demonstrates the government's commitment to excellence and prosperity for all citizens.

4. TRADE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

One of the projects of the Uzodimma second coming is the development of the Orashi Oil and Gas Free Trade Zone as part of the state's industrialisation drive. By leveraging the expertise and resources of esteemed organisations, Imo State aims to create a conducive environment for business growth and prosperity, aligning with the government's commitment to economic development. Governor Uzodimma's meeting with the President of Afrexim Bank has resulted in significant progress, with potential investments totalling up to USD 1.5 billion. In June 2024, the groundbreaking ceremony for Afrexim Bank's Quality Assurance Center in Umuowa, Ngor Okpala LGA, marked a significant milestone in Imo State's economic development and infrastructure growth. This partnership with Afrexim Bank demonstrates a commitment to fostering economic prosperity and creating opportunities for citizens. The establishment of the Quality Assurance Center is timely, coinciding with the preparation for the operation of the Sam Mbakwe International Cargo Airport's Cargo wing, which now, courtesy of the Uzodimma administration, has acquired night-landing capabilities.

5. SANITATION AND WASTE MANAGEMENT

Another positive step taken by the Imo State government is the engagement of the Eastern Waste Management Company Limited under a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) arrangement to improve waste management practices in urban and semi-urban centres of Imo State. This collaboration aims





to revolutionise waste management in the state, leading to a cleaner and healthier environment, enhanced waste management practices, increased recycling, and improved public health and well-being. Imo State plans to reduce environmental pollution, promote public health, and contribute to a cleaner and healthier environment by adopting sustainable waste management practices.

6. HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM

The state government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Hassan Allam Holding and Punz Limited in the hospitality sector. Through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model, this partnership aims to construct a 200-room Imo Marriott Hotel in Owerri within 24 months. This ambitious project has received financial support from esteemed institutions such as Afrexim Bank and Fidelity Bank Plc, with the State Government serving as an equity partner. This initiative showcases the government's commitment to expanding the hospitality industry and catalysing economic growth.

7. TOURISM AND INTERNATIONALIZATION

The Imo International Conference Centre (IICC) in Owerri is a project of immense significance that has shown commendable progress. As reported by the media, Governor Hope Uzodimma's recent visit to the construction site filled him with pride and excitement as he envisioned the centre's potential as a hub for economic and cultural exchange. The IICC is expected to attract national and international events, stimulating local businesses and tourism. Its impact on Imo State's economic advancement cannot be overstated, as it promises to transform its economic landscape. This iconic centre will not only showcase Imo State's potential but also position it as a prime destination for business and tourism.

8. AIR TRANSPORT

Installing night landing facilities at the Sam Mbakwe International Cargo Airport is another significant achievement of the Imo State Government. This upgrade will enhance the airport's operational capacity, increase cargo throughput, and boost economic activities in Imo State. With the ability to accommodate flights at night, congestion will be reduced, and efficiency will be increased. This improvement will attract more airlines and cargo operators, creating job opportunities and stimulating economic growth in the region. The night landing facilities will further establish the airport as a major cargo hub in Nigeria, solidifying Imo State's position as a player in the country's aviation sector.

9. SECURITY

In the period under review, Governor Hope Uzodimma of Imo State has equally handed over 32 operational vehicles and 11 Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) to the Nigerian Police Force to enhance the protection of lives and properties in the state. The Governor emphasized the importance of supporting the police in combating crime and maintaining functional security equipment for their operations. This donation aims to strengthen the capacity of the police to ensure the security and safety of Imo State citizens.

CONCLUSION

Looking at what has been achieved so far in less than one year in office under his second term, Governor Uzodimma is clearly focused on making a significant change in Imo State. His commitment to driving economic growth and development is evident in progress made, and it is clear that he is dedicated to creating a lasting impact on the state's future.

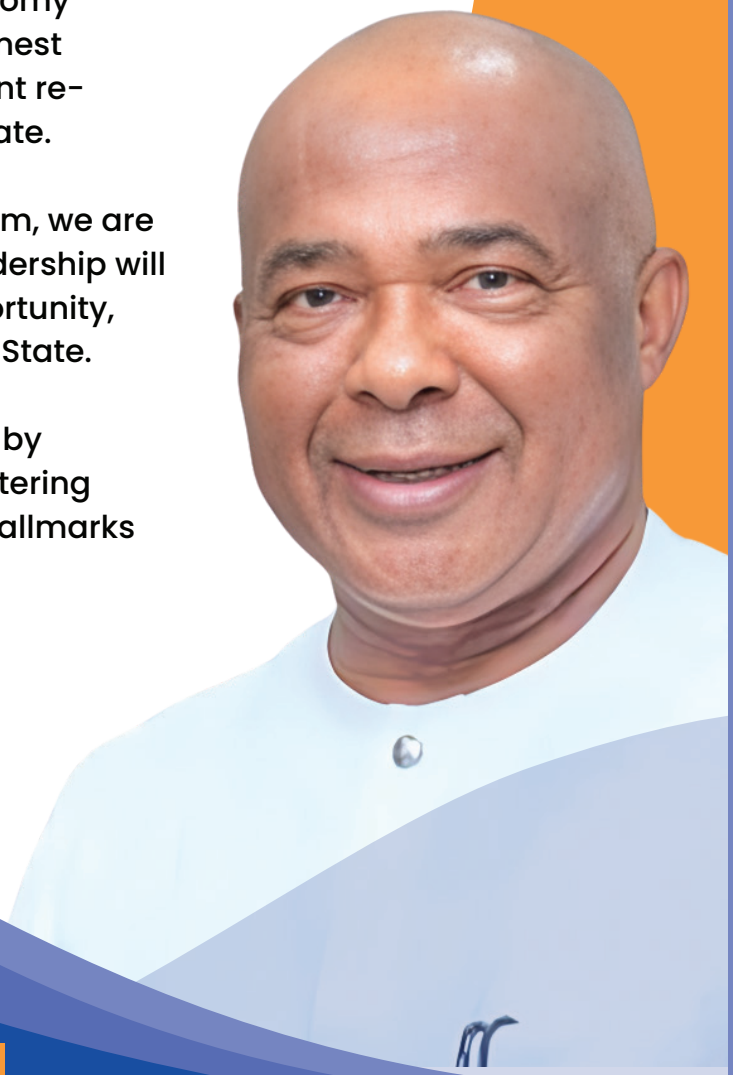
His Excellency,

GOVERNOR HOPE UZODIMMA

The editorial team of the Imo Economy Digest Magazine extends our warmest congratulations on your triumphant re-election as the Governor of Imo State.

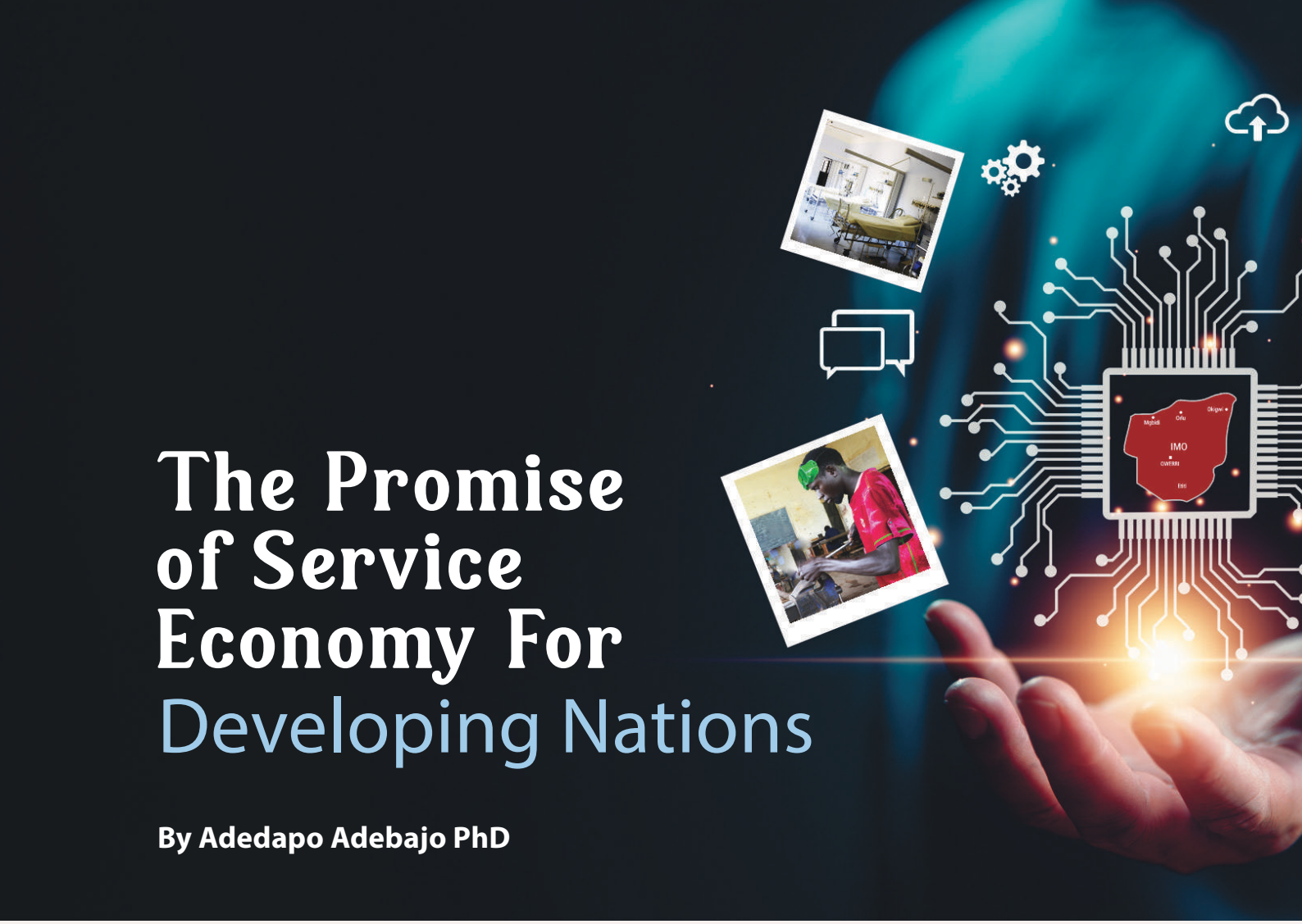
As you embark on your second term, we are confident that your continued leadership will usher in a new era of growth, opportunity, and success for the people of Imo State.

May your second term be marked by resounding success through unfaltering dedication that has become the hallmarks of your distinguished tenure.



BEST WISHES, YOUR EXCELLENCY.

The Editorial Team
Imo Economy Digest Magazine.



The Promise of Service Economy For Developing Nations

By Adedapo Adebajo PhD

We live in a time of extraordinary change, where rapid technological advancements and evolving global economic landscapes have compelled nations to shift from traditional, manufacturing-based frameworks to ones that are predominantly service-oriented, heralding a new era of sustainable growth. As we survey the vast and ever-changing global economic terrain, it is evident that seismic shifts are underway, propelled by swift currents of technological innovation and changes in market dynamics. The age-old industrial models, heavily reliant on manufacturing, are slowly but surely making room for service-oriented economies. Such a shift is not merely a trend but a strategic move towards sustainable growth and heightened competitiveness on the global stage, with cutting-edge technologies reshaping the socio-economic landscapes of nations across the globe.

But what exactly is a service-oriented economy? A service-oriented economy is one in which the primary focus is on providing services rather than on the production and sale of goods, with service industries such as finance, healthcare, education, and tourism driving economic growth and job creation. In recent years, the service-oriented economy has become increasingly important for developing countries, as they seek to expand their economies and create new opportunities for employment and investment.

In developed nations, the service industry drove 90% of GDP growth from 1985 to 2005. By 2008, services made up nearly three-fourths of GDP, up from two-thirds in 1991. Meanwhile, employment in the manufacturing sector continued to decline, while services accounted for all employment growth. In 2008, on average, the service sector employed 72% of the labour force in high-income countries—a full ten points higher than in 1991. By 2019, services had come to represent 55% of the GDP and 45% of employment in developing countries, whereas developed economies saw services constituting an even larger share of their economic growth, averaging 75%. It is evident that services now dominate the economy in high-income countries, while manufacturing takes a less prominent role.

The transition towards a service-oriented economy is a significant shift that leads to several advantages. The gravitation towards a service-oriented economy reshapes the employment landscape significantly. While traditional manufacturing sectors might see a dip in job opportunities, the burgeoning service industries open new avenues



for employment. These sectors often demand a distinct set of skills and qualifications, underscoring the need for substantial investment in education and training. This shift not only fosters a skilled workforce but also promotes entrepreneurship and self-employment, enhancing labour market flexibility and empowering individuals.

Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh state in India, serves as a motivating tale for those who have joined the development process late. Over just two decades, Andhra Pradesh swiftly transformed itself from a predominantly agricultural, impoverished economy to a significant service hub. Fueled by a remarkable 45-fold surge in service exports between 1998 and 2008, the number of information technology companies in Hyderabad skyrocketed by eight times, and employment opportunities expanded by twenty times. The trend of service-led growth has also gained traction in other regions of India, earning the country a global reputation for exporting cutting-edge services.

Another crucial benefit is economic diversification. As nations move away from predominantly manufacturing-driven models to embrace services, they dilute their dependency on any single industrial sector. This strategic diversification acts as a safeguard against the fluctuations and downturns specific industries might face, thereby bolstering the economy's overall stability. Moreover, service-based economies thrive on a diverse array of sectors, crafting a more resilient and balanced economic terrain. In addition, a service-based economy fosters innovation and creativity, as businesses in various sectors continuously seek new ways to differentiate themselves and meet evolving consumer demands.

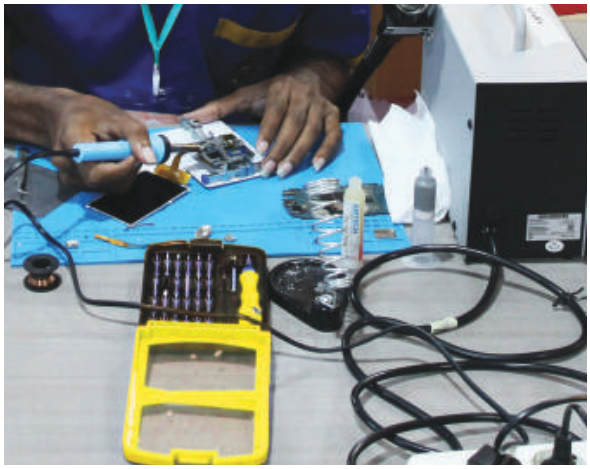
Enhanced labour mobility stands out as another significant advantage of a service-based economy. The service industry's independence from rigid geographic locations and physical infrastructures offers unprecedented flexibility in the movement of labour. Workers are empowered to traverse across regions, exploring and seizing employment opportunities across various service domains. Such fluidity not only optimizes the allocation of human resources but also amplifies job possibilities, curtails unemployment, and fosters social and economic inclusivity.



The architecture of a service-based economy inherently supports sustainability and resilience. Key sectors such as renewable energy, environmental consulting, and sustainable tourism are dedicated to minimizing ecological footprints and promoting sustainable practices. Prioritizing these sectors helps nations reduce their carbon emissions and aligns them with global initiatives aimed at mitigating climate change impacts. Moreover, the intangible nature of services renders them less vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, ensuring quicker response and adaptation during crises, thereby enhancing economic resilience.

A service-oriented economic framework elevates a nation's stature on the global stage. Specialized and innovative service sectors furnish a competitive edge,





distinguishing a country in the international arena. Focusing on high-value service domains not only positions a country as a leader in specific fields but also capitalizes on intellectual property and knowledge-intensive activities. This strategic focus not only amplifies export potential but also bolsters the nation's reputation as a cradle of innovation and expertise.

For developing economies, the successful pivot from a manufacturing-heavy to a service-based economic structure demands some pre-requisites and considerations for its manifestation. First, the workforce of such a developing economy must undergo profound structural transformations. The burgeoning demand in sectors like healthcare, education, finance, information technology, and professional services necessitates a workforce adept in these areas. To equip our workers for success in these evolving fields, substantial investments in education and training are imperative. Initiatives might include vocational training, apprenticeships, and retraining programs, all tailored to imbue individuals with the skills demanded by service-centric roles.

