

Unpacking the Nexus Between Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) Sit-at-Home Order and Socio-economic Development in South-East Nigeria

Chinedu Valentine Ofoma^{[a],*}

^[a] Assistant Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

An environment devoid of security threats is not only needed for human existence but also a critical factor that determines the socio-economic development of every country, region or state. Drawing on this perspective, this article aims to examine the correlation between Indigenous People of Biafra Sit-at-home order and socio-economic development in South-east Nigeria. This was a qualitative study driven by secondary data which include newspapers, journal articles and conference papers among others. The findings of the study reveal that Indigenous People of Biafra Sit-at-home order has significantly affected economic activities and human security in the South-east but has no significant effect on academic activities in the region. It is also revealed that efforts put in by various governments (federal and state governments) to stop the order have not yielded any concrete result. The practical implication of the above is that economic growth and human security in the South-east will continue to be a mirage until this issue is seen to be addressed. Arising from the above, this article majorly recommends for a dialogue between the federal government and Indigenous People of Biafra so as to return the region to its progressive path.

Key words: Indigenous People of Biafra; Sit-At-home order; Socio-economic development; South-east; Unknown gunmen

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INTRODUCTION

People are not only primary beneficiaries of socio-economic development of nation but also active participants in the activities that trigger this development. Daily activities of private individuals and public institutions are central to the socio-economic development of any city, state, region or country as they greatly determine Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy and employment levels which are critical indicators of socio-economic development. South-east is not an exception to the above as it is one of the geopolitical zones in Nigeria with flourishing socio-economic activities. For instance, the region has some of the highest commercial hubs (in Onitsha and Aba) among other gateways of socio-economic development in the country.

Conducive atmosphere that is free from security tension is fundamental to this socio-economic development as it ensures smooth operations of businesses and social activities. It is equally needed to attract investors in that no right-thinking investor (foreign or local) will invest in an area that is highly tensed with security challenges. Peaceful environment does not only attract investors but also guarantees continuous stay of the investors in that area.

Sit-at-home order in the South-eastern Nigeria by Indigenous People of Biafra is a phenomenon that has generated a lot of concerns among the Nigeria populace basically due to its far reaching negative effects on socio-economic development in the region and country at large. Therefore, this article is fundamentally poised to interrogate the correlation between Indigenous People of Biafra Sit-at-home order and socio-economic

development in the South-east. The remaining parts of the article are thematically organized as follows; Indigenous People of Biafra, IPOB Sit-at-home order, socio-economic development, devastating implications of IPOB Sit-at-home order on socio-economic development of South-east, state response to IPOB sit-at-home order and conclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This article is qualitative and made use of secondary data such as journal articles, newspapers, magazines and government publications. The data was mainly on Indigenous People of Biafra Sit-at-home order as it concerns socio-economic development in the South-east Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

Secessionist agitation is not new as well as peculiar to Nigeria but a serious global issue that has continued to attract the attention of constituted authorities. Abada, Omeh & Okoye (2020) traced the origin of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to a renewed campaign in 2012 for the actualization of state of Biafra. Through its leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu together with the use of London-based Radio Biafra station, IPOB started reaching out to a growing number of dissatisfied young people in the South-east and South-south geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Consequently, a large number of people, mostly South-easterners frequently tune in to the clandestine radio station (Radio Biafra) to listen to the message(s) considered to be inciting against the Nigerian state. Similarly, Ojukwu & Nwaorgu (2016) observed that Radio Biafra is a major instrument used to allegedly address Federal Republic of Nigeria as a zoo and president Buhari as a terrorist as well as evil. This suggests that Radio Biafra has contributed immensely in

creating awareness about the agitation by IPOB. Goggins (2017) in Igwebuike & Akoh (2021) opined that the IPOB leader (Nnamdi Kanu) is a political activist who deploys self-legitimation and other-delegitimation measures in his online radio speeches to champion the agenda of Igbo extraction by revealing IPOB's positive traits and downplaying their negative traits, while at the same time exposing the bad attributes of Nigerian government and under playing the positive ones.

