

Ocean Economy in Nigeria: Analysis of the Economic Benefits of River Benue, 1960-2020

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Abstract

Many scholars of different shades of life have comprehensively undertaken some studies on River Benue. However, these intellectual enquiries have not x-rayed the economic dimensions of the River. This paper, therefore, attempts to narrow the existing historiographical gap on the subject. Using extant and oral historical sources in line with the interdisciplinary methods, the paper analyses the economic benefits of River Benue between 1960 and 2020. It affirms, the indispensable nexus between the River and thriving agricultural production, water transportation, fishing, block industry, and rice milling, *et cetera*. The study discusses the challenges that have impeded the aforementioned and related economic activities. The evidence thrown up leads to the major conclusion that the protracted flooding and the resultant massive destruction and obstruction of the economic activities, paucity of funds, lack of modern equipment, and double taxation, among others, posed a grave danger to the aforementioned sources of livelihood. Given the above, the paper concludes that River Benue contributed marginally to the development of the Benue economy. It recommends *inter alia* the dredging of the river and the construction of a buffer dam.

Key words: Ocean; Economy; River Benue; Economic activities; Industry

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INTRODUCTION

People's way of life or culture is deeply affected by the environment - the area in which they live. Globally, in the contemporary era; those who live in developed societies have more time to spend on leisure, to experiment with new ideas, and work on new researches in all spheres of life. All these and others are possible because there are resources, a self-reliant economy, and abundant foodstuff. But on the other hand are the people who live in the Third World comprising those countries that are generally referred to as backward, underdeveloped, or developing. People in these countries spend the greater proportion of their time thinking of how to survive, usually on a day-to-day basis (Falola, Mahadi, Uhomoibhi & Anyanwu, 1999). They spend their time and efforts on how to procure foodstuff or on how to sell their labour to earn small wages for their survival. The nature and place of habitation influenced the activities of man. For example, people who inhabited open plains, an area which was attractive to several people, tended to develop war-like tendencies and struggled to invent implements of war because of the strong need to protect and defend themselves against invaders or their aggressive neighbours. Sometimes they had dangerous animals to contend with. On the other hand, societies' inaccessible places tended to bother little about developments elsewhere and also showed evidence of slow technological changes (Falola, Mahadi, Uhomoibhi & Anyanwu, 1999).

Early periods of human development show that man had inadequate knowledge to assist him in manipulating his environment. There was, thus, limited skill and science to control or alter the environment. This was responsible for the gathering and hunting economy that characterized the early ages in history, periods which archaeologists often refer to as pre-historic. Society advanced as man developed the skill to manipulate his environment. The success in the agricultural revolution brought more food and allowed for more leisure and time

to make technological progress; with surplus food and manufactured goods, trade was able to flourish (Falola, Mahadi, Uhomobhi & Anyanwu, 1999). Nowadays, there is a significant improvement in all spheres of human development. This has given impetus to vibrant economic activities. Many people manipulate oceans and rivers to achieve their economic needs. This has become a subject for intellectual brainstorming. Numerous studies have been done about River Benue. However, those extant studies have not focused directly on the economic benefits or importance of River Benue and are not historical in nature. This study, therefore, serves as an intervention by filling the gap accentuated by the existing literature, by analysing the economic benefits of the River.

To achieve this aim, the paper is sequentially organised. It discusses a clarification of conceptual issues, the historical and geographical context of River Benue. Some of the core issues researched in this paper border on the economic importance of the Benue as well as the challenges with the economic activities associated with River Benue. Lastly, the paper draws a conclusion based on the evidence presented and analysed.

A CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Several concepts need to be clarified to enhance a profound comprehension of this discourse. Three key concepts, economy, ocean economy and blue economy are brought under consideration. The word economy, on the one hand, implies the large set of inter-related production and consumption activities that aid in determining how scarce resources are allocated (<https://www.investopedia.com>, accessed on July 20, 2015). An economy encompasses all activities related to the production, consumption, and trade of goods and services in an area. It applies to everyone from individuals to entities such as corporations and governments. An economy of a particular region or country is governed by its culture, laws, history, and geography, among others (<https://www.investopedia.com>, accessed on July 20, 2015). In the context of this paper, an economy implies activities that are carried out primarily to earn a living or improve the standard of living.