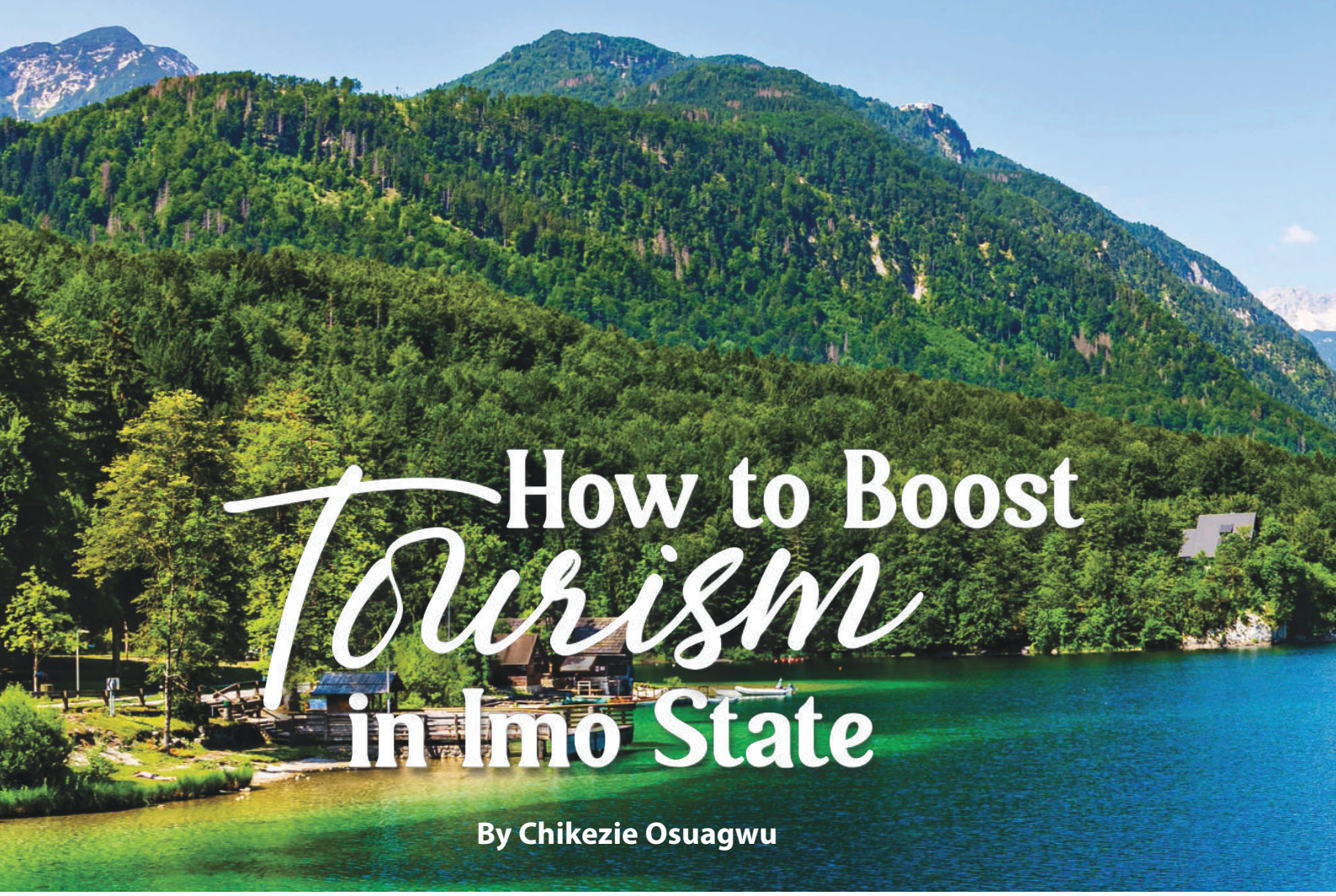
Second, the shift towards a service-based economy underscores the necessity for continuous investment in education and training. As job requirements morph, acquiring new and relevant skills becomes crucial for individuals aiming to remain competitive in the job market. This not only involves technical skills pertinent to specific service sectors but also transferable skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. To this end, fostering collaborations between governments, the private sector, and educational institutions is vital. These partnerships are essential for aligning training programs with the actual needs of the service economy, ensuring that the curriculum remains responsive to both current and future market demands.

Lastly, the transition to a service-based economy also calls for the formulation of robust policy and regulatory frameworks. Such frameworks should facilitate entrepreneurship, safeguard fair competition, and protect consumer rights. To mitigate market failures and encourage the expansion of service industries, government intervention is often required. This may take the form of reducing entry barriers, offering financial incentives to service-oriented businesses, and enacting regulations that uphold fair and ethical business practices.

The importance of services in the economy is undeniable. As the demand for services continues to grow, developing nations have an opportunity to capitalize on this trend and build a service-based economy that can drive economic growth and development. To fully realize the potential of a service-based economy, developing nations must prioritize investment in education and training to ensure that their workforce is equipped with the skills necessary to compete in the global marketplace. Additionally, developing nations must focus on creating an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and innovation, as these are key drivers of economic growth and can help to create new opportunities for workers in the service sector.



Adedapo Adebajo, PhD, FHEA
Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Marketing, Loughborough University, United Kingdom
Research Specialisms: Service Economy; Service Innovation Ecosystems; Transformative Services; Public Management; Digital Transformation; Consumer Wellbeing.



How to Boost Tourism in Imo State

By Chikezie Osuagwu

Tourism has become an integral part of the global economy, with destinations around the world striving to attract visitors and reap its economic benefits. Tourism can be significantly improved in Imo State in line with global trends. In this article, I will demonstrate how improvements in infrastructure, landscapes, and cultural resources play pivotal roles in enhancing tourism at destinations; and how these features can boost tourism in Owerri. As key ingredients, these features shape the overall visitor experience and also contribute to the competitiveness and sustainability of tourism at destinations. The synergistic development of infrastructure, landscapes, and cultural resources creates a holistic tourism ecosystem that sets a destination apart for tourism and attracts a diverse range of visitors.

Imo state, "The Eastern Heartland," is endowed with natural wonders, historical sites, traditional festivals, gastronomical delights and friendly people. Regrettably, the state's tourism sector is yet to reach its full potential, due agelong challenges that remained unaddressed. These relate particularly to inadequate infrastructure and lackluster promotion of natural

"Imo state, "The Eastern Heartland," is endowed with natural wonders, historical sites, traditional festivals, gastronomical delights and friendly people.

landscapes and indigenous cultural endowments. Understanding the roles of infrastructure, landscapes, and cultural resources in tourism development is crucial for destinations to make informed decisions to enhance her tourism milieu. As key stakeholders, government(s), have a very critical role to play in addressing these challenges to ultimately enhance the state's tourism. Concerted efforts in these areas can significantly boost the state's tourism ecosystem and profoundly

expand her earning base. This review focuses on three major areas of interest that need attention, namely - infrastructure, landscapes and cultural development.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure is crucial to unlocking tourist destinations and improving existing ones. It encompasses transportation routes and road networks, accommodation options, and other supporting facilities. Good and adequate infrastructure attracts travelers, enhances movement, and promotes destinations. Accessibility is essential for the flow of tourists to, from, and within a destination. Hence, a well-maintained transportation system ensures such convenient connectivity. A positive correlation has been suggested between road infrastructure and tourism activities as a required boost for tourism development. Construction and upgrade of major and minor roads in a state is a key priority for enhancing the tourism sector. Adequate accommodation options cater to diverse preferences and budgets, and the availability of essential services like portable water, electricity, and communication systems create a comfortable experience. Tourism-specific infrastructure, such as visitor centers, signage, and public amenities, further enhance the overall tourism experience.

Addressing security, safety, and physical environmental preservation is also essential for attracting and retaining tourists. Proper infrastructure management, regular safety inspections, and implementation of safety protocols contribute to a positive visitor experience and promote a safe and tourist-friendly destination.

Landscapes

Landscapes are natural treasures that have the power to captivate and inspire tourists. Majestic mountains, magnificent lakes, lush forests, and diverse ecosystems are among the natural landscapes that attract tourists. These landscapes offer opportunities for a wide range of activities, including sunbathing, hiking, wildlife viewing, and adventure activities. These enable visitors to connect with nature, rejuvenate their senses, and create lasting memories. Imo State is home to stunning natural landscapes, such as the "Okigwe 1000 Rolling Hills" to the magnificent lakes at Oguta, Abadaba and the "Imo 5 Great Rivers" - Njaba, Nworie, Okitankwu, Otamiri and pristine forests at Ohaji, Oguta and Orlu ranges. This state possesses great endowments that can be harnessed for tourism development. However, conscious efforts are required of major stakeholders to enhance these resources. The preservation and enhancement of these natural environments are crucial for the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations, ensuring that future generations can also enjoy their splendor.





"A positive correlation has been suggested between road infrastructure and tourism activities as a required boost for tourism development."

Cultural Resources

Heritage sites, indigenous events, and artistic expressions, provide unique and authentic experiences for tourists. Historical monuments, archaeological ruins, and cultural landmarks showcase the rich history and heritage of a destination, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in its past. Vibrant cultural events, festivals, and traditional art forms provide opportunities for tourists to engage with local communities, learn about their customs, and participate in cultural activities. The preservation and promotion of indigenous cultures, crafts, and cuisines not only enriches the experience of visitors, but also contributes to the socio-economic well-being of local communities. Okonko cultural dance in Orlu, Mmanwu Masquerades of Umunoha, cultural festival and dances of Ekeleke at Ekwe, Ogho at Umuaka and Okorosha at Izombe, the triennial Iwa-Akwa festivals in Mbano, Obowo and Ihite-Uboma, the Oru Owerri and Ikeji Arondizuogu are amongst so many unique attractions that make up the state's tourism sector offerings.

When carefully planned, developed, and managed, these key ingredients enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of a tourism destination. They create a positive image and reputation, increase visitor satisfaction, and generate economic benefits for local communities. By incorporating sustainable practices in the development and management of these elements, tourism destinations can ensure the preservation and conservation of their natural and cultural assets for future generations to enjoy.

Recent Positive Developments

Recent key interventions by Governor Hope Uzodinma to enhance the state's tourism milieu are highly commendable. The emphasis and investment of the state's resources on construction and upgrade of major roads have increased accessibility and connectivity. Recognizing the critical role of these key road projects, the government's efforts in this area are complemented with solar-powered street lighting, making "Night-time broad-daylight travel in Imo State" possible!

It is worthy to particularly mention the Owerri-Orlu road, Owerri-Okigwe road, part of Aba-Oweri Road, Sam Mbakwe Cargo Airport road expansion, ongoing Owerri-Mbaise-Obowo-Umuahia road, and the ongoing Owerri-Port Harcourt road/ Onitsha road enhanced interchange at Control Post. Furthermore, working with a renowned



construction company, CRANBERG, firmly demonstrates the government's commitment to improving the state's tourism. Such enhancements would significantly contribute to smooth travel experiences for residents and tourists, thereby bolstering Imo State's tourism appeal. There is however the need to improve security, safety, environmental preservation, and cultural enhancement measures to fully benefit from the state's abundant resources and to foster sustainable tourism development.

Some roads still need the Governor's urgent attention. The Avu-Obosima-Adapalm-Etekwuru road, leads to AdaPalm Company, a 4,310-hectare plantation with capacity to produce nearly 300,000 tons of palm oil. It was established in 1975 as a downstream agricultural company and has been processing special palm oil (SPO) and palm kernel since 1992. It is also access to the Assa North-Ohaji South gas project (ANOH), one of the largest greenfield gas condensate development projects in Nigeria, discovered in 1992 according to GlobalData. These two major tourism attractions and Obaranta Lake "The Blood Lake" in addition to many others are not easily accessible due to this very bad road.



Source: @The Travel Place

In addition to the construction and upgrade of major roads, the government should consider other notable steps to enhance the state's tourism sector. Some of these initiatives should include:

i. Empowering a Tourism Development Agency to oversee the development of tourism, policy formulation, strategic planning, and promotion.
ii. Promotion of cultural festivals and events, stakeholder (governments, communities, and private sector) engagement to showcase the state's rich cultural heritage, and attraction of tourists.
iii. Destination Marketing and Promotion: Campaigns should be launched to highlight the state's attractions, activities, and unique selling points (USP).
iv. Training and Capacity Building: The government needs to prioritize training and capacity-building for tourism stakeholders to enhance service quality, customer experience, and professionalism.
v. Investment Grants and Tax Relief: The government may provide financial assistance to tourism projects to offset initial capital costs.
vi. Land Allocation: The government may allocate land at favorable terms to investors for the development of tourism projects.
vii. Community Engagement: Community involvement in tourism development can lead to the preservation of local heritage, creation of employment opportunities, and equitable distribution of benefits derived from tourism.

Conclusion

Current initiatives demonstrate the Governor's commitment to promoting tourism in Imo State. However, by adopting a multi-faceted approach that encompasses infrastructure development, capacity building, marketing, and stakeholder collaboration, the government can unlock the full potential of the state's tourism sector and drive economic growth, job creation, and sustainable development. By harnessing Imo State's abundant natural and cultural treasures, the government can propel tourism development, thereby expanding opportunities for the overall growth and prosperity of the state and its residents.

Going forward, to boost Imo States's tourism ecosystem, it is very crucial to prioritize security, safety, and environmental preservation to create an environment that instills confidence amongst residents and visitors while protecting the indigenous resources.



OSUAGWU Chikezie *is a tourism development specialist. He was 1st Secretary of Cross River Tourism Development Initiative (CRTDI) and Coordinator, 1st Abuja Carnival stakeholders consortium. He is currently a researcher in nature and heritage-based tourism with interest in Imo State and Niger Delta.*



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Imo State: Encouraging Service Economy

By Julian, Chijioke Godswill

In today's globalized economy, the service sector has emerged as a pivotal force driving economic growth, fostering innovation, and enhancing overall development. Unlike traditional economies heavily reliant on the production of goods, a service-based economy focuses on the provision of intangible goods and services, such as finance, healthcare, education, information technology, tourism, and retail. These sectors significantly enhance productivity, improve quality of life, and build economic resilience against various shocks. A service-based economy is characterized by higher employment in service-oriented industries, significant investment in human capital, technological advancement, and well-developed infrastructure supporting services.

Is Imo State operating a service-based economy? This question is increasingly relevant as the state, situated in southeastern Nigeria, shifts its economic focus towards the service sector. This transition is driven by strategic vision, investments in education and infrastructure, and a burgeoning entrepreneurial spirit among its residents. The service sector in Nigeria contributed approximately 60.3% to the GDP in 2023 according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and Imo State is beginning to mirror this trend.

The transition to a service-based economy in Imo State is evident in its employment patterns and investments in education. According to the NBS, employment in the service sector grew from 35% in 2015 to 50% in 2022. This shift is largely attributed to the expansion of educational institutions and the emphasis on skill development. The state's metropolis is home to several prominent tertiary institutions, including Imo State University (IMSU), Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, and the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO).

In addition to these public institutions, numerous privately owned educational institutions have significantly contributed to the sector. Renowned primary and secondary schools include the Madonna Model Secondary School, Lifeforte International Schools, and Grace Schools. At the tertiary level, institutions such as Hezekiah University, Maranatha University, and the Claretian University have played pivotal roles in providing quality education and fostering a skilled workforce.

Over the past five years, the number of graduates in fields such as business administration, computer science, and healthcare has increased by

an average of 20% annually, fostering a more educated workforce essential for the growth of the service sector. Despite these advancements, the education sector in Imo State faces challenges such as inadequate funding and infrastructure, and a mismatch between graduates' skills and labor market demands.

Healthcare is another critical component of any service-based economy. In Imo State, there has been significant investment in healthcare infrastructure. The state government's spending on healthcare has risen by 15% year-on-year over the past four years. It is important to add that several privately owned healthcare establishments have contributed significantly to the sector in Imo State, like St. Damian's Hospital, Owerri; Holy Rosary Hospital, Emekuku; FMC Umuguma; American Cancer Hospital, Iho and Living Word Mission Hospital, Orlu. These establishments have played vital roles in enhancing healthcare delivery and providing specialized medical services.

Despite these investments, access to quality healthcare remains limited, especially in rural areas, and there is a shortage of medical personnel. Other challenges include inadequate healthcare infrastructure, limited availability of advanced medical equipment, and uneven distribution of healthcare services across the state.

The ICT sector is another cornerstone of modern service economies. Imo State has made substantial strides in enhancing its digital infrastructure. The Digital Imo Project aims at improving digital literacy and expanding IT infrastructure across the state. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), internet penetration in Imo State increased from 25% in 2015 to 73% in 2023.

In support of government initiatives, several privately owned ICT establishments have significantly contributed to the sector in Imo State. Prominent among them are Zinox Technologies, one of Nigeria's leading computer and IT solutions providers; InfoConnect, a local firm specializing in software development and IT consulting; and Digital Dreams Limited, which focuses on web development and digital marketing services. These establishments have been instrumental in driving ICT growth and providing employment opportunities.

However, inconsistency in power supply and the need for more skilled IT professionals are significant hurdles. Other challenges include inadequate broadband infrastructure in rural areas, high costs of internet services, and limited investment in advanced technological innovations.

Tourism and hospitality remain vital components of Imo State's service sector. The state boasts numerous cultural sites, natural attractions, and festivals that draw visitors. According to the Imo State Tourism Board, tourism revenue has increased by 25% annually.

Also, several privately owned tourism and hospitality establishments have significantly contributed to the sector in Imo State. Notable among them are Rockview Hotels, Owerri, which offers luxury accommodation and conference facilities; All Seasons Hotel, known for its high-quality services and central location; and the Oguta Lake Motel and Conference Centre, which provides scenic views and recreational activities at Oguta Lake. These establishments play crucial roles in enhancing the tourism experience and attracting visitors to the state. Unfortunately, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient marketing investment hamper access to beautiful tourist sites like Oguta Wonder Lake Resort.

The financial services sector is another critical pillar of Imo State's service economy. The state has witnessed a significant increase in the number of financial institutions. According to the Central Bank





of Nigeria (CBN), the number of bank branches in Imo State increased by 30% from 2015 to 2022.