Ekpo & Agory (2019) conceptualized IPOB as a secessionist movement domiciled in South-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria whose aim is to restore defunct Biafra peacefully. The objectives of IPOB are to facilitate and advocate right to self-determination among the Igbos. According to European Asylum Support Office (2018), IPOB is a small group that emerged from Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). In the same vein, Goggins (2017) viewed Indigenous IPOB as a remodeled secessionist group founded by Nnamdi Kanu in 2014 after leaving MASSOB as Director of Radio Biafra. Most activities of IPOB such as activism, mobilizing support and forcefully persuading members to embark on demonstrations, sit-at-home protests and boycott of national elections are championed through ITS online radio broadcast (Nwangwu, 2018).

The emergence of IPOB as a secessionist group predated the current government of Buhari but came to limelight under this government particularly in 2015 after the arrest of its leader by federal government of Nigeria on charges of treasonable felony among others. Through its Radio Biafra used in conveying message(s) of secession of Igbo extraction from Nigeria state as well as the reasons behind it, the group was able to gain more members and supporters beyond Igbo region and even in diaspora. IPOB is an organized and coordinated group of people from Igbo extraction whose objective is the actualization of state of Biafra. It has well defined structures within and outside Nigeria headed by coordinators under the leadership of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu.



Figure 1
Picture displaying IPOB Members and Supporters

IPOB Sit-at-home Order

Sequel to the arrest of the leader of IPOB, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and consequent contempt of court by federal government by way of its refusal to court orders granting the IPOB leader bail, public sympathy for IPOB grew immensely (Jannah, 2017) leading to unprecedented protests in the South-east and South-south Nigeria which resulted to disruption of socio-economic activities in the area. Subsequently, a declaration for Sit-at-home order was made mostly in the South-east by IPOB leadership as solidarity for the freedom of IPOB leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and in honour and remembrance of Biafran heroes (Onyeji, 2017). The situation exacerbated in June, 2021 due to the re-arrest of the IPOB leader in Kenya by Nigerian government and his consequent return to the country which resulted to his re-arraignment in court on charges bordering on treason brought by the federal government. As a result, the IPOB spokesperson, Emma Powerful declared that every Monday starting from 9th August, 2021 would be sit-at-home in Biafra land as a form of continuous protest until the leader of IPOB, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu is set free from Department of State Service custody (Kingsley et al, 2022).

IPOB Sit-at-home order in the South-east Nigeria is a child of protest which initially started as an annual event marked with the aim of remembering as well as giving honour to Biafrans who paid the supreme price for the actualization of a state of Biafra especially during the Biafra civil war of 1967-1970. This explains its annual observance on 30th May, the day which Biafra war (Nigeria civil war) ended. However, the purpose of IPOB Sit-at-home order in the South-east has gone beyond the above to include solidarity for IPOB leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu who has been in DSS custody for charges bordering on ethic incitements and treason. Hence, the observance of the Order every Monday and any day the IPOB leader would appear in court for the matter. Conceptually, IPOB Sit-at-home order is a directive given by the group leadership to the people and residents of South-east to be indoor on a particular day usually Mondays and any other day(s) the IPOB leader will be arraigned. During this period, movements are restricted; banks, companies, offices, markets and schools in the region are shut down.

Socio-economic Development

Socio-economic development is a very broad and fascinating topic among other things that is essential to national development. The term “socio-economic development” refers to social and economic changes in society (Chojnicki, 2010). The type of socioeconomic development is determined by development methods and/or development goals. These processes are typically internally ordered series of transformations in states of affairs, or phases, where some states influence other states. It is a process of structural, quantitative, and qualitative changes brought about by people’ acts in

social (and economic) practice. The following areas are affected by these changes: material circumstances (the ability to meet needs related to consumption of goods and services; it is connected to the phenomena of economic growth, economic structure, and entrepreneurship), access to public goods and services (which affects changes in education level, a person’s method of caring for their health, etc.), and relationships within the social system (individual integration, trust, security, sociability, etc.) (Stemplowski, 1987; Chojnicki, 2010; UNDP, 2012; Bellu, 2011).