Ocean economy, on the other hand, encompasses ocean-based industries (such as shipping, fishing, offshore wind, marine biotechnology), but also the natural assets and ecosystem services that the ocean provides (fish, shipping lanes, carbon absorption, and the likes) (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264251724-en>). Contextually, ocean economies are those on-shore and off-shore activities that are done basically to tap the economic benefits of the water bodies such as oceans, rivers, etc. Ocean economy provides food and employment opportunities to many youths. For example, mariners,

fishermen, farmers, sand dredgers, and bricklayers, amongst others. The executive summary of the *Ocean Economy Database* acknowledges both the benefits and challenges of the ocean economy as excerpts below:

Economic activity in the ocean is expanding rapidly, driven primarily by developments in global population, economic growth, trade, and rising income levels, climate and environment, and technology. However, an important constraint on the development of the ocean economy is the current deterioration of its health. As anthropogenic carbon emissions have risen over time, the ocean has absorbed much of the carbon, leading to ocean acidification. Also, sea temperatures and sea levels are rising and ocean currents shifting, resulting in biodiversity and habitat loss, changes in fish stock composition and migration patterns, and a higher frequency of severe ocean weather events. The prospects for future ocean development are further aggravated by land-based pollution, in particular agricultural run-off, chemicals, and macro-and micro-plastic pollutants that feed into the ocean from rivers, as well as by overfishing and depleted fish stocks in many parts of the world (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264251724-en>).

Concerning River Benue, it would not be out of place to emphasize that its benefits or economic importance surpasses the challenges it offers to the host state or communities. Additionally, ocean economy refers to the sum of the economic activities of the ocean-based industries, together with the assets, goods, and services of marine ecosystems. In many cases, marine ecosystems provide immediate inputs to the ocean-based industries (<https://www.oecd.org/sit/policy-note-ocean-economy>, accessed on September 10, 2021).

A related term to ocean economy is the blue economy. Some organisations use the two terms interchangeably. However, these two terms represent different concepts (Ocean Economy Takes Centre Stage at Davos, in *Grit Daily News*, accessed on September 2, 2019). The *World Bank* conceives blue economy as the “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem” (The *World Bank*, “What is the Blue Economy?” accessed on September 09, 2021). *European Commission* defines it as “all economic activities related to oceans, seas, and coasts. It covers a wide range of interlinked established and emerging sectors” (European Union, Vol.5, 2018). The slim difference between the two concepts is that ocean economy simply deals with the use of ocean resources and is strictly aimed at empowering the economic system of ocean (<https://www.examrace.com>, accessed on September 09, 2021). Blue economy goes beyond viewing the ocean economy solely as a mechanism for economic growth. It focuses on the sustainability of the ocean for economic growth. Therefore, the blue economy encompasses ecological aspects of the ocean along with economic aspects (<https://www.examrace.com>, accessed on September 09, 2021). It is in this wise that, this paper harps basically on the economic benefits of the ocean economy, with specific references to River Benue.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF RIVER BENUE

Historically, the advent of the 19th century (1800) witnessed the burning desire of the Europeans to explore and discover the vast human and natural resources of the hinterland of Africa. The crisis in the European capitalist mode of production necessitated a need to acquire colonies and markets abroad to invest the surplus capital that was beginning to clog the domestic economy of Western Europe (Ugbegili, 2013). There was also a need to acquire colonies and markets to exploit agricultural raw materials and mineral resources needed by European industries. Scholars such as J. A. Hobson and V. I. Lenin have noted that “the surplus capital within the domestic economies of the Western capitalist nations was the primary and basic motivating force of European expansion to Africa by the 19th century” (Lenin, 1933).

European explorers such as Mungo Park, Richard Lander, and Macgregor Laird were sent on expedition missions on the River Niger and Benue to open up the possibility of trade with the many people of the hinterland of Nigeria. The outcome of these expeditions was the opening up of Rivers Benue and Katsina-Ala, and the establishment of trading ports and stations at Abinsi, Ibi, and Katsina-Ala by several European commercial firms marking the development of the relationship between the Europeans and the indigenous populations (Ochefu, 1984). Contributing on the exploration of River Benue, Y. A. Ochefu (1984, p.30) was more forthcoming when he states that:

The first attempt to explore the Benue was carried out in 1832 by Macgregor Laird, who led an expedition to Vagboh, about 150 miles from the confluence of the River Niger and Benue. This expedition although a disaster and a commercial failure revealed the region's economic potentials. After a disastrous expedition in 1841, when many lives were lost, the Benue