Several privately owned financial service establishments have also significantly contributed to the sector in Imo State, and these include; Zenith Bank Plc, First City Monument Bank (FCMB), and Access Bank Plc, which have established multiple branches across the state. Microfinance banks like Lift Above Poverty Organization (LAPO) Microfinance Bank have also played vital roles in providing financial services to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and low-income individuals.

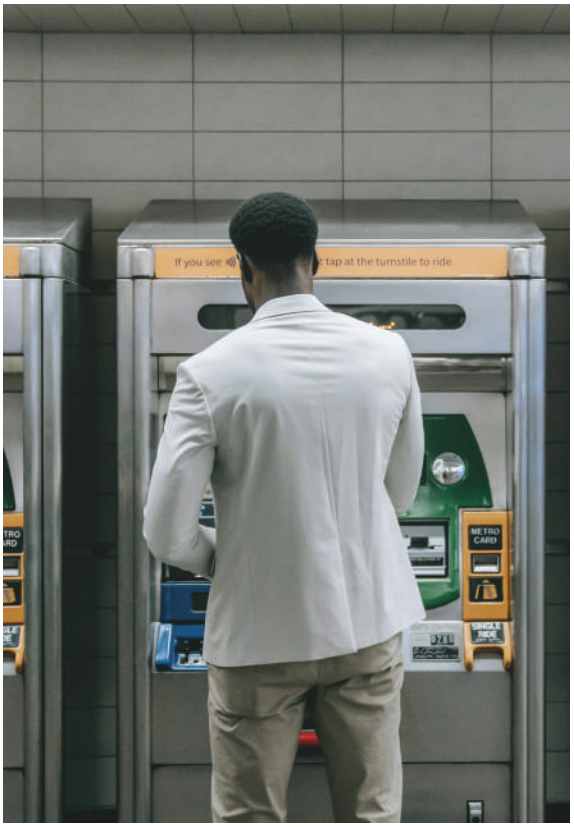
Still, issues like financial inclusion remain a challenge. Other issues include limited access to banking services in rural areas, inadequate financial literacy among the population, and the high cost of banking services.

Again, a robust legal framework is essential for supporting a service-based economy, and Imo State aims to be a nerve center for professional legal services. Despite having a well-established legal system designed to support businesses and individuals, the state faces several challenges.

Several privately owned legal, accounting, and consultancy firms have significantly contributed to these sectors in Imo State. Notable among them are Leeds Legal; Emeka Etiaba & Co. Law Firm, renowned for its expertise in corporate law; Ugochukwu Associates, a leading accounting firm; and Chidiebere Consultancy Services, which offers comprehensive business consultancy services. Issues related to the availability of a sufficient number of professionals and regulatory inefficiencies limit the state's potential to become a hub for professional legal services. These challenges also extend to related sectors such as accounting and service provision consultancy. The accounting and consultancy sectors struggle with insufficient professional expertise and bureaucratic hurdles, which further hamper Imo State's growth as a center for these critical services.

Effective media communication is also vital for fostering transparency and trust in the service sector. In Imo State, there has been a growing emphasis on improving communication through state owned digital broadcast platforms like Imo Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) and public awareness campaigns. Several privately owned media communication service establishments, such as Hot 99.5 FM, Ozisa FM and Boss Radio 98.9FM, have significantly contributed to enhancing media communication in the state.

Notably, challenges remain, including limited digital infrastructure, low digital literacy rates, and insufficient investment in modern communication technologies. Additionally, regulatory barriers and a lack of skilled





media professionals hinder the full potential of media communication in Imo State.

Another key service-based sector, retail and commerce, play a vital role in Imo State's economy, contributing significantly to employment and GDP. According to the NBS, the retail sector in Imo State grew by 28% annually from 2015 to 2023. Top tier privately owned retail and commerce establishments contributing to this growth include Shoprite Owerri Mall, Everyday Supermarket, and Priceless Stores.

However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, regulatory bottlenecks, and competition from informal markets persist. Additionally, issues like poor road networks, limited access to financing, and a lack of modern retail spaces hinder the sector's full potential.

Against this backdrop of service based economic challenges, I have outline some suggestions that will aid the Government in dealing with the issues raised:

Policy Recommendations

Investing in infrastructure is crucial for the growth of the service sector in Imo State. The government should prioritize the development of transportation, digital, and healthcare infrastructure. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can play a significant role in financing and implementing these infrastructure



Another key service-based sector, retail and commerce, play a vital role in Imo State's economy, contributing significantly to employment and GDP.

projects. The State Government's partnership with the international investment bank Afrexim Bank to build a quality assurance center in the state, its proposed plan to build a five-star hotel to accommodate and create a luxurious haven for prospective partners, and the takeoff of the construction of a 300MW Power Station at Ohaji Egbema will help revitalize the sector in the state, making the Eastern Heartland attractive to more service-based investment partners. For this plan to work, these projects must be completed in record time.

Again, strengthening educational institutions is vital for building a skilled workforce. The government should increase funding for tertiary institutions and vocational training centers, update curricula to align with industry needs, and provide scholarships for students in critical fields. Collaborating with private sector partners can also enhance the quality of education and training programs. Special attention should be paid to improving the funding of research-based trips for those in academia, with a view to bringing back garnered knowledge to the State's own research implementation centers.

Furthermore, the government should create an enabling environment for SMEs and startups by providing access to finance, reducing regulatory barriers, and offering business development services. Establishing incubators and accelerators can support the growth of startups and foster entrepreneurship. Government's attention should also be on building robust investment in marketing campaigns to attract tourists and showcase the state's cultural heritage. Improving infrastructure at tourist sites and offering incentives for private sector investment can enhance the visitor experience. Organizing cultural festivals and events can boost tourism revenue and promote local culture. The government can partner with communities that celebrate renowned cultural festivals in the





state like Oru Owerre, Iri-ji Mbaise, Umunnoha, and Arondizogu Masquerade festivals, to attract tourism investors that can build to-go firms exposing these events to adventure-seeking pleasure hunters outside our shores.

Focus should also be on enhancing financial literacy and inclusion, implementing financial education programs, promoting digital banking solutions, and expanding banking services to rural areas. Supporting fintech innovations can also improve access to financial services for underserved populations.

To enhance Imo State's position as a hub for legal, accounting, and consultancy services, the government should implement comprehensive legal literacy programs, streamline regulatory processes, and invest in professional development. Simplifying bureaucratic procedures and providing incentives for skilled professionals will attract and retain talent. Promoting best practices through workshops and partnerships can also elevate service standards, ensuring sustainable growth in these critical sectors. Recently, the State Government paid for the law school tuition fees of the last batch of Imo State University Law graduates. Gestures like this will strengthen and increase indigenous legal manpower in the state, similar to what has been achieved in the western part of the country.

The present administration should increase funding for healthcare infrastructure and services, particularly in rural areas. Serious enlightenment campaigns should reach the remotest parts of the state about the Health Insurance Scheme package of the Government. Trained volunteers should be placed on permanent remuneration to achieve this aim, and international health partners can be contacted as well. Investing in telemedicine and mobile health solutions can extend healthcare services to remote locations. Incentivizing healthcare professionals to work in underserved areas can address the shortage of medical personnel.

In addition, the government should support initiatives that promote digital literacy and transparency, including public awareness campaigns and the use of digital communication channels such as newspapers, radio, and television houses. Encouraging open dialogue between service providers and their clients can build a more inclusive and transparent service ecosystem.

Lastly, to support the retail and commerce sector in Imo State, the government should invest in modern retail infrastructure, streamline regulatory processes, and provide incentives for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Improving road networks and market facilities can enhance access and efficiency. Simplifying business registration and licensing will reduce barriers for new enterprises. Additionally, offering financial support and training programs for local businesses can foster growth and innovation in the retail sector.



Chijioke *is a doctoral candidate of Mass Communication at Imo State University in Owerri, Nigeria. He is also a Lecturer in the Department of Development Communication, Imo State University, and the Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to the State Party Chairman of Imo APC. Email: julian-godswill@gmail.com*



Hospitality As A Service

By Ikem Okuhu

Imo State was rated as the hospitality capital of the southeast of Nigeria, and from every available indication, has not lost any of its charm that made the state, particularly its capital, Owerri, the destination of choice by leisure seekers in search of a home away from home.

In Owerri, the state capital, there are 246 hotels recognised as logged by hotels.ng. This platform, which aggregated more than 13,000 hotels across Nigeria, logged 127 for Enugu, the capital of Enugu State, 74 for Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, 137 for Aba, Abia State, and 105 hotels for Awka, Anambra State. This places the Imo State capital well ahead of the other states in the number of recognised hotels across the east.

Peopled by naturally gregarious communities, who plied their gifts of the arts to provide comfort for themselves and their visitors, Imo State grew to become a "centre of excellence" of sorts for Igbo highlife and folk music. While it is possible to develop talents in the arts through intentional state policy, it appears that nature endowed Imo State with the abundance of talents and skills that make it an undisputed hospitality and entertainment capital.

Hospitality has natural trappings. An attractive destination, once built, tends to spin off associated industries. It was therefore natural that given the hospitable nature of the people and their endowments in music and performing arts, the state capital would become the preferred zone for all forms and genres of entertainment, thus increasing the preference for leisure tourism in the state.

In music, for instance, Imo State has unarguably produced the largest number of musicians southeast of the Niger. Notable names and brands include The Wings, Peacocks International, Paulson Kalu, Oriental Brothers, Sir Warrior, Bright Chimezie, Dr Alban, Alex O, Charly Boy, Onyeka Onwenu, and Ababa Nna to mention but a few.

In the Nigerian movie industry, the story of its origin and growth cannot be told without the omnipresence of talented Imo sons and daughters like Okey Ogunjiofor, Kanayo O. Kanayo, Ngozi Nwosu, Okey Bakassi, Bright Okpocha, Francis Duru, Charles Awurum, Genevieve Nnaji, Rita Dominic, Victor Osuagwu, Eucharia Anunobi, Steph-Nora Okere, Emeka Ike, Osita Ikeme and Stephanie Okereke.

It was therefore not surprising that Owerri plays host to the largest number of hotels and entertainment centres of all the political capitals in the region. It would seem that Owerri has its own model of Uwa Mgbede relaxation spots as made popular by Ibari Ogwa, a relaxation spot, owned by Chukwudi Ofoha. These hospitality centers, as well as others, could be harnessed and standardised to deepen their value propositions.





People visit mostly on weekends and public holidays from Port Harcourt, Bayelsa, Anambra, and Lagos just to savour the high-octane leisure Owerri offers.

Ibari Ogwa and other exciting entertainment centres like Mimi Place, Cubana, Orange Groove, among others are a few examples of the scores of exciting hangouts that make the Imo State capital quite attractive. People visit mostly on weekends and public holidays from Port Harcourt, Bayelsa, Anambra, and Lagos just to savour the high-octane leisure Owerri offers.

Having discovered the opportunities the state offers, Instagram sensation, Pascal Okechukwu, popularly known as Cubana Chief Priest, was reported to have concluded plans to build a 5,000-sitting-capacity entertainment centre in Owerri.

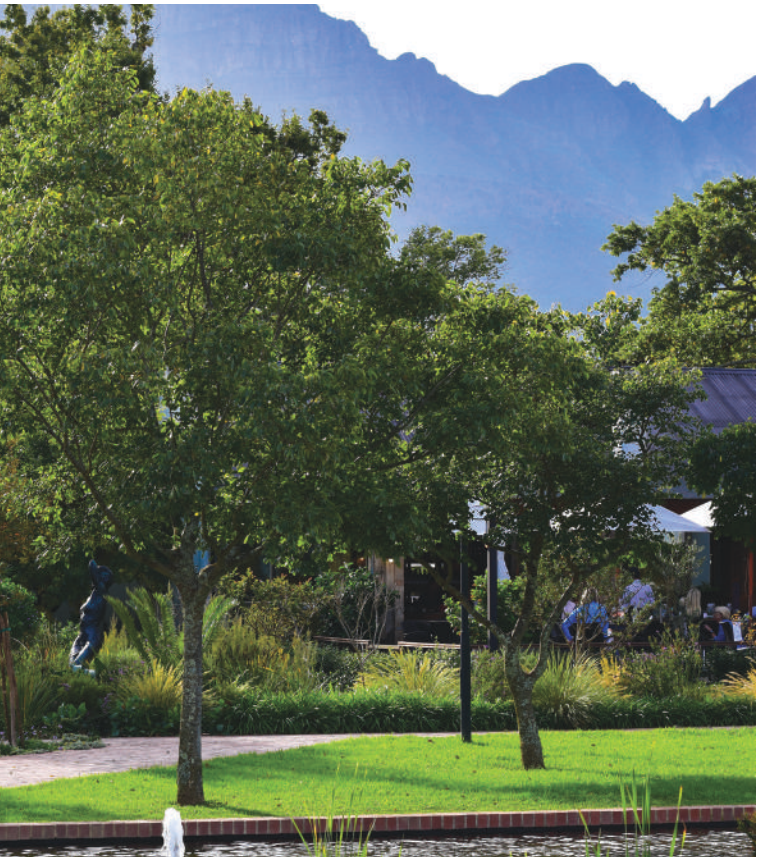
Said to be modelled after the London O2 Arena, the project is envisioned to make it possible for music concerts and other entertainment shows to be held in a secure environment. Cubana Chief Priest also envisions that the centre, when completed, would democratise concerts in the state, enabling a large number of people to be part of shows rather than what obtains at present, where only a limited number attend such shows in clubs at very prohibitive costs.

Even while Cubana Chief Priest's project is still in gestation, Owerri attracts thousands of visitors every weekend. According to a report published by EveryDayNews, an online newspaper based in Enugu, hotels in the capital, as many as they are, and growing in sophistication, have an estimated 95 percent of the rooms fully booked on weekends. One can only imagine what would happen, were there to eventually become three or even five such large entertainment centres in the city.

The investments by Ibari Ogwa, Cubana Chief Priest, and the scores of others that have built hotels and entertainment centres in the state capital are the alluvial gold on the surface of what could be auriferous gold mines of opportunities in the hospitality industry. While the state government is likely generating revenue from these players, being more creative about the process rather than relying solely on conventional taxes, rates, and fees will likely add greater value.

Taxation is disliked worldwide; nobody likes to pay, and nobody willingly complies. That is why companies, including multinationals, go to great lengths to hide their real income and thus pay fewer taxes. But businesses will welcome, or at least not resist a system that gives them recognition and class.

To achieve this, the state government should develop a grading system for all the hotels and hospitality centres across the state. This system should go beyond mere certifications. It should be based on standardised measurements with clear criteria for upgrading from one grade to another. Operators will



be made to pay for the upgrades and be allowed to use them for public relations and marketing.

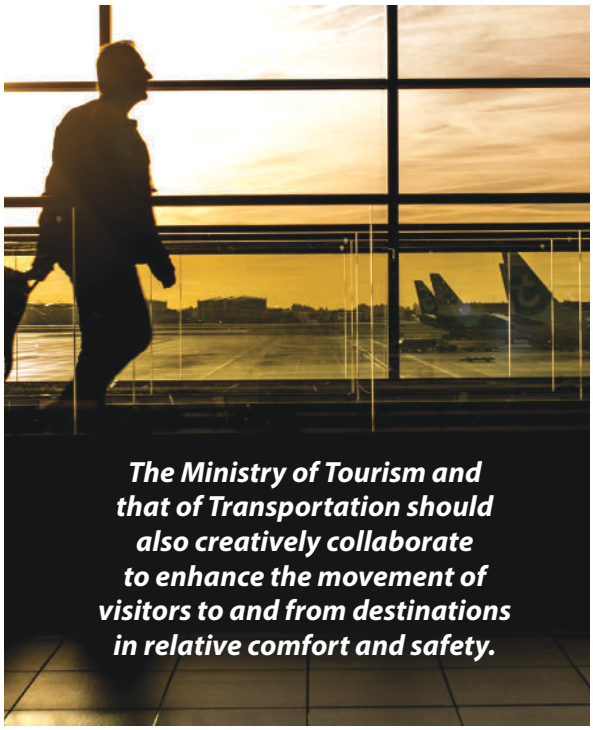
If handled transparently, this grading system will likely fetch more revenue and get greater voluntary compliance than the regular tax system. It might even cost less to collect. Any person who has studied Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs will be in a position to understand why.

Maslow understood the psychology of recognition, and in his research on human motivation, said that "we have what we may call the desire for reputation or prestige, recognition, attention, importance or appreciation. ...Satisfaction of these needs leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting any of these needs could produce feelings of inferiority, weakness, and helplessness."

What this strategy of introducing measurements will do, besides generating revenue, is ensure continuous improvements by these hotels, aware that any drop in standards will have a direct effect on their grading and customer traffic.

From every indication, the focus of developments in the hospitality industry in the state has focused more on youth and adult segments of the population. It will, therefore, be interesting to see the government widen the space to include family leisure. This can be achieved by either building parks or licensing private companies to build them. This will attract families who might opt to spend holiday periods in the capital.