IPOB SIT-AT-HOME ORDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH-EAST: THE CONVERGENCE

South-east is one of the geopolitical zones in Nigeria with flourishing socio-economic activities which have contributed to the development of the region and country at large. The region is naturally endowed with a lot of minerals such as limestone, petroleum, lead, coal and zinc among others. In the past, cities such as Aba, Enugu, Owerri, Umuahia, Okigwe and Onitsha due to their easy accessibility served as a place of trade articulation used for the expansion of international economic activities involving the export of agricultural produce and minerals, and the import of manufactured goods. The region attracted modern infrastructural facilities together with industrial and commercial activities. Crop farming, raising livestock, fishing and petty trading are important sources of livelihood among the people of the area, with some of them engaging in numerous income-generating activities, normally on a small scale. Yam, cocoyam, cassava, rice, plantain and vegetables are the main food crops, while palm produce, rubber, coconut and cocoa are the most important cash crops in the zone. More so, poultry is reared commercially. In states like Abia and Imo, the extraction of crude oil is crucial for the production of petroleum products and natural gas. In the region, full-time traders are either distributors of the goods of huge manufacturing enterprises or agents of powerful corporations (Okali, Okpara & Olawoye, 2001).

Furthermore, Ariaria International Market, Aba and Onitsha Main Market in the South-east are great commercial hubs not only in the country but Africa. Ariaria International Market is a one-stop-buy all market with virtually all the goods and services such as electrical lightening, clothing material, provisions, furniture, automobile parts and accessories etc. Most importantly, the market is internationally known for clothing and shoe making. It remains a very large market with numerous components such as Alaoji Motor Parts market, Eziokwu (Cemetery) Market, City Shops, Ehere (Ogbor Hill) Market, Ekeoha Shopping Centre, Ngwa Road (New) Market, Ohabiam Electronics Market, Nsulu Textile

Market and Uratta Timber Market. The contribution of the Market to the economy of the South-east and Nigeria at large is very significant as people from all walks of life come to the market for exchange of goods and services. Additionally, Onitsha Main Market which is equally in the region is one of the largest markets in West Africa on the basis of geographical size and volume of goods and services.

Disturbingly, these socio-economic activities thriving in the region are now greatly disrupted on Mondays and any other day(s) depending on the circumstances around the continued keeping of IPOB leader in DSS custody. Any day that sit-at-home is declared by the IPOB, social and commercial activities in the region are shut down and the economy grumbles. Movements are restricted as transportation services are on halt. Markets and hospitals are not excluded as all the people and residents stay away from their shops and offices. Educational institutions in the region especially public owned institutions (nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary) are usually under lock and key with all the academic activities put on hold including external examinations such Senior School Certificate Examination and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board Examination. According to Okoye (2021), IPOB sit-at-home order has unwittingly done great harm on investments, investors and investees in the South-east geopolitical zone. The giant strides recorded in education sector in the zone especially in Anambra state are being eroded. According to the Governor of Anambra State, Prof. Charles Soludo, an estimated ₦19.6 billion is lost in Anambra state during sit-at-home days. Apparently, IPOB is showing commitment towards destroying the economy of the south-eastern region (Tribune, 2022). In the words of a staff of Young Shall Grow Motors in Kingsley, Obi & Oham (2022, p.16):

The loss we experience cannot be quantified, because we are losing. We have over 46 parks in Lagos, and on Monday, the least number of vehicles to leave Lagos are 100 while only 10 leave for Abuja. We are losing and we can't quantify the loss. The company is losing resources. In four-five Mondays in a month, we are losing. We still have to pay workers. It also affects the company in the sense that the workers who earn a percentage from what they charge the passengers have to fend for themselves. Some of these people affected are the loaders.

Similarly, a customer service officer at God is Good Motors in Kingsley et al (2022, p.16) observed that the enforcement of the Sit-at-home order has negatively affected their revenue base because their buses do not ply five routes any longer. In his language:

Since the sit-at-home order, we have lost six routes. For us, we don't go to Aba, Enugu, Awka, Uyo and Owerri on Mondays. On a normal day, we get to go to these places. That affects the revenue and also gives us extra workload. The people, who are to travel on Monday, end up rushing to travel on Tuesday or Sunday in order to avoid all of those things. So it has not been easy. This has affected us so much that I really wish the government and IPOB would have a dialogue to end the tension.

The security implications of the order is also worthy of interrogation as a lot of causalities have been recorded among the IPOB members, security personnel and ordinary citizens. The rising case of extra-judicial activities carried out by security personnel under the guise of restoring normalcy in the region is a pointer to the deteriorating state of security fueled by the declaration and enforcement of the Sit-at-order. According to Amnesty International in Premium Times (2018), the extra-judicial torture and execution by security agents in the country especially the Nigerian Army have resulted to the death of over One Hundred and Fifty (150) pro-Biafra protesters in the South-east, between August 2015 and August 2016. Specifically, during Biafra Remembrance Day in 2016, Nigerian military in their Python and Crocodile dance operations killed some members of IPOB. More so, over a thousand members and supporters of the IPOB who assembled for a rally in Onitsha, Aba and other cities in the south each were clamped down by security personnel. In August 2021, at least six people were killed and three buses burnt in Anambra State after a joint security patrol team killed two persons suspected to be members of IPOB enforcing the sit-at-home order in the region. The troops of 34 Brigade Obinze killed four suspected members of IPOB in Orlu Local Government of Imo State. According to the Army, the suspected pro-Biafran agitators opened fire on the troops who were on a patrol but there were overpowered. In the same month, two travelers were burnt to death with shops and vehicles, including buses of Libra and Okey transport companies set ablaze in Imo State (Kingsley et al, 2022).

In an attempt to resist the Sit-at-home order by the people, the enforcers of the order who are usually referred as "unknown gunmen" attack, maim, kill the people and destroy properties trying to extract compliance from the people. There are reports of attacks and killings of traders and commuters disobeying the order in the region. So many business outfits, offices, government facilities have been set ablaze and even security personnel killed by these "unknown gunmen" combing communities to enforce the Sit-at-home order. According to Ofoma (2022), currently, there are faceless violent youths tagged "Unknown Gunmen" who are responsible for some of the attacks against citizens and security personnel including the destruction of properties and public facilities. Small and Medium Enterprises are not spared even goods sampled along roadside are usually destroyed with the owners seriously assaulted or beaten by these enforcers. Many people coming from others parts of the country to the region on the day of sit-at-home get stranded as hotels are not even in operation for them to get accommodations and continue their journey the following day. Paradoxically, the IPOB through its Spokesperson (Emma Powerful) has come out to state that those attacking, maiming, killing and destroying people's properties on the basis of

enforcing the sit-at-home order are not IPOB members that IPOB is a non-violent group driven by the restoration of state of Biafra.

Education sector is part of the areas affected by the IPOB sit-at-home order as academic activities have been disrupted to a certain degree. It is now a new normal in the region that teaching and lectures including examinations (internal and external) mostly in public educational institutions do not hold on any day Sit-at-home is declared. Ugorji (2017) observed the resurgent separatist movement among the Biafran people with its effects beyond just intra-ethnic conflict. It is a threat to disruption of the educational system

STATE RESPONSE TO IPOB SIT-AT-HOME ORDER

The activities of non-state actors such as IPOB are part of the existing realities which make every government uncomfortable. Globally, political authorities adopt either kinetic or non-kinetic approach to address this kind of situation. Thinking that military (kinetic) approach was capable of solving the problem of IPOB agitation with its accompanying Sit-at-home order, Federal Government of Nigeria through the Nigerian military high-command launched Operation Python Dance II and Exercise Egwu Eke II in the South-East with the justification that there are spate of assassinations, even in religious places, attacks on security personnel, theft of weapons and kidnapping in the region. The response to the IPOB activities by the state according to extant literature has rather taken a more coercive measure than any other to suppress the operations of the IPOB. Consequently, there are leadership alienation, massive arrest and unlawful detention of members, extra-judicial killings of IPOB members and finally the militarization of IPOB operations (Abada et al, 2020).