The Ministry of Tourism and that of Transportation should also creatively collaborate to enhance the movement of visitors to and from destinations in relative comfort and safety. This can be achieved by upgrading the public transportation architecture in the state. According to research published in October 2022 in the International Journal for Hospitality Management by Weimin Zheng, Shengnan Gao, and Bin Fang, public transportation accessibility has a direct impact on



The Ministry of Tourism and that of Transportation should also creatively collaborate to enhance the movement of visitors to and from destinations in relative comfort and safety.





With careful planning that must incorporate city redesign with infrastructure uplift, Owerri can become the Las Vegas of Nigeria. Vegas prides itself as the Entertainment Capital of the World and is famous for its luxurious and extremely large casino hotels.

hotel demand as it can influence travelers' decisions by minimizing their transportation costs.

An organised intracity transport system will also impact city aesthetics, enhancing hospitality investments made by the state.

Ancillary to investment in hospitality is road infrastructure and security. Security in this case does not begin and end with CCTV cameras and uniformed guards at the gates of hotels and event centres. It includes the overall security structure of the municipality. The state must ensure proactive security management that guarantees the safety of visitors and revelers.

Good road networks are a part of a city's experience. Visitors should be able to have hitch-free movement from one part of the city to another. A city like Owerri should have an impeccable network of roads to enhance the experience of its throng of visitors.

It is known that most approaches to capital cities in Nigeria are classified as Federal Roads. As a result, some governments are led to avoid intervention even in times of deterioration. However, a state that is conscious of the importance of the city entrance to hospitality will make interventions to achieve remediation irrespective of the cost.

With careful planning that must incorporate city redesign with infrastructure uplift, Owerri can become the Las Vegas of Nigeria. Vegas prides itself as the Entertainment Capital of the World and is famous for its luxurious and extremely large casino hotels. Las Vegas is the sixth-most visited city in the United States and is also a top-three destination in the U.S. for business conventions and a global leader in the hospitality industry. It has more Triple A-listed Five Diamond hotels than any other city in the world. Las Vegas annually ranks as one of the world's most visited tourist destinations.

Despite being located in a mostly desert area, Las Vegas has not been inhibited in its growth. Owerri can earn its stripes as an entertainment destination with careful planning and as the city expands and develops, support services will naturally spring up to meet the needs of the industry.

With this, the government will solve the problems of employment generation, which in turn, will help curb crime and other forms of deviant behaviour.



Ikem Okuhu *is a Public Relations and Brand STrategy expert. His career traverses journalism, Corporate Communications, route-to-market, and Public Communications. He lives in Lagos and can be reached via brandishauthority@gmail.com*



Financial Services and Sustainable Development in Imo State

By Godson Ikiebey

Imo State has continued to create the enabling environment for sustainable development through policies, developmental plans and sustainable socioeconomic programs. In the last couple of years, the state has developed a sustainable industrialisation policy, a ten (2024-2034) year sustainable socioeconomic development plan, the Skill-Up Imo digital program to develop the digital skills of over 300,000 Imo citizens to be able to effectively play in the digital economy, the One Kindred One Business Initiative (OKOBI) which is driving sustainable socioeconomic empowerment in rural communities by having Kindreds set up businesses, and the state Community Economic Development Initiative (CEDI) through which sustainable and resilient infrastructures will be built to address the infrastructural challenges in Imo State. It is imperative to note that the above programs and other plans not mentioned will be fundamental for the state to achieve its sustainable industrialisation and sustainable socioeconomic development. Implementing these policies and plans will position Imo State as a modern state, and its economy as an inclusive economy, where no one will be left behind in line with the Just Transition.

The state government has since commenced the implementation of some of these sustainable socioeconomic development programs. For example, up to 40,000 Imo youths have been trained in digital skills. OKOBI has seen the registration of over 200 Kindred businesses in sectors such as sustainable agriculture, food processing, clean energy, and inclusive community finance. Some of these cooperative businesses include A-92 Farmers, New Emii, Akuyoma Amaimo and Green Era Technologies. This shows the growing strength of the program since its launch in 2022. The intention is to ensure that all kindreds have a registered OKOBI business that can provide jobs, scale, and participate in the global value chain. This will enable them to be active participants in the Imo State economy.





To achieve the sustainable socioeconomic developmental and industrialisation agenda of the state, these plans and programs need financing. In particular, the state needs sustainable developmental finance that will catalyse the sustainable socioeconomic development and industrialisation of the state. This is the kind of financing that could either come as grants or as low interest rate loans compared to that of normal commercial banking, focused on sustainable development needs such as road infrastructure, education, healthcare, clean energy, climate smart agriculture, food security, SMEs funding, skills development, etcetera.

This is the kind of financing that could either come as grants or as low interest rate loans compared to that of normal commercial banking, focused on sustainable development needs such as road infrastructure, education, healthcare...

Imo State and Sustainable Development Finance

Imo State's ability to access such funding will be very important in how far the state will go in achieving its developmental and industrialisation agenda. This is because revenue from taxation and the federation account will not be enough to ensure the delivery and success of these plans and programs, considering other recurrent needs of the state. It is therefore imperative for Imo State to position itself for the global and local financial sectors as it relates to sustainable development finance. On the basis of the fact that accessing sustainable development finance can be stringent due to the dual focus on return on investment and impact, as the funds are tied to specific development needs, it is imperative that the state builds its capabilities to attract such investments from Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), Development Finance Institutions (DFIs), and Commercial Banks, whose interest in development projects with impact are gaining momentum. Some of such funding in Nigeria include the Afreximbank US$1 billion funding of the health sector, the World Bank US$2.25 billion dollars facility, the investment of about 60 percent Afreximbank energy funding in Nigeria, and the US$3.5 billion Afreximbank loan to Cross River State to develop the Bakassi deep seaport.

It is important to highlight that the Imo State government through Governor Hope Uzodimma has been engaging with Afreximbank for a potential US$1.5 billion dollars investment in various sectors of the state. It is expected that when this becomes a reality, sustainable socioeconomic growth will be stimulated, coupled with the enhancement of sustainable infrastructure and job creation. However, Imo State needs more of such funding and investment to be able to meet its sustainable development plan and sustainable industrialisation policy. The state needs more of such funding if it is to achieve the CEDI, OKOBI and Skill-UP Digital Imo objectives. This means that Imo State should be a

veritable partner with financial institutions committed to sustainable development finance.

These institutions, besides Afreximbank, include, but are not limited to, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and African Development Bank (AfDB). Developing the partnership approach and positioning for such funds to catalyse the sustainable development of the state is important. The state should therefore develop a robust investor engagement framework that will position it as ready for such investment opportunities and funding. It is good that the state has commenced the journey of accessing sustainable development finance. However, what is required is for the state to concretise its capability to easily access such funds by developing the required mechanisms. This would require the development of a sustainable finance framework that articulates financing of conceptualised projects across sustainability-linked, social, green, blue and sustainability investments, including capacity building, as part of the state's pitching documents as they engage with these financial institutions.

Developing the partnership approach and positioning for such funds to catalyse the sustainable development of the state is important.

Developing a Sustainable Finance Framework

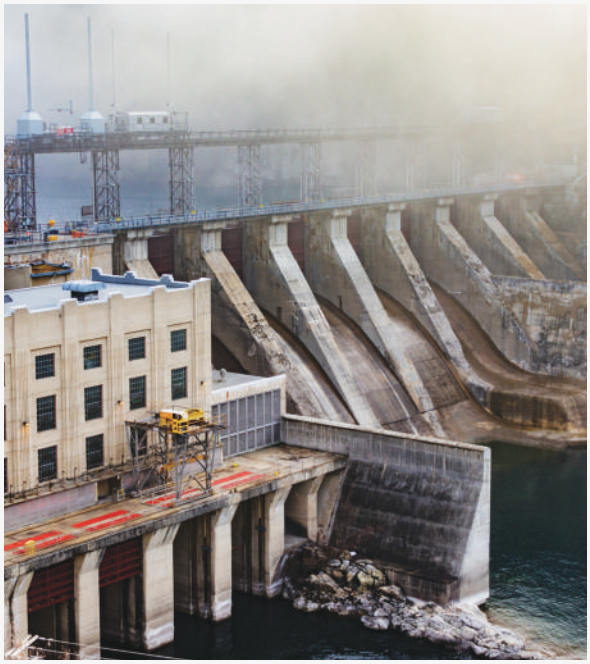
Developing a sustainable finance framework involves a broad consideration of developmental sectors. The sectors could include education, health care, road construction, rail construction, electricity (including solar, considering the Electricity Act of 2023), water infrastructure, affordable housing, etcetera. It is also important to highlight that a sustainable finance framework should be situated within the following four pillars: Use of Funds, Process for Project Evaluation and Selection, Management of Funds, and Reporting.

Use of Funds: The framework should explicitly state what the funds being sourced will be used for. This component covers the eligibility criteria used to determine the projects and programs that the funds will be used for, as well as takes into cognisance specific projects the funds will be used for, and their sectors. Under the use of funds, the framework will demonstrate the alignment of the projects to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the social or environmental objectives and benefits as the case maybe. For example, if the funds are to be used









for climate or green projects such as solar technology or hydro power for energy generation, the projects selected will have to show their alignment to the SDGs related to these. It will also need to show both the social and environmental objectives and benefits of the projects. In the same vein, if the funds are to finance the building and provision of infrastructure to schools or improve access to education, the projects will have to show the aligned SDGs as well as the social objectives and benefits of the projects. It is imperative to state that the use of funds defines and sets specific financing agendas in sustainable finance frameworks.

Process for Project Evaluation and Selection: This pillar should address how the projects included in the framework for financing were evaluated and selected. The framework should be able to show how the project clearly aligns with the eligibility criteria in the use of funds; and the process through which the alignment was determined.

Management of Funds: This refers to how the funds for the financing will be managed throughout the life cycle of the projects, which presupposes transparent communication of the project process as it relates to project performance and project impact.

Reporting: Impact reporting is very important as it helps to situate the financing within the context of beneficiaries (individuals and communities) of the projects. An annual impact report on project performance is key to demonstrating that the funds secured have been appropriately and effectively used.

Setting a Sustainable Development Finance Agenda

It is therefore beholding on Imo State to set a sustainable development finance agenda. To do this, it will be important for the state to develop a sustainable finance framework. The framework will bring together the state's focus as it relates to projects and programs that will enhance the sustainable socioeconomic development of Imo State. This will position the state to access the required funding for such projects. By developing a sustainable finance framework, Imo State will be making a statement of readiness to undergo stringent conditions which usually accompany such financing, including a good measure of transparency and accountability throughout the financing circle. Imo State is already on the journey through the plans, policies, programs and projects they intend to focus on. There is no doubt, whatsoever, that it is time for the Imo State Government, through a sustainable finance framework, to pull together cheap capital that will accelerate the state's sustainable socioeconomic development, where no one will be left behind.



Godson Ikiebey *is an ESG, Sustainable Finance and Sustainable Development Advisor.*





100

Young Entrepreneurs sponsored and trained from Assa North – Ohaji South Project's 11 host communities in Imo State (4 main host communities and 7 access road communities) as beneficiaries of Shell LiveWire entrepreneurship programme.



40

Community Youths benefit from specialized vocational and professional training. The beneficiaries from the Ohaji/ Egbema communities in Imo State acquired skills in project management, welding, fitting, scaffolding, rigging & lifting, electrical installations, electrical engineering & drafting, carpentry, building technology & drafting, ICT & telecoms, surveys, quality, and safety training.



18,000+

Adults and children received free medical care under the Community Health Insurance scheme (Health-In-Motion) in the Assa North – Ohaji South Project Communities.



Assa North HCDT Unveiled

The Shell Petroleum Development company of Nigeria Limited (SPDC's) Assa North Ohaji South Gas Project newly incorporated 2 Host Community Development Trusts (HCDT) in Assa North and Egbema/ Oguta. The HCDT model will be the key mechanism to drive community empowerment through equitable distribution of the community project benefits.



7

Selected Host Community Youths trained as Gas Compressor Mechanics, to further undergo on-the-job training.

Employment Opportunities



Thousands of employment and subcontracting opportunities being created in the Imo State region to date.



23+

Community projects completed and ongoing in the host and access Communities of Assa North – Ohaji South Project region. These projects include new additions and upgrade to schools, health post, townhall, markets etc.



80+

Community vendors have been beneficiaries of the Community Development Training to develop vendor's capacity in specialized areas such as Contract Management, Financial Management, Health, Safety, Security, Environment, Lifting and Hoisting and Electrical Safety.

Signature Infrastructure Projects

- Sustainable electrical power supply for the 4 host communities (Assa, Awarra, Obile and Ochia)
- Construction of Multi-Purpose Entrepreneurship Development Centre with over 275 capacity ICT/CBT Centre
- Construction and furnishing of 20 Bed Primary Health Care Facility
- Road Reconstruction: 22km External Community Roads (Umuakpu-Assa) and 7km community internal roads rehabilitation.

...Powering Lives in Nigeria

The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited

Operator of The NNPC/SPDC/TotalEnergies/NAOC Joint Venture

NNPC TotalEnergies eni naoc



Service Economy and Government Efforts: AN OVERVIEW

By Prince Eze Ugochukwu

Every State in Nigeria has own unique set of assets, opportunities, and potentials. What works for one state may not work for another. As they say, "one size does not fit all." According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the Imo State service sector accounted for over 80% of the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In 2023, Imo State was ranked by Statisense as the state with the 4th largest GDP in Nigeria. Here is a state with a highly skilled workforce and a highly educated population with strong work ethics. It is a state with an attractive central location and a rich cultural heritage. The state is also embracing digital transformation while modernising its physical infrastructure, such as roads, hospitals, and recently, the installation of night landing facilities at the Sam Mbakwe International Cargo Airport for 24-hour flight operations. Where else can be more attractive than a state with a rapidly growing service sector covering a wide range of industries, including healthcare, oil and gas, education, hospitality, legal services, financial services, real estate development, and transportation and logistics, all of which are meeting today's needs?

It is becoming clearer that Imo State is a leading centre for healthcare services in Nigeria, with an impressive range of medical facilities and services that contribute to the health and well-being of its citizens and medical tourists. The presence of two teaching hospitals in the state (FUTO Teaching Hospital and IMSU Teaching Hospital), along with other specialised hospitals, is a testament. With its highly skilled medical workforce and state-of-the-art medical technology, Imo State delivers high-quality care. The healthcare system in Imo State is thriving, providing a wide range of services from primary care services to hospital care and specialised care services. The Imo State Specialist Hospital, Umuguma, Owerri, successfully carries out complicated spinal cord and neurosurgeries. Similarly, Regions Healthcare Hospital, Mgbirichi, Owerri, provides heart and brain surgeries. They also treat chronic kidney and heart diseases, offering renal replacement therapy, dialysis, and colorectal cancer treatments.

The oil and gas service industry in Imo State is booming thanks to the abundance of natural resources. Imo State gas reserves sit at 200 trillion cubic feet, making her the single biggest gas-holding state in Nigeria. This is why the USD30 billion ANOH project was sited in Ohaji-Egbema LGA. South-East Nigeria has more gas deposits than oil, with Imo accounting for 70% of Nigeria's gas deposits. The ANOH Gas Plant and the Waltersmith refinery are examples of investments that have attracted oil and gas service providers. This has created a range of economic opportunities, from

employment to the growth of businesses that provide such services, including equipment leasing, technical services, maintenance and repair services, logistics and transportation of oil and gas equipment and products, safety and security services, as well as training and consulting. The economic implications of the industry's presence are positively affecting the local workforce, value chain, and tax revenue. The industry has created thousands of jobs, directly and indirectly, in construction, operations, logistics, and support services, and many local companies now provide catering, cleaning, and security services to the oil and gas industry.

The state's investment in ICT and digitalisation has truly transformed Imo State into a digital paradise. With 20,000 youths already trained and equipped and another 40,000 receiving training, the benefits are multifaceted, from creating new economic opportunities and improving public services to increasing access to information and enhancing quality of life. The state's vision for the future is clear - a digital economy that is prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable. This sector enables businesses to create and manage websites, apps, and other digital tools that are essential for conducting business online. Cyber security services are another growing sector, protecting businesses and individuals from digital threats like data breaches and cyber-attacks. E-commerce has taken off in Imo State with the rise of online shopping and digital payments, all key components of the state's digital transformation.

Imo State is truly a centre of knowledge, not just because of its abundant educational institutions but also due to the unique mix of expertise it attracts. Its four universities and other educational institutions provide a diverse range of knowledge, from technology and engineering (FUTO), agriculture (UniAgric Umuagwo), education (Alvan Ikoku) and business (IMSU). This variety has created a melting pot of skills, ideas, and experience, giving rise to new business models and technological solutions.

Education is a key pillar of Imo State's economic diversification and growth. Though many other states have universities, Imo State has a unique competitive advantage in terms of its universities' strong focus on science, technology, and engineering education, which are in high demand in today's global economy,

> ***Imo State gas reserves sit at 200 trillion cubic feet, making her the single biggest gas-holding state in Nigeria.***

allowing the state draw from this pool of talent.

There is also clear collaboration between industry and academia. By providing internships, the universities are giving their students valuable experience and skills that can be used in the workforce while providing companies with access to a pool of talented and eager young professionals. This stimulates the Imo local economy by injecting new energy and ideas into the workforce. By working closely with local companies, the universities are creating a pipeline for future employment opportunities for their graduates.