In addition, the state governors in the region have through the instrumentality of law set up a South-east joint security outfit called "Ebubagu" aimed at restoring peace in the region. Also, they (the Governors) have on severally occasions issued press releases urging the people not to obey the Sit-at-home order by the IPOB; stressing that necessary measures have been put in place to guarantee their safety. Vanguard (2021) reported Governor Umahi of Ebonyi State (Chairman, South-east Governors Forum) as saying that the region loses ₦10 billion each day Sit-at-home is observed that Ebonyi state will not subscribe to incessant calls for Sit-at-home within the region.

The foregoing measures have not been able to stop the Sit-at-home order in the South-east as the people have continued to comply with the directives from the non-state actors. This is basically due to the loss of lives and properties of innocent citizens recorded on the days the

Order was declared. This further explains the level of ineffectiveness of the kinetic strategies adopted by the Nigeria state in bringing normalcy to the region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

IPOB Sit-at-Home Order and Economic Activities in South-East Nigeria

The finding of this study reveals that there is significant correlation between IPOB Sit-at-home order and dwindling economic activities in the South-east. It was indicated in the study that economic activities in the region were thriving until the declaration of Sit-at-home order by Indigenous People of Biafra. This finding is in congruence with the opinion of Kingsley, Obi & Oham (2022) that business activities in the South-east are disrupted every Monday as there is serious fear emanating from the order as well as its enforcers which strongly discourages people from coming out of their houses for business activities. Life is a very precious gift from God in that nobody wants to be harassed or attacked by militants or unknown gunmen for any reason including socio-economic activities. Similarly, Okoye (2021) averred that IPOB sit-at-home order has significant devastating implications on socio-economic activities in the South-east because citizens' rights to run businesses, investments and education have been trampled upon. Nnewi Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines, and Agriculture (2022) in Osita, Anoke & Eze, (2022) revealed that 8billion was estimated as the daily financial loss of sit-at-home order in the region. This suggests that economic activities in the South-east will continue to decline until the situation is arrested.

IPOB Sit-at-Home Order and Human Security in South-East Nigeria

The finding of this study also reveals that human security in the area has deteriorated due basically to the conduct of enforcers of the Sit-at-home order and some security personnel. Hoodlums tagged "Unknown gunmen" have continued to take advantage of the precarious situation to attack, maim and kill innocent citizens in the guise of ensuring compliance with the order. On the other hand, some security personnel have engaged in unprofessional conducts such as torture and extra-judicial killings of citizens all in the name of returning normalcy in the region. According to Chika (2021) in Kingsley et al (2022)

I felt like a fugitive travelling on a Monday to Nnewi as the bus driver had to sneak past any crowd to avoid being mobbed. It felt like I was running away for committing a crime. Everyone in the 14- seater bus held their breath when they saw a crowd of protesters. At a point, they stopped our cars and we had to chant, 'We are for Biafra! This is Biafra land!' Even after all that, they impounded our vehicles and told us to wait. We had to wait till about 9pm.

IPOB Sit-at-Home Order and Academic Activities in South-East Nigeria

This finding of the study reveals that IPOB sit-at-home order has not significantly affected academic activities in the South-east. There has not been significant or total shut down of educational institutions in the area due to the order especially in states such as Ebonyi and Abia. Teaching and learning still go on especially in private institutions despite the IPOB sit-at-home. This particular finding is in consonance with the opinion of Anyadiegwu & Nzekwu (2022) that the level of compliance to IPOB sit-at-home order among private and mission schools is very low. Furthermore, classes are held in boarding schools on the days sit-at-home is declared.

CONCLUSION

This paper broadly sought to examine the correlation between Indigenous People of Biafra Sit-at-home order and socio-economic development of South-east Nigeria. In the course of the study, socio-economic development of the regime was interrogated from economic, human security and academic point of view. Drawing on this, the findings of the study revealed that IPOB sit-at-home order has significantly affected economic activities and human security in the region. However, it was established in the study that the order has no significant effect on academic activities in the region. The practical implication of the above is that the achievement of economic growth and human security in the region under this current situation is impracticable. However, the situation is not insurmountable as the recommendations made below can address it.

- Federal government of Nigeria should urgently consider non-kinetic approach by calling for a dialogue with the IPOB.
- Marginalization is the most driving force of the agitation by the IPOB. Therefore, federal government should with action address this widely held view of marginalization against the people of South-east.

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