Imo State's hospitality sector is indeed a melting pot of services catering to all needs and desires. From high-street bars and restaurants to world-class hotels, the sector is teeming with activities for everyone to enjoy. With a strong focus on preserving the state's cultural heritage, the hospitality sector also provides a unique experience of traditional Igbo culture through highlife (Bongo) music and local cuisines. Imo State's culinary services are unique and attractive to people beyond its borders with its rich and diverse food culture,







offering a wide range of local dishes and flavours. There is a growing interest in the health benefits of traditional Imo State cuisine which uses of fresh, locally sourced ingredients. A growing number of restaurants and chefs who are promoting and innovating with Imo State cuisine, creating exciting new dishes and fusions.

The hospitality sector's contribution to the economy extends beyond its direct effects on the industry. It also creates a ripple effect throughout the service economy by supporting other sectors like transportation, construction, and manufacturing. It has created demand for supplies like food, beverages, linens, and cleaning supplies, meaning more business for local businesses and more jobs in the supply chain. The service sector thus acts as a chain reaction, with the hospitality sector driving economic activity and growth.

Lawyers play a key role in the Imo State service industry by providing a range of legal services for businesses and individuals. They help with contract drafting and review, business formation, and regulatory compliance. Accountants and financial advisors are also in high demand, as they help businesses and individuals manage their finances and taxes by providing vital services like bookkeeping, auditing, and financial planning. Imo-based consultants are other key players, offering valuable advice on strategy, marketing, and operations. Not least are the state's real estate developers who are busy building new homes, hotels, offices, and retail spaces to accommodate the growing entrepreneurial population. These diverse service professionals, including those not mentioned, contribute significantly to the overall economy in Imo State.

The Imo State Transport Company (ITC) leads the way in the transportation and logistics sector in the state. The ITC is a public transportation company that not only moves people around the state but also provides a vital link to other parts of Nigeria. In addition to providing transportation, the ITC through its range of franchises offer other services like logistics, courier services, and tours, making it an important player in the service industry. The company employs thousands of people, from drivers to maintenance workers to dispatchers, significantly contributing to the local economy.

By focusing on quality and cost-friendly services, Imo State is building a competitive advantage in the service industry. Its high-quality services has helped to attract and retain customers, while its cost reduction has helped to keep prices of services affordable, allowing businesses to pass on savings to their customers. Imo State's service industry sectors are tapping into the state's enormous economic potential in a variety of ways. The transportation and logistics industry helps businesses get their products to market quickly and efficiently; the hospitality industry is attracting new businesses and earning tourism revenue; the legal sector is supporting the growth of businesses by providing essential services like contract drafting and compliance; and the technology sector is creating new opportunities in fields like IT, software development, and data analytics. These industries are working together to capitalize on Imo State's potential, creating jobs, generating revenue, and building a brighter future for the state.



Prince Eze Ugochukwu *is a Marketing, Public Relations, Strategic Communications and Institutional Reputation Management Professional. He was a former Special Adviser to the Imo State Government on Public Enlightenment.*



Health Care, Health Insurance and Economic Productivity in Imo State

By Uchenna Ewelike, MBBCh, Ph.D

The Imo State Health Insurance Agency (IMSHIA) was established by the Imo State Law No. 4 of 2018 and was inaugurated in October 2018 to ensure affordable, accessible and quality healthcare services for residents of Imo State. The Act provides for mandatory Health Insurance for persons residing in the State, the general public, and all employees of the public and organised private sector with five (5) staff and above.

To that effect, the Imo State Health Insurance Agency launched four (4) major programs: the Formal Sector Social Health Programme (FSSHIP), designed to cater to the health needs of Civil Servants in the State, the Basic Health Care Provision Fund (BHCPF) for the poor and vulnerable population in the state, the Imo-Tertiary Institutions Social Health Insurance Programme (Imo-TISHIP) for students of all state-owned tertiary institution, and the ImoCare Health Insurance Program intended to cover health benefits for individuals, families and groups in the informal sector population of the state.

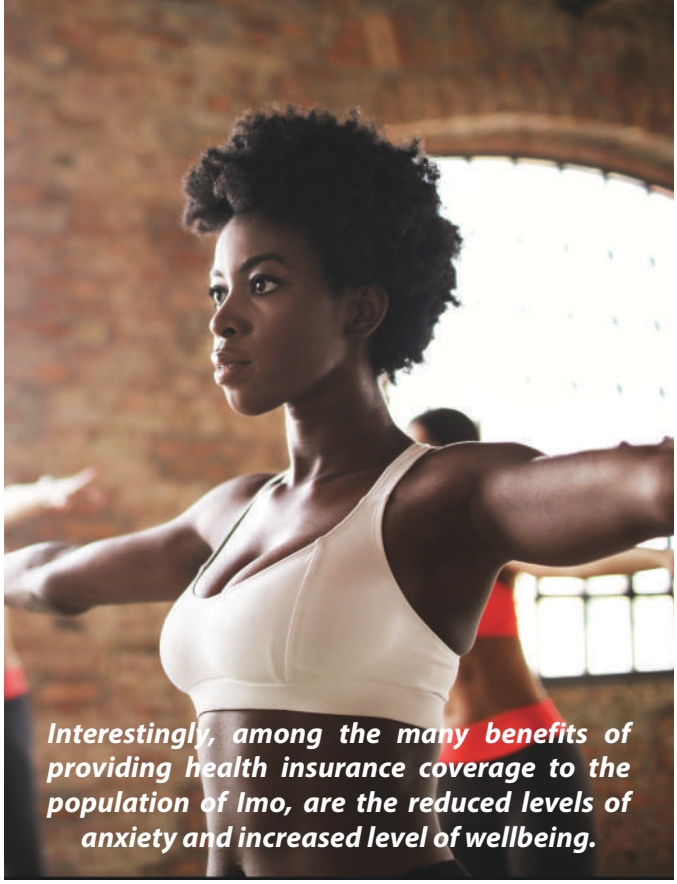
The implementation of the health insurance program in Imo State has transformed the landscape of access to healthcare services by dismantling barriers such as financial constraints, unavailability of healthcare services, and inequality in access to healthcare services.

As of 2018, according to a study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO), 92% of total health service expenditures in Imo State were from out-of-pocket expenses, indicating a lack of financial risk protection and posing a significant risk of pushing people deeper into poverty if compelled to sell off assets to pay out-of-pocket for healthcare services.

Currently, the Imo State Health Insurance Agency has enrolled and covered over 128,000 Imo residents under the health insurance program, ensuring financial risk protection as the enrolled population no longer faces financial hardships while accessing healthcare services, since they no longer have to pay hefty sums out of pocket for such services.

The implementation of health insurance has ensured equitable access to care in Imo, as enrollees in the program are entitled to quality healthcare services whenever needed, regardless of their socio-economic status, ensuring equal access based on need rather than ability to pay.

The goal of implementing health insurance is to guarantee the health of Imolites, thereby sustaining a productive society aimed at improving the quality of



Interestingly, among the many benefits of providing health insurance coverage to the population of Imo, are the reduced levels of anxiety and increased level of wellbeing.



human capital available to contribute to the state's GDP, as a healthy population indicates higher labour productivity and economic growth.

The ripple effects of the health insurance interventions on the state's economy will be evident in the number of healthy individuals available to contribute to economic activities, with financial protection against falling into poverty due to illness, recognizing that everyone is just one major illness away from poverty.

Reducing out-of-pocket expenditures on health across the entire Imo population through health insurance implementation will free up more resources for individuals to invest in other household needs or sectors of the economy such as setting up businesses, acquiring assets, education, taxes, et cetera, thereby increasing economic activity in the state.

Given the unpredictability of health, those without health financial risk protection are likely to fall ill unexpectedly and be forced to pay out of pocket since they lack health insurance coverage. Therefore, having health insurance protects against unplanned health expenditures, which could otherwise have catastrophic financial consequences, especially when one is not financially prepared or may need to sell off assets to cover medical bills.

Furthermore, considering the achievements of the Imo State Health Insurance Agency, the number of cases treated and managed by the Agency, totaling over 230,000, has had a positive ripple effect on the state's economy. The number of interventions by the Imo State Health Insurance Agency highlights lives saved, health restored, and individuals reintegrated into society as productive members, preventing them from falling deeper into poverty if they had to pay for healthcare themselves or remaining sick and unproductive if unable to afford treatment.

Interestingly, among the many benefits of providing health insurance coverage to the population of Imo, are the reduced levels of anxiety and increased level of wellbeing. According to a study by the WHO, the state's literacy rate of 98.2% and 74% willingness to pay for health insurance are crucial, because it indicates a deep understanding of its importance by the populace.

The potential of the state's health insurance is great, as there is strong collaborative engagement between the Imo State Health Insurance Agency, the Organized Labour Union (NLC, TUC and JNC), and Imo State Amalgamated Market and Traders Association (ISAMATA) groups for the sustainability of the Formal Sector Social Health Insurance Programme (FSSHIP) designed for Civil Servants and for the enrollment of marketers and association members into the ImoCare health insurance program.

The Imo State Health Insurance Agency is in partnership with over 50 hospitals, including private and public healthcare facilities, as well as 305 Primary Health Centers as providers under the scheme to deliver quality healthcare services to enrolled Imo residents. These facilities are accredited across the four IMSHIA referral zones: Orlu Zone 1, Orlu Zone 2, Owerri Zone, and Okigwe Zone, providing both primary and secondary

services under the program. Providers are duly paid based on the number of enrollees assigned to their facilities on monthly basis.

The uniquely designed referral network has enabled and facilitated over 800 secondary services, mainly surgeries, across the four IMSHIA zones, achieving "knife-on-skin" in less than 30 minutes, which has enabled the Agency to save the lives of over 100 pregnant women through Cesarean Sections, in addition to facilitating the birth of1000 babies through normal deliveries under the program.

Healthcare Providers under the scheme are assessed quarterly for improvement using the Agency's developed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on key areas such as human resources, equipment, medicines, infrastructure etc., enabling the Imo State Health Insurance Agency to assess the level of impact of the state government's investments in the healthcare sector through health insurance.

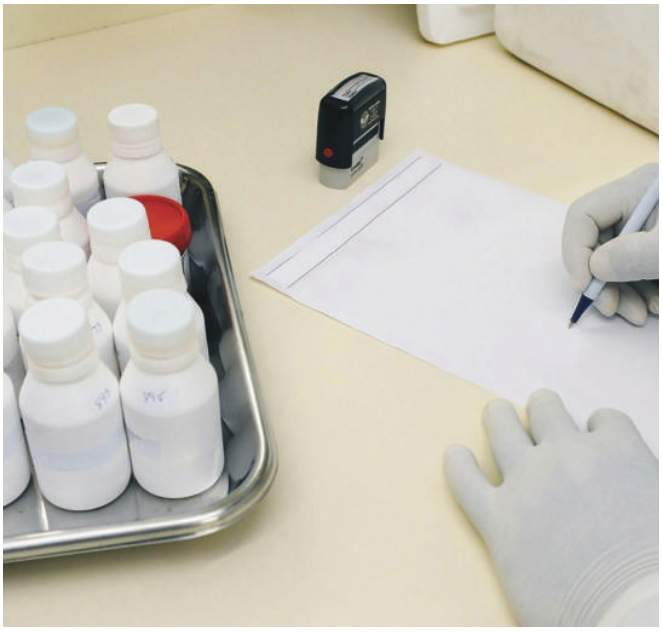
Under the Basic Health Care Provision Fund program, the 305 implementing Primary Health Centers across the state have undergone transformations due to the sustained funding from the BHCPF through the Imo State Health Insurance Agency. This funding has equipped the primary healthcare facilities to offer quality healthcare services to the poor and vulnerable in rural communities. According to the Impact Assessment report by the Imo State Health Insurance Agency after one year of the implementation of the BHCPF program in Imo, primary healthcare centres have been empowered to purchase drugs, consumables, procure equipment, carry out major repairs, and construct new structures in their facilities, thereby transforming access to primary healthcare services. Health centres are now a beehive of activities, ensuring a healthier population group that will, in turn, contribute to the local economy.

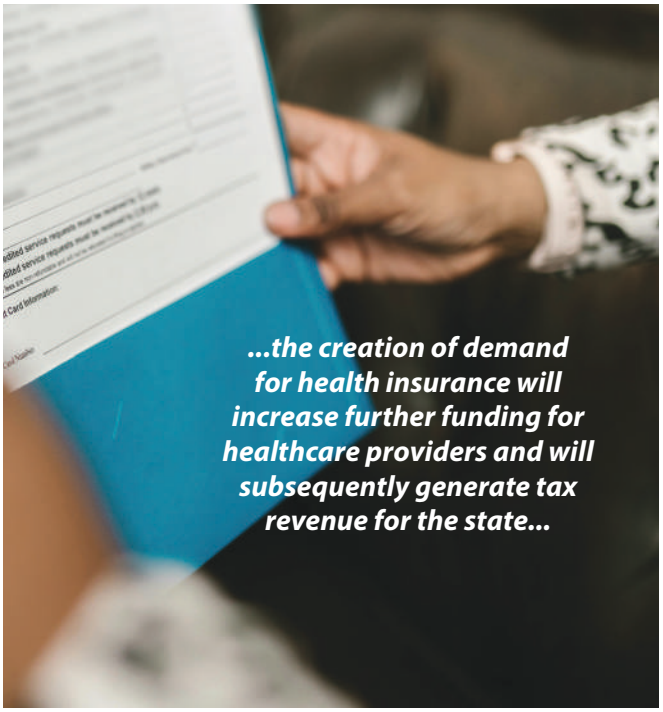
In addition, there have also been verifiable instances where individuals and communities have invested in the facilities to show support to the ongoing efforts of the state government in the primary healthcare delivery, such as installing borehole systems, donating generator sets, repairs, and procuring equipment for the primary healthcare facilities.

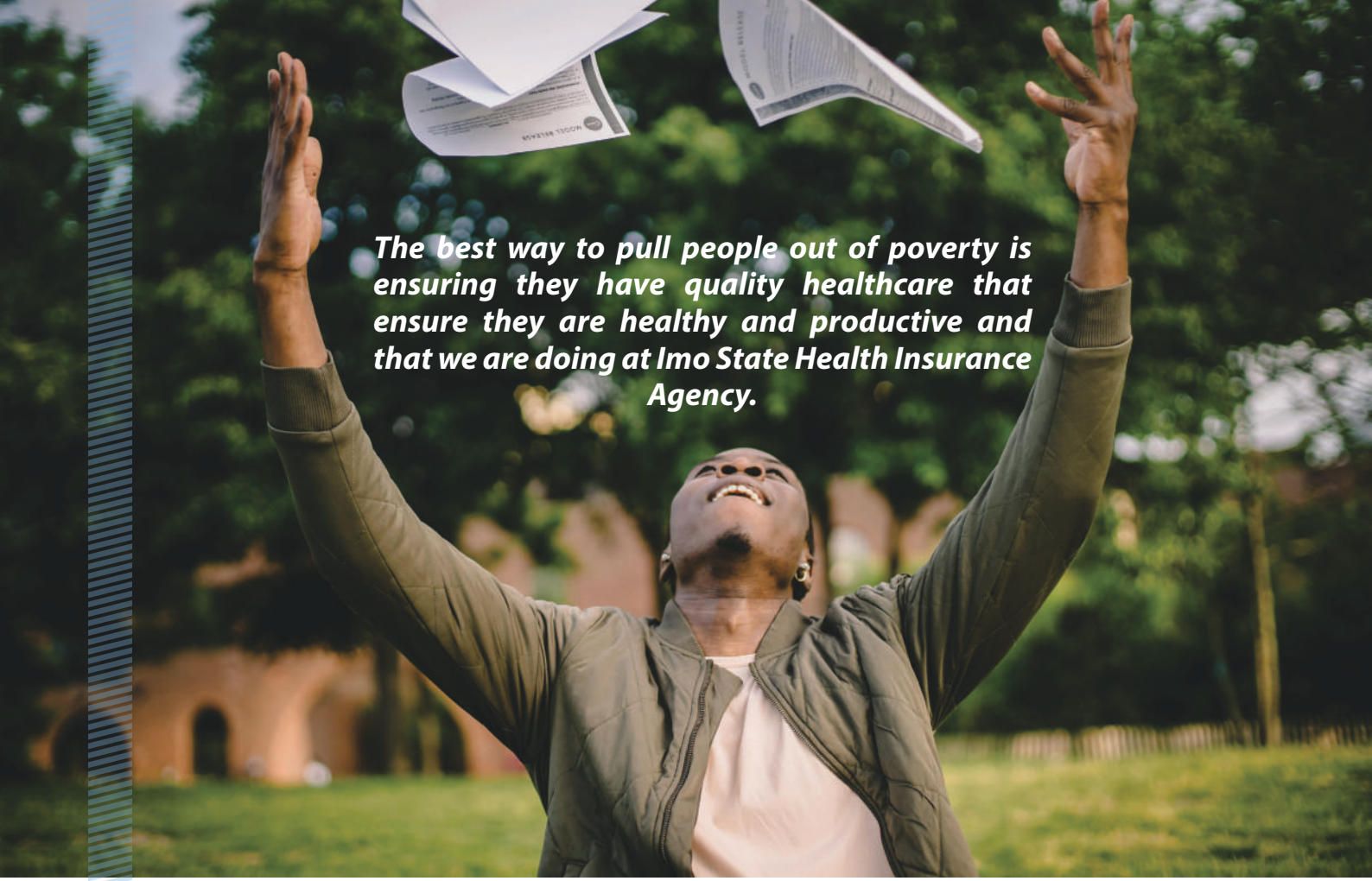
Not least, the creation of demand for health insurance will increase further funding for healthcare providers and will subsequently generate tax revenue for the state, which will in turn be reinvested into critical sectors of the economy.

The Imo State Health Insurance Agency (IMSHIA) has enrolled approximately 128,846, covering 2.4% of the population as follows:

1. **BHCPF (84,995):** Poor and vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, the elderly, and disabled persons.
2. **FSSHIP (37,323):** Imo Civil Servants, including state and local government staff.







3. **Imo-TISHIP (4,880):** Students of all state-owned tertiary institutions.
4. **IMOCARE (1215):** Informal sector populations, including individuals, market women, artisans, traders, and those in the diaspora.

In light of this, and in an effort to improve the health of Imolites, Governor Hope Uzodimma's Shared Prosperity Administration is focused on improving the quality of lives of Ndi-Imo by ensuring the reduction of out-of-pocket health expenditures through the implementation of health insurance in Imo state.

Imo State stands out as the only state in the country where the Governor pays health insurance premiums for principal civil servants in the state, thereby ensuring their maximum productivity, as insured workers are less likely to miss work due to sickness.

Health interventions and initiatives, such as the implementation of health insurance, are recognized as major ways and new paradigms for pulling people out of poverty, and this has distinguished Governor Hope Uzodimma as a true humanitarian, trailblazer, and visionary in the Imo health industry.

The existence of a vibrant and sound healthcare sector is necessary for economic growth and sustained development, as it ensures a sound and healthy workforce, thereby enhancing productivity.

The provision of effective healthcare services that are affordable and accessible to Imolites was a significant challenge prior to the implementation of the insurance scheme in the state. The establishment of a health insurance scheme by the state government has improved access to healthcare services and has the potential to positively impact the quality of lives and the economy Imolites.

Health insurance affects the likelihood of an individual falling sick, missing workdays, or being unproductive due to illness, as well as the probability that he or she recovers and returns to work as a productive member of society.



Dr. Uchenna Ewelike *is a Senior Public Health Physician and Health Economist. He holds a bachelor of Medicine and Surgery and a doctorate degree in Health Economics. A member of the Global Joint Leaning Network for Universal Health Coverage. He is the Executive Secretary/CEO of Imo State Health Insurance Agency*



It's Not All Rosy!
Global Professional Service Firms and Inequality

By Mehdi Boussebaa

The rise of global professional service firms (hereafter GPSFs) is one of the most significant changes in the contemporary world economy, and it is well known that these firms have become "global" in large parts to serve multinational enterprises (MNEs) across the globe (Beaverstock et al., 1999; Greenwood et al., 2010). What is often overlooked, however, is that MNEs have been a major agent of global inequality (see e.g., Petras and Veltmeyer, 2007; Smith, 2016). This is perhaps most visible in the global production networks (GPNs) they control. GPNs, of course, provide some economic benefits to countries in the Global South, but, as Buckley and Strange (2015: 244) put it, 'the (increased) profits from the dispersed value-chain activities will accrue to the shareholders of the MNEs'. Global inequalities in the distribution of income may thus be exacerbated as a result. GPSFs may be deeply implicated in the production of such inequalities given their raison d'être is to serve MNEs.

Indeed, since the 1990s, GPSFs have even been offering a growing suite of offshore outsourcing services (see e.g., Silver and Daly, 2007), i.e., services specifically designed to enhance Northern MNEs' ability to access and exploit the vast low-wage labour pools of the Global South. Related services are also offered to Southern supplier firms seeking to participate in this process, often to the detriment of domestic workforces. For instance, Munir et al.'s (2018) study of GPNs in the clothing industry reveals the role of U.S. consultants in shaping the thinking and practices of Pakistani suppliers towards forms of management that "protected the interests of western branded apparel companies and consumers but did not necessarily serve the interests of workers" (p. 561).

Additionally, GPSFs, such as accounting firms may be exacerbating global inequality through the tax services which they offer to MNEs, among other clients. A growing body of literature suggests such services may be facilitating tax evasion on a massive scale (Sikka and Willmott, 2013; Seabrooke and Wigan, 2022). This malpractice is a drain on the resources of most societies, but Southern countries are particularly vulnerable, not least because they lack the resources to understand and combat Northern tax avoidance strategies (Sikka and Willmott, 2013). The literature suggests GPSFs may be enabling complex tax avoidance schemes that result in the Global South being stripped of hundreds of billions of dollars (of tax revenue each year. Such revenue, as Sikka and Willmott (2013) put it, "could be used to provide, sanitation, security, clean water, education, healthcare, pensions and social infrastructure to improve the quality of life





for millions of people."

Interestingly, GPSFs also appear to be reproducing North-South inequalities within their own organizational boundaries. Northern professionals employed by these firms generally "own" the most lucrative client relationships and capture the bulk of the profits earned from the global projects which they deliver on behalf of MNEs (Boussebaa, 2015a). This unequal distribution of income is exacerbated by the tremendous cross-national fee-rate differentials that exist within GPSFs – Northern professionals generally command fees that are far higher than those that accrue to colleagues in the Global South. This also often results in the former capturing large chunks of the profits generated through projects led by the latter. Boussebaa (2009: 843) illustrates this, drawing on an interview with a London-based manager working within the consulting arm of a major American GPSF. The manager commented that he alone earned more than 23% of the total earned from a large project run by his firm's Polish office: "In Poland, my project [a project for which assistance from the UK was requested] was £3.2 million and I think I accounted for about £750,000 of that £3.2 million – just one resource."

It is because of dynamics such as these that I have argued elsewhere that GPSFs are "institutionalizing internal hierarchies that mirror the long-standing core/periphery hierarchy of the world capitalist system" (Boussebaa, 2017). Such hierarchies are also reflected in and indeed (in part) enabled by organizational arrangements that generally protect, prioritise and advance the interests of Northern professionals. Note, for instance, how the top leadership teams of GPSFs are mostly, if not exclusively, composed of professionals based in the West (Boussebaa, 2015a/b) – typically, "white, heterosexual, middle-class males" (Empson et al., 2015). Note also how GPSFs have developed global knowledge management systems that, among other things, mainly serve to promote and export Northern knowledge – generally at great cost to Southern colleagues (Boussebaa et al., 2014).

Aside from client services and intra-organizational arrangements, GPSFs reproduce global inequality by shaping the rules governing international trade, and investment in ways that align with their priorities. Arnold (2015) reveals significant efforts by Anglo-American accounting firms (together with Northern industry lobbies), supported by the World Trade Organization, to use international trade agreements towards the creation of a global market for their services. The study also shows how the legal arrangements produced by such efforts can "trump domestic laws to the disadvantage of developing nations by pre-empting laws designed to protect indigenous accounting industries, and by instituting transparency rules [… that give accounting firms] access to and a voice in the rulemaking deliberations of smaller nations" (Arnold, 2005). Further insights on such neo-colonial dynamics can be found in various sociological studies examining sustained efforts by networks of Northern actors,

including professionals, to reshape Southern societies in congruence with the goals and preferences of the former (e.g., Boussebaa and Faulconbridge, 2019).

It is fair to suggest that GPSFs are implicated in reproducing global inequality. Of course, the set of arguments put forward here provides a schematic representation of global inequality and the role of GPSFs in its reproduction. I do not mean to imply that the North-South divide is static or that the Global South has no agency to change the status quo. The resurgence of China and India as major economic powers and the associated rise of large professional service firms in those countries is telling in that regard.

In sum, GPSFs seem to play a crucial role in the reproduction of global inequality and a solution to the problem is more likely to come from the Global South than the firms themselves or indeed the wider system of professions which has given rise to them. I therefore conclude this essay with a call for further research into not only the role of GPSFs (and Southern collaborators) in reproducing North-South inequalities but also, importantly, the roles played by Southern professionals in addressing the problem.



Mehdi Boussebaa *is Professor of International Business at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom. His research spans the fields of international business and organisation studies and is also informed by postcolonial/decolonial thought and theories of globalisation.*

A longer version of this article was published in 2023 in the Journal of Professions and Organization. See Ashley, L., Boussebaa, M., Friedman, S., Harrington, B., Heusinkveld, S., Gustafsson, S. and Muzio, D. (2023) Professions and inequality: challenges, controversies, and opportunities. Journal of Professions and Organization, 10(1), pp. 80-98. (doi: 10.1093/jpo/joac014)

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American Business Council Promoting Nigeria-America Economic Partnership



How Coca-Cola Is Refreshing The World And Making A Difference In Imo State

By Nwamaka Onyemelukwe

Coca-Cola aspires to bring people, brands, and beverages that make life's everyday moments more enjoyable while doing business the right way, not just the easy way. The result is a shared opportunity for our communities, our customers, our associates, and our shareowners.

Everything we do starts with passion for what people want. We listen carefully, pay attention to how they live their lives, and learn what they care about most. We then turn that listening into irresistible drinks and opportunities that make life's everyday moments more enjoyable. Because of our size and scale, The Coca-Cola System Advantage means we can reach communities farther and faster than anyone else up to the last mile. From our vast supply chains to delivery trucks to coolers, to our sustainability initiatives, we know how to make sure our beverages and programs create life changing impact one community at a time.

Collaboration is the bedrock of success. Individuals, organizations, and governments thrive off partnerships because it allows us to leverage each other's strengths and resources for maximum impact. This is the Coca-Cola story. It is a story of partnerships that extends beyond our business to our sustainability initiatives. We are excited to share the phenomenal impact of two of our impactful initiatives targeted at (a) improving access to clean water & sanitation and (b) youth empowerment/ entrepreneurship.

Reliable access to good, safe water is essential to life, nature, and the health of our communities. We take our responsibility to protect nature's resources seriously. Because people need water to thrive, we support local water access projects that help bring safe, clean drinking water to communities in need. With approximately 1billion naira ($1m dollars) invested through our philanthropic arm, the Coca-Cola Foundation, millions of lives have been impacted across various communities in Imo state which has hosted our business for many decades.

The first initiative is called Resilient Watershed for All, implemented by Rural Africa Water Development Project (RAWDP). This project seeks to enhance water systems, establish gender-responsive sanitation facilities, and create Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) clubs in schools, healthcare facilities, and marketplaces. This making-a-difference project has impacted approximately 1.5 million lives since its launch in 2023. So far, a total of 25 water and sanitation facilities have been built and upgraded across Owerri North, Owerri West, and Owerri Municipal Local Government Areas.





In the same light, there is the Digital Skilling and Employment Project (DSEP) for empowering youths through education and skills development. Recognizing the pivotal role that young people play in shaping the future, Coca-Cola Foundation in partnership with the Centre for Social Awareness, Advocacy and Ethics (CSAAE) and Corporate Imo Impact Partnership (CIIP) powered by the Office of the Chief Economic Adviser to the Imo State Government launched DSEP, aimed at empowering Imo youths with in-demand digital skills like cybersecurity, web development, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing. Beyond training, DSEP actively facilitates job linkages and employment opportunities for its participants.

The Digital Skilling and Employment Project (DSEP) has demonstrably improved the lives of its participants. With over 52,000 direct beneficiaries and an estimated 250,000 indirect beneficiaries, Coca-Cola is making a notable impact in Imo State. About 6,000 youths have been trained on various digital skills-set and over 70 students provided access to subsidized laptops with flexible payment options. A workstation has been established in Owerri for continued learning and office spaces provided to ensure the beneficiaries have the best support. Top performers received mentorship from industry experts, as well as linkages to job opportunities, internships, and fellowships, reiterating the company's dedication to making a difference in the society.

The program also fosters a cycle of knowledge sharing, with graduates becoming tutors for new student intakes. DSEP's impact extends beyond technical skills. It has empowered 1,100 beneficiaries with seed capital to launch businesses and provided training to over 50 people with disabilities, including financial grants for 10 individuals to put their new skills to work. These achievements highlight Coca-Cola's commitment to creating lasting positive change in Imo State and beyond.

Through initiatives like the Digital Skilling and Employment Project (DSEP) and the Resilient Watershed Project, Coca-Cola exemplifies its commitment to improving access to safe water, promoting sanitation, as well as empowering young people with the right skills and tools they need to reach their full potential. Each decision our company makes is a chance for us to do the right thing. We are relentlessly self-aware of our role in the world and the impact we can have. We care for the people and communities we depend on to succeed. Coca-Cola will continue to implement transformative projects that foster sustainable communities in line with its mission of refreshing the world and making a difference across various communities where we operate.

We hereby acknowledge and express our deep appreciation to our partners: Rural Africa Water Development Project (RAWDP), Centre for Social Awareness, Advocacy and Ethics (CSAAE), Corporate Imo Impact Partnership (CIIP) and the Office of the Chief Economic Adviser to the Imo State Government for their valuable partnership to impact the lives of Imolites and the larger society.



Nwamaka Onyemelukwe *is a Senior Director, Public Affairs, Communications, and Sustainability, Coca-Cola Nigeria.*

OKOBI:
A New Approach to Corporate Community Relations



By Kenneth Amaeshi, PhD

A group once approached a business in their community for a bus. The company granted their request and offered a locally branded bus. They picked up the bus, but halfway home, they changed their mind, returned It to the company, and asked for a foreign-branded bus instead.

As trivial as this sounds, it is typical of the unending demands on companies by their host communities, who often see them as the only government they know. Such rampant community requests have come to mischaracterise Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Nigeria as mainly philanthropy.

I started researching and advising on CSR in the early 2000s. Since then, it has become what some people call corporate sustainability, perhaps because sustainability seems more strategic and business-like. Nonetheless, the perception of CSR as corporate philanthropy in Nigeria has persisted because many businesses still build schools, construct roads, sink boreholes, equip hospitals, et cetera, for their communities. However, not all are good at it.

Recently, I encountered a company whose business largely depends on natural resources in a specific community. I asked the managers how long the natural resources would last. About 80 years, they said. The answer was pretty straightforward and without much effort. I paused and asked them what their host community would look like in 80 years, and they were lost for words and scratched their heads instead. It did not take much to conclude that this company was not concerned about developing its host communities sustainably and empoweringly.

Many companies are like this. They would give communities fish instead of teaching them to fish. In the process, they create and foster a culture of problematic community dependency.

When the Nobel laureate in economics, Amartya Sen, described poverty as unfreedom, he didn't mince words. That's precisely what it is. As such, any genuine act of empowerment should be liberating and free from a permanent cycle of dependency. In other words, the current practice of corporate community relations in Nigeria must genuinely empower the communities it aims to serve. But how can it do this without a tried and tested model?

This is where the One Kindred One Business Initiative (OKOBI) model of entrepreneurship, championed by Senator Hope Uzodimma, the Governor of Imo State, can be an excellent example for the private sector to emulate. The message of economic freedom encapsulated in OKOBI is the essence of his administration's 3R agenda (i.e., Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Recovery).

OKOBI is about community-based and group-owned businesses. These groups include extended families, villages, communities, friends, alum associations, or religious and social organisations. It is non-political.

OKOBI emphasises the communal spirit of the Igbos of southeast Nigeria anchored on the philosophy of igwebuike (i.e., strength in number). Although not



entirely new, it stretches into the past to revitalise a declining ethos of togetherness that has sustained the Igbos despite the current challenges of perceived economic and political marginalisation, culminating in many societal ills. In short, it is a response to high unemployment, poverty, hopelessness, and helplessness.

Since its launch in 2023, there are over 250 OKOBI businesses in Imo State today. Together, they have created over 5000 jobs. Like any business, OKOBI businesses are advised to start with proper needs assessment because meaningful and productive entrepreneurship implies addressing real societal challenges efficiently and profitably. This needs assessment will identify market gaps, opportunities, target customers, and funding sources. Given that the government is not very prescriptive and not a primary investor in these businesses, they have been very creative and flexible in figuring out what works for them.

An example of the OKOBI model in action is the Okpofe Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES) Multi-purpose Cooperatives in Ezinihitte Local Government Area of Imo State. The cooperative has about 90 members. Many of them are graduates. Instead of waiting for jobs to be given to them, they created their own jobs. They met with their Eze (i.e., local King) and the community elders to secure a space to start their agribusiness, comprising poultry, piggery, fishery, and some vegetable farms. Their mission is to be a major player in their local government area, and their mantra is "Operation feed Ezinihitte". They tasked themselves according to their competencies and abilities to achieve this goal and placed themselves on salaries.

Given the time it takes for their livestock and vegetables to mature, they involved a local microfinance bank to offer them financial assistance, which means that each cooperative member can borrow up to a certain amount of money every month. The microfinance bank is repaid when they harvest and sell their produce. The excess is partly reinvested in the business and distributed to the members when they make a surplus.

Today, this cooperative has grown to create jobs for non-members and is still expanding. This is a classic case of people doing things for themselves instead of waiting to be fed. Despite the challenges of the time, they have shown a unique expression of individual agency in the face of daunting and discouraging situations.

Learning from OKOBI, corporate community relations can focus on igniting or reviving community collective agency. The beauty of the model is that it can be applied in contexts with similar social structures.

Of course, community development is complex. It's even more complicated when a business does it alone. Engaging in providing for the people will always create a situation of dependency and leave organisations drained in the long term if care is not taken.

Although the provision of hard infrastructure to communities might seem expedient in the short term, it can become a burden in the long term. This trap must be avoided to achieve an empowering corporate community relationship, and OKOBI can be a credible alternative.



Kenneth Amaeshi is a professor of sustainable finance at the European University Institute, Italy, Chair in business and sustainable development at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, and a public philosopher. He is currently the Chief Economic Adviser to the Imo State Government, working part-time and pro bono. He tweets @kenamaeshi

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Spotlight on The Office of The **Chief Economic Adviser**



Professor Kenneth Amaeshi
University of Edinburgh/European University Institute, Chief Economic Adviser to the Imo State Government

The Office of the Chief Economic Adviser to Imo State has been actively engaged in a variety of impactful initiatives since the last edition of our magazine in November. The primary focus has been the promotion of OKOBI. Here are the most significant activities:

1. OKOBI SUMMIT

The first OKOBI Summit was held on December 13, 2023, at the Conference Hall of Rockview Hotel in Owerri, attended by more than two thousand participants. The Chief Guest of Honor was Governor His Excellency, Distinguished Senator Hope Uzodimma, represented by the Deputy-Governor, His Excellency Prof. Placid Njoku, who praised the OKOBI initiative and spoke of its potential to eradicate poverty. The Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of Imo State, Professor Kenneth Amaeshi, welcomed the governor, the panelists, and the participants. Other highlights of the event included a keynote address by Professor Maurice Iwu.



Three panel discussions followed: the first by opinion leaders, co-operators, and consultants who reflected on the theme "BUILDING COMMUNITY WEALTH WITH OKOBI"; the second panel comprised financial institutions and corporate bodies under the aegis of the CIIP (Corporate Imo Impact Partnership) which focused on "FINANCING OKOBI"; the final panel, discussing "SUSTAINING THE GAINS OF OKOBI," was made up of clergymen, politicians, and union leaders amongst others.

2. LOCAL ADVOCACY

A. On December 30, 2023, the Chief Economic Adviser, Professor Kenneth Amaeshi, delivered a talk at the Inyishi League of Patriots 2023 Maiden Conference held in Inyishi, Ikeduru. He made a clarion call for action on OKOBI. Accompanying him was Dr. Okey Anukwuem, who discussed OKOBI and its connection with the 3R agenda of Senator Hope Uzodimma's administration in Imo State.

B. On March 14, 2024, the Chief Economic Adviser, Professor Kenneth Amaeshi, delivered a Zoom lecture on Kindred-Based Economic Systems for Inclusive Economies at a conference hosted by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Several advocacy and promotional visits have been conducted across the state this year. Here are the key ones:

(a) The OKOBI team from the Office of the Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of Imo State visited the OKPOFE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT COOPERATIVE SOCIETY in Ezinihite Mbaise LGA during their Annual General Meeting (AGM) on

December 31, 2023. The team included Dr. Okey Anukwuem, Mrs. Jovita Agwu, Technical Assistant to the Chief Economic Adviser, and Mr. Fabian Anyanwu, Public Relations Officer.

(b) On February 14, 2024, the OKOBI team conducted a partnership visit to BONEL MPCS in Egbu. The visit aimed to assess the viability and success of the cooperative to ensure it meets the standards of OKOBI-recognized cooperatives.

4. WEBINARS

(A) The first webinar of the year was held on January 6, 2024, with the theme "Opportunities in Group-Owned Digital Businesses." Moderated by the Chief Economic Adviser (CEA), it featured experts such as Francisca Ekwughaonu from the Centre for Social Awareness, Advocacy, and Ethics (CSSAE), and Iwuagwu Chinaza Amarachukwu from Virtual Assistance Services. The webinar was broadcast live on various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Ozisa Radio Station. Thousands of listeners tuned in. The recording is available at [link].

(B) On January 27, 2024, another webinar was held under the theme "Experiences and Lessons from Registered OKOBI Businesses in Imo State." The panel included Mr. Chinedu Nwogu of the New Emii Cooperative Society, Rev. Fr. Cornelius Chika Amadi of the A-92 Multi-purpose Cooperative Society (MPCS), Odide Okoro from Agricultural Woodwork and Poultry Farm, and Prince Francis Ekeoha, Coordinator of the African Women Foundation.

(C) A webinar on "Successful Businesses in Imo State" was held on February 10, 2024. Moderated by the CEA and the Executive Director of the Imo Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the panel featured Mr. Johnson Alaneme, President of J.C. Alaneme MPCS Ltd., Isiala Mbano, Mrs. Sandra Obialor of Glorious Day Foundation, and other reputable panelists.

(D) On February 17, 2024, the OKOBI team conducted a sensitization visit to the Anglican Diocese of Okigwe in Ehime Mbano during their conference to raise awareness about OKOBI.



(E) On February 22, 2024, the OKOBI team met with the Chairman of the Board of Trustees (BOT) of Oil Producing Communities in Ohaji/Egbema L.G.A. to discuss introducing OKOBI projects in the oil-producing communities. The meeting took place in Mgbirichi, Ohaji.

(F) On February 24, 2024, a webinar titled "Experiences and Lessons from Registered OKOBI Businesses in Imo State" was held. Panelists included Chiamaka Ukanwa and Nwamaka Gloria Samuel.

(G) On March 9, 2024, another webinar on "Experiences and Lessons from Registered OKOBI Businesses in Imo State" was held. Panelists included Amb. Ijeoma Ann Nwachukwu, President of Farmers Unit 6, Ohaji, Mrs. Gloria Williams, State Secretary of the Mushroom Growers, Processing and Marketers Association of Nigeria, and Mrs. Juan Nwiwu, Associate Professor at Imo State University (IMSU) and Member of the Board at Umunumo Community Bank.

(H) On March 23, 2024, a webinar titled "Empowering People through OKOBI (I)" was targeted at the Honorable Members of the Imo State House



of Assembly. The webinar aimed to generate ideas on how they can assist in starting OKOBI businesses in their constituencies and encourage well-meaning individuals to initiate OKOBI projects. Featured members included Hon. Sir MacDonald Ebere, Ph.D., State Chairman of APC; Hon. Innocent Ikpamezie, Representative of Mbaitoli State Constituency, IMHA; Hon. Udeze Ernest Okechukwu, Representative of Ideato North State Constituency, IMHA; and Hon. Henry Agbasonu, Representative of Ezinihitte Mbaise State Constituency.

(I) On April 6, 2024, another webinar titled "Empowering People through OKOBI (II)" was held. Panelists included Hon. MacDonald Ebere, Ph.D., State Chairman of APC; Hon. Iheoha John Leoba, Representative of Ikeduru State Constituency, IMHA; Hon. Sam Osuji, Representative of Isiala Mbano State Constituency; and Adaeze Nwaka from the Office of the CEA, Government House, Owerri.

(J) On April 20, 2024, a webinar titled "Empowering People through OKOBI (III)" was conducted. Panelists were Hon. MacDonald Ebere, State Chairman of APC, Imo State; Hon. Princewill Amuchie, Representative of Aboh-Mbaise State Constituency, IMHA; Hon. Ozioma Ebonine (Ezengwori), Representative of Njaba State Constituency, IMHA; and Mrs. Jovita Agwu, Technical Adviser to the CEA, Government House, Owerri.

(K) On May 4, 2024, the fourth edition of "Empowering People through OKOBI (IV)" was held. Panelists included Hon. MacDonald Ebere, State Chairman of APC; Hon. Obinna Egu, Representative of Ngor-Okpala State Constituency, IMHA; Hon. Ben Ozoemelem, Representative of Ehime Mbano State Constituency, IMHA; and Adaeze Asaheme from the Office of the CEA, Government House, Owerri.

5. SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

On February 3, 2024, the Alaigbo Youth Forum hosted a Twitter Space discussion at 7 PM featuring Prof. Kenneth Amaeshi, the Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of Imo State, as the guest speaker. The topic was "What OKOBI Can Do for Alaigbo." Prof. Amaeshi enlightened the audience on the potential benefits of OKOBI and the steps to establish one.

6. INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

(A) On February 8, 2024, Prof. Kenneth Amaeshi spoke at an event hosted by LUISS University in Rome on "A Fresh Start for Africa-Europe Relations."

(B) On May 3, 2024, Prof. Amaeshi met with the German Consul to Nigeria to explore possible collaboration on the economic initiatives of H.E. Sen. Hope Uzodimma in Imo State, particularly the OKOBI project.

(C) On May 28, 2024, Prof. Amaeshi (Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) to the Imo State Government) and the OKOBI team met with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations to explore support and collaboration for the OKOBI project. Attendees included M. Kouacou Dominique Koffy (FAO Rep. Nigeria and ECOWAS), Salisu Mohamed

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(FAO Implementing Partner, NE Nigeria), and OKOBI team members Jovita Agwu (Technical Adviser to the CEA), Adaeze Nwaka (Team Lead, Communications and Advocacy office of the CEA), and Adaeze Ashaheme (Technical Assistant to the CEA).

(D) On April 12, 2024, Prof. Amaeshi spoke on "Indigenous Approaches to Socio-Economic Transformation: A Case Study of the One Kindred One Business Initiative" at the Business, Society and African Future International Conference at Mandela University, South Africa.

(E) On May 24, 2024, at Badia Fiesolana, Italy, Prof. Amaeshi was a panelist at the prestigious EU State of the Union 2024 Conference, discussing "Rethinking Capitalism in Europe in the Path of Sustainability."

(F) **June 6, 2024: Keynote Speech at The New Institute Hamburg**

Professor Kenneth Amaeshi gave a talk at The New Institute Hamburg, Germany, on "Africapitalism and Kindred-Based Economic System for Inclusive Economies", using lessons from Senator Hope Uzodinma's OKOBI initiative in Imo State.

(G) On 24th June, 2024. Professor Kenneth Amaeshi gave a presentation at the Piazza Martiri della Libertà, 33 - 56127 Pisa (Italy) on the topic Reimagining Economic Systems for Inclusion: Lessons from the One Kindred One Business Initiative (ÓKÓBÌ) of Imo State, Nigeria.

7. MEETINGS AND WORKSHOPS

(A) On February 23, 2024, the Office of the CEA held a meeting with the Head and Staff of NIRSAL, Owerri, to discuss potential partnerships to promote OKOBI.

(B) On February 21, 2024, the OKOBI team represented the Office of the CEA at a one-day training and empowerment program for Women in Agriculture in Imo State at Amanwokpu Civic Centre, Obazu Mbieri, Mbaitoli L.G.A.

(C) On April 20, 2024, in Manchester, UK, Adaeze Nwaka (External Communications & Advocacy Assistant, Office of the CEA), represented the OKOBI team at the Alaigbo meeting, speaking on the gains of the OKOBI project under the 3R administration.

(D) On April 30, 2024, the OKOBI team met with the Chairman/President of OKE-OVORO EZUO MPCS Ltd. at the CEA office to discuss OKOBI-related issues.

(E) On May 9, 2024, Prof. Amaeshi delivered a keynote speech on achieving sustainable development through the empowerment of group-owned/ community-based businesses, highlighting the OKOBI initiative in Imo State.

(F) On May 10, 2024, the OKOBI team held a crucial meeting with the President and Executive members of Imo Women Cooperative Federation Alliance (IMWCOFA) and Nigerian Women for Agricultural Progress (NWAP) to explore partnership opportunities for the OKOBI project at the CEA office.



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Interview with Okpofe Youth Development Cooperative Society

Interview with the Secretary of **OKPOFE YOUTHS EMPOWERMENT CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY**.

Q: Please tell us about your co-operative and what you do.

A: Our co-operative is eh... Okpofe Youths Empowerment Scheme Co-operative Society. We do more of farming activities.

Q: I can see you are into poultry and piggery.

A: Yes, fishery and cucumber as well. We intend to go into full-time palm oil production in a very short time.

Q: What informed you to go into poultry and piggery?

A: Actually, we look at demands. The availability of the market of the demands determines. Demands for the products are high hence, we chose to go into the products.

Q: How did you start and how much progress have you made?

A: It was just a few of us when we started. We are graduates and we decided to team up together to know what we can do for ourselves because of the level of unemployment in the country, so we had to come up with this idea and registered a co-operative. So far, you can see the level of progress we have recorded.



Q: What is the extent of the value chain?

A: The only thing is that, as we are producing and expanding, we keep bringing personnel, staff and keep empowering each other financially. So, it keeps revolving in that regard.

Q: That means, as you do it, you create employment; you make profit; and at the same time, empower your members?

A: Yes. Both financially and otherwise. Also expertise too, because we train our members.

Q: That is to say that possibly, most of your members may have their individual farms.

A: Yes. Most of the members have their individual farms but in a very small scale. But definitely, they must come here to participate. So, if you have anything, until you develop it, you bring it here for us to co-opt it into with what we are doing. At the level of learning, you can do it individually.

Q: As it stands now, how many people have you employed here full-time or in terms of giving you supplies? For somebody that is giving you supplies, is it that you have employed the person on a part-time basis?

A: If you're talking about full-time employment, we have about fifteen (15) people under our employment whom we pay on a daily or monthly basis. For indirect employment, we can't count them. For our customers and suppliers, we also can't count - up to fifty (50) and above.

Q: You know, in a business outfit like this, you may have some challenges; because everything may not go the way you projected.

A: Most at times, we have these products, especially the pigs and the poultry, diseases come around most at times to attack them. These are challenges. Like other times, we lost most of our birds. At this point, what we do is called, *HEDGING*. By hedging, I mean, what we get when the business is flourishing, we plough back in times of challenges.

Q: There is a terminology you used that you called hedging, what actually do you mean by hedging?

A: By hedging, I mean putting a bridge to the challenges. Like for instance, in the fishery section, when we had the challenge, what we had to do was to smoke the fish and sell. We have a functional oven here, so rather than to run into losses, we smoked the fish and sold to the public until we were able to factor out the cause of their deaths. That is why they said that "Blessed is the city that in the time of peace, they prepare for war".

"Most at times, we have these products, especially the pigs and the poultry, diseases come around most at times to attack them. These are challenges."

Q: What is your vision for the future like? What is your growth and expansion plan like? Though I have seen the new structure, where you are expanding? What informs your expansion?





A: I understand your question, Sir. When I featured as a panelist in one of your webinars, I made it very clear that our mantra has been "Operations Feed Ezinihitte". In carrying out that "Operation Feed Ezinihitte," we know we would rake in profits. A good entrepreneur is that person who knows what is lacking in the society. [As] you try to make [these things] available, people will come. Our vision is to empower ourselves financially, using our expertise, and at the same time, using the opportunity to create employment for the teaming youths, especially those from Okpofe. By doing that, we also contribute our quota to the society by making food available. In making our products available, we make it to be cheaper.



Q: In what ways do the policies of the present administration in the State affect or benefit from your business?

A: We were very happy when we partnered with the Office of the Chief Economic Adviser because economic policies affect every business. We suggest that Government Policies be channeled towards Agriculture. Reason is because, one who is hungry cannot reason well. Let the Government do more in Agriculture by empowering small and medium scale Agricultural industries. It will go a long way to creating wealth and employment.

Q: From your perspectives, what can you make out of this One Kindred, One Business Initiative (OKOBI)?

A: When we initially heard about the concept, One Kindred, One Business Initiative (OKOBI), many people didn't understand it. But we understand that what we are doing in our co-operative is what OKOBI is all about. We are OKOBI compliant.

Q: what governance structure, and decision-making processes do you have on ground?

A: For every business outfit to survive, there must be an Organogram. We have our Organogram first of all. We also have board members. Most of these board members are financial members. They are not directly involved in the day-to-day running of the

business. What they do is that they come in with their own expertise in terms of accounting, advice and all what not. They monitor what we use the finances for. They make us not to ignore matters relating to funds management. We are accountable to them. We also involve the Okpofe Micro-Finance management. They audit our firm. They help us to be frugal in spending. We also have executive members who are directly involved in the business and those who have the technical-know-how. When we factor in, we have our staff.

Q: Bearing in mind the current economic realities in the country today, what prospects do you have?

A: This can be linked up with the challenges. The challenges you brought up earlier are challenges in the farm. This is the general aspect of it. You know that the Nigerian Economy is fast declining but that decline will not defer us from struggling to survive. We have the challenge of electricity. You know what it costs to buy fuel to power our equipment. We wanted to go into processing, but when you factor in the cost of energy, it becomes very exorbitant. That is why we are dropping most of our processing plans. If the economy improves and we are given the desired energy, then…. and another problem are the financial institutions. They are not proactive in what they should do as it is difficult to get funding from them. That is why we believe that keying into OKOBI, the narrative would change. Besides, since we know the economic realities in Nigeria, we try to look inwards and think outside the box so we will not deterred.

Q: So many businesses are groaning and struggling, what words of encouragement do you have for them?
A: Don't give up! Continue! If you try and don't succeed, try and try again. The only time you fail is when you quit. Quitters don't win, and winners don't quit.

Q: What words of advice do you have for communities or kindreds that are yet to float their own OKOBI?

A: Permit me to use Igbo Language here. Eji kpuru ishi woro onwe ya nri. The only reason I can forgive them is if they are not aware of the Program of OKOBI. But, if they are and are still waiting to key in, I think before they might do that, it would be late. Let them make use of the rare opportunity. They should make hay while the sun shines. Let also OKOBI put up more sensitization.

Q: Does it mean that OKOBI has not put up enough sensitization?

A: No. Not quite. I'm talking of communities that are yet to key into the project. Maybe they've not known about the project. The OKOBI Team should put in more in publicity and try to sensitize the public.

Q: At the same time, you can still help the OKOBI Team by being an OKOBI ambassador, by spreading the gospel of OKOBI in other communities?

A: Currently, we are grooming some people in Nwangele L.G.A. Look at the distance. The first sole administrator of Nwangele L.G.A. is from this community. So, we [already] have synergy.

Q: What is your understanding of OKOBI as an economic movement?

A: OKOBI is a movement and the only way to make the best out of it is to join the moving train. OKOBI is a moving train. If you have that spirit of discernment, once you see the moving train, you join it. The earlier you join, the better for you.

CONCLUSION: Thank you, Mr. Udochukwu Nguma for your time with us. On behalf of the Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of Imo State, Prof. Kenneth Amaeshi and the OKOBI Team, I wish to say thank you. Keep the flag flying.

Udo Nguma: Thank you very much, on behalf of our Chairman, Chidiadi Nwogu, Ihuoma, the Executives and the Board Members, we say, Thank you





ÓKÓBÌ:
Our Catalyst and Hope
Before a Service-Driven Economy Can Even Start...

By Engr. Kelechi Abonuyo

I got the hint when the Imo State Government initiated the One Kindred One Business Initiative (OKOBI). I suddenly had this urge to aspire for my community's President General. And it's not too late. Whenever I think of OKOBI, I think of it as a catalyst. One may ask, "What type of catalyst is it"? I see it as a catalyst for the re-calibration of our autonomous communities or, as politicians would prefer, the 305 electoral wards in Imo State.

What you heard may be different. But when I was growing up, I heard that a city, like the ancient Benin City, derived its city status because of a perimeter wall around it. And actually most ancient cities had walls or, at least, city gates.

In the United Kingdom, they say a city must have had a cathedral to earn the status. Nowadays the metrics have changed to include population density and other indices.

In many parts of Igboland, an autonomous community must have an Eze or Igwe (King) and a certain number of residents. These are our metrics. No other metrics have been clearly explained. But what do these autonomous communities actually do and represent?

We still remember the concept of the igwe-bu-ike philosophy of Ndi-Igbo, which has helped Igbo rural communities to prosper and flourish over the years – especially between the 1950s and 1980s. The town union governments, which are essential components of autonomous communities, helped to achieve this igwe-bu-ike concept.

Let's not even talk of the apprenticeship program of Ndi Igbo called igba-boyi and its remarkable success in honing the entrepreneurial skills of Onye Igbo, of which Chief Cosmas Maduka of COSCARIS Motors is a clear, eloquent testimony. In a way, Igbo DNA is more attuned to this sort of developmental strategy, whereby individuals contribute to the everyday purse through crowd funding, even if it means taking a chieftaincy title out of the endeavour.

Since we are entrepreneurial-minded, why can't we make business ownership an essential criterion for establishing autonomous communities besides the other criteria?

Please don't fret about the controversy this question may bring. It will be a welcome new normal, better than COVID-19-era social distancing and masks. So, don't worry. We will cope and get used to it. After all, it is not as difficult as the challenges of the hard times we are in now and the urgent need for a thriving economy.

When I think of business here, I mean the type that can employ at least 50 people in the community, with other specifications as may be decided by the Chieftaincy Affairs Commission of the state. This metric may be used to re-calibrate existing autonomous communities. If a community wants to be autonomous, let them come together with the I-can-do spirit of the Igbos, to articulate a business that matches the

specifications of the Chieftaincy Affairs Commission. After satisfying this, they may then present their eze-elect. One may ask where the money for such a business venture would come from. Communities can apply our age-long, time-tested project finance model, where we restrict personal palm fruit harvest to community use for a specified period. I believe this approach will litter businesses across the state. These businesses will also create ancillary ones, which will help a service-driven economy from manufacturing.

Looking around Imo State, we have not utilised palm trees and Indian bamboo for up to 40% of their resources, for instance. Ndi Igbo are gifted with technology, foundry and crafts. Our communities would soon become like rural China, where kindreds gather to find something to produce for the local market and export. This way, under the government, the Standardization Board will come on board to control, give quality assurance and encourage export. Town Union presidents must play a significant role. Years back, town unions built schools, churches, hospitals, pipe-borne water supply systems and markets, in an inter-community competitive atmosphere to bridge a yawning gap.

A time in history came when the federal government initiated a policy to develop agriculture in Nigeria. The government took the primary and secondary schools as stepping-stones. The idea was that not all persons will end up as a "professor". Interests like farming may be developed right from a younger age. So, the government acquired community lands, which is why in every [primary] school in rural communities, one can find school farms and school gardens, where pupils/students try out their hands, pick interest if they don't fancy academics and career into farming, from preparing compost manure to making ridges, planting, tending, harvesting and even preserving the seeds. Even though this is not a back-to-back supply chain solution, it was a great stepping-stone. Nothing of such, including Thursday's handiwork/craft presentations, happens nowadays. Instead, the original owners of these pieces of surrounding land have started to trespass and recover them. We know them because they live near the schools in every community. I think that town unions can move in instead of losing these acquired spaces. The spaces may be good sites



Ndi Igbo are gifted with technology, foundry and crafts. Our communities would soon become like rural China, where kindreds gather to find something to produce for the local market and export.



for distributed energy systems to provide electricity to parts of the community and sustain OKOBI projects articulated in conjunction with the autonomous communities. They also ensure the project sites are returned in situ after the product lifecycle.

In my opinion, OKOBI is a great initiative that can energise our economy. When I think of OKOBI, I think of a catalyst and hope.



***Kelechi Abonuyo**, MNSE, holds a master's degree in Personal, Mobile and Satellite Communication Engineering from University of Bradford and another in Renewable Energy Engineering from Kingston University, London. He is a novelist, socio-political commentator and currently the MD/CEO of Lordgate Projects (Nig) Ltd. He was formerly Deputy Manager (QA/QC), Huawei Technologies Ltd (Sub-Sahara Africa).*



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ÓKÓBÌ - Understanding the Concept of One Kindred Business

Okpofe Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES) Multi-purpose Cooperative Society As A Case Study



Okobi is an acronym and a term that refers to the concept of one kindred business, emphasizing growth, unity and solidarity among family members. In the context of business, Okobi represents a family-owned and operated enterprise where a group of individuals (as cooperatives) work together towards a common goal. This type of business structure has been successful for many co-operatives, including Okpofe Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES) Co-operative Society, offering numerous benefits that can contribute to its growth and prosperity.

Benefits of Okobi One Kindred Business:

1. **Trust and Understanding:** Co-operative members share a strong bond, fostering trust, open communication, and a deep understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses.
2. **Shared Values and Vision:** Most jointly owned businesses often share a common vision and values, ensuring everyone works towards the same objectives.
3. **Long-term Focus:** Co-operative businesses tend to prioritize long-term success over short-term gains, making decisions that benefit the business and co-operative members for generations to come.
4. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** One Kindred (family) businesses can respond quickly to changes and challenges, thanks to their close-knit structure and ability to make swift decisions with Okobi Initiative
5. **Loyalty and Commitment:** Cooperative members are often deeply invested in the business, demonstrating unwavering loyalty and commitment to its success.
6. **Cost Savings:** Co-operative businesses may reduce labor costs, as members often take on multiple roles and responsibilities.
7. **Legacy and Succession:** Co-operative businesses can ensure a smooth transition of ownership and leadership through shares, preserving the Co-operative's legacy and business continuity.

Growing Your Joint Business with Okobi: to benefit from this initiative

1. **Define Roles and Responsibilities:** Clearly setup a business for your co-operative and outline each member's tasks and expectations to avoid confusion and overlapping work.
2. **Establish a Shared Vision:** Develop a unified business plan and goals, ensuring everyone works towards the same objectives.
3. **Encourage Open Communication:** Foster an environment where Co-operative members feel comfortable sharing ideas, concerns, and feedback.
4. **Set Boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries between personal and professional relationships to maintain healthy communal dynamics.
5. **Seek External Advice:** Consult with professionals in Okobi, such as their business advisors or financial experts, to address challenges and improve your business output (growth)
6. **Embrace Technology and Innovation:** Stay up-to-date with industry trends and technologies to enhance efficiency and competitiveness. This is readily available through the programs organized by Okobi team.
7. **Plan for Succession:** Develop a succession plan to ensure continuity in leadership and ownership, securing the business's future.

By embracing the Okobi concept and understanding the benefits of one kindred business, a co-operative society can harness the power of unity and solidarity to drive growth, success, and a lasting legacy for their joint business.



Innocent Udochukwu Ngumah *is a visionary scholar and innovative thinker, known for his intelligence, studious nature, and proactive approach to problem-solving. With a passion for learning and a drive to succeed, he consistently delivers cutting-edge solutions and inspires others to do the same. Through his work and achievements, Udo Ngumah, as he is addressed, embodies the perfect blend of innovation, intelligence, and academic excellence. Currently, he is the Secretary of Okpofe Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES) Multi-purpose Co-operative Society an affiliate of the OKOBI project.*

INTERVIEW WITH REV. FR. PIUS ANYANWU

DIRECTOR, MATER FARM PROJECT, AHIARA, MBAISE

Q: Please, tell us about your Co-Operative and what you do.

A: At the moment, I belong to two Co-Operative Societies as a member. I belong to Imo CSE (CASSAVA SEEDS ENTERPRENEUR - CSE). Imo CSE is a group of people that were trained by the Research Institute, Umudike, on Cassava seed production. So, all of us from Imo State formed a group, formed a Co-Operative Society, and I happened to be one of them. Then, the other one is Greater Mbaise Farmers Association. It is just newly formed and I am a member but also a member of their inner caucus. I also belong to MAPIC (Mbaise Agric. Policy Implementation Committee), though [it is] not yet registered, it is a branch of Mbaise Policy Round Table. Where I am directing or Managing at the moment is MATER FARM PROJECT, a farm belonging to the Catholic Diocese of Ahiara, and I happen to be the Director of this farm. So, for the past four (4) years, I've been in charge of this farm trying to oversee what goes on in the farm and how we can be able to really bring about the vision set out by the Pioneer Bishop of Ahiara Diocese in securing food in our neighborhood, making sure that there is food security in our land. We've continued for the past four years to preach about Agriculture here in Mbaise and beyond. That's about Mater Farm which I'm in charge off, and since then, we've been trying to make people know more about Agriculture. The sole aim of this farm is to make sure that nobody goes to bed hungry, and to make sure that people are really trained in Agriculture…in modern ways of farming.

Q: How did you start and how much progress have you made?

A: My journey in Agriculture started in 2020 during the COVID pandemic. Within that time, we farmed a few portions of land and it totaled to about six (6) plots of land. So, I had to move to Umudike. And there, a classmate of mine was studying soil science at the prestigious University of Agriculture, Umudike. When I went to him, I told him about my passion for farming. He was so happy about it, that he took me to some of his lecturers. When I went to them, they all okayed my aspiration to join the agricultural sector.





In fact, none of them told me about the bad side of it or how stressful it is, but they really encouraged me. They said, "Oh! Father, we love this. Father, we would be ready to partner with you in anything you want to learn in Agriculture." One of them told me that if I wanted to get everything in agriculture that I should go from the scratch and I took that advice. I came back to my Diocese and decided to meet the Secretary of my Diocese and made him understand my passion to join the Agricultural revolution. I told him that I would want to start from scratch. He said okay, if I would be able to do that, when I should write the JAMB exam and come back. I took JAMB and got a good grade. When I came back, he told me that the problem would now be sponsorship. "There's no money to really sponsor you in this Agric. thing." I said, no problem, my problem is not sponsorship, rather my problem is permission to move into the Agric. sector. He said okay, when the Bishop comes, we will go and meet him together, and from there, we would know what to do about it. As we waited for the Bishop to come, I received a letter that I should go to Mater Farm, the farm that belongs to the Catholic Diocese of Ahiara to really practice that which I want to go to School to learn. I accepted the letter and went to Mater Farms. Unfortunately for me, I came to Mater Farms with little or no knowledge about agriculture apart from the fact that I have the passion to really move into the sector. From that moment, I started looking for a place that I could align myself with about anything Agriculture, and I started registering for both online and offline conferences. I moved into so many places for training. In fact, the one that revolutionalised my mentality and background in agriculture was the training I went at Songhai Farms, belonging to Rev. Fr. Godfrey Nzeamujor. The head of the Farm is at Port-Novo, Benin Republic, but I was trained at Emii, his hometown, where he built IGRC, where people go for trainings in Agriculture. I registered for that training for two weeks for N262,500 (Two hundred and sixty-two thousand, five hundred Naira only). Another part of the training was free, sponsored by Mastercard Foundation, which I went for three months. When I came back, my ideas of agriculture changed and I began to look at agriculture as a way of life and as a business. Since then, my journey in agriculture began in full force.

Q: What and what do you do (produce) and what is the extent of the value chain?

A: The farm I'm handling is an integrated farm which cuts across livestock production and crop production. Within animal production, we have poultry, piggery, fishery, snailry, and we have apiary. Within the crop production, we are into cucumber, yam, maize, and pepper, with other ones that we do in little quantities.





Within these, we produce and partly we process, especially, the honey production (the Apiary). We produce, we process, and we package our honey. Then other ones, we produce and we sell like that, hoping to continue the value chain into processing and packaging too.

Q: How many direct and indirect jobs do you create? That is, how many people are working full-time here and how many suppliers and indirect jobs?

A: I have about nine (9) workers with me here. Six of them are males while three are females, and we also have other people who buy our products and re-sell. So, I won't be able to mention how many of them but, the honey we produce, we have a lot of people who come to buy from us and they re-sell. We have also some students who buy our honey and they go back to school and re-sell them to their lecturers in school. Then, the cucumber that we produce, we sell them wholesale and people buy from us and they retail in the markets. Likewise other things we produce, like vegetables. For example, people come to buy our pepper in bags and they go to the market to re-sell.

Q: What are the main challenges that you face in this enterprise?



A: One of my greatest challenges is bringing people to have interest in this farm thing, especially the youths. Since I began propagating the agric business, my intention has always been to carry the youths along. But it is unfortunate that at this time, I've not been able to get in touch with the number of youths that I intended having from the very beginning, When I started this project, I know that I was moving with the youths at that time. We had a lot of slogans then, "Farm dey pay," and other slogans that we had then. At the moment, the number that I had in view moving along with is not truly what I have at the moment.

Secondly, some of the policies of Government have not been able to give us a safe landing for this job. For instance, during the dry season, we intended making massive processing of crops. But unfortunately, you see that some of the policies like cost of fuel, and the rest, cause our projects not to move as expected. Then also is the issue of finance. It has not really been easy financing this project to the volume that we intend to have them.

Q: How do you overcome the challenges?

A: In fact, the first one is concerning getting the youths involved in this project, We've been trying our best to move along with those who are interested. Then, we also keep cuddling those who are becoming weak or those who do not really find enough reason to join this project. But, in order to entice them and bring them close, we try to let them know that, yes, agriculture is stressful, but there are ways technology has reduced the stress in agriculture. So, we've been trying our best to acquire simple machines that make work easier. Like, on our farm here, we have a mini-tiller machine that tills the soil for us or that ploughs the soil for us. Then, we have a planter… a seed planter. This seed planter has two compartments. One compartment is where you place your seed. The other one is where you place your fertilizer. So, with the aid or with the help of the seed planter, one can plant an hectare of maize in a day without much stress.

In our farm too, we have the earth auger. With the earth auger, we make holes where we want to plant something like plantains, pawpaw, or make holes for yam or to establish palm plantation for people. So, with the earth auger, one can make about 400-500 holes in one day for planting of these economic trees. But, if it were direct labour, it would not really be easy, and using the shovel or spade to make holes will make the youths to run away … but with the use of these simple machines, one can be attracted. Oh! with this machine, I can cover up to a plot or two plots of land in a day. So, there's no need claiming that it is stressful. I can move along with that. But, where we have not been able to make much impact is the area of government policies because, you can't predict what will happen the next day. Like, there was a time I planted cucumber. I planted cucumber in about three plots of land. When the cucumber was due for harvest, the next thing that came on board was the cashless policy. With the cashless policy, people didn't have money to buy the cucumber from us and this cucumber is perishable. Before you know it, as we were harvesting, there were no people to buy from us and all of the cucumbers were destroyed and they decayed. So, we lost in that direction. Then, the issue of finance. I think there's nothing we can do apart from using the little we have to make progress as much as we can, unless there's help from anywhere to really push us to where we really want to be. And if there is, thanks be to God, we will accept and we will be able to get to where God wants us to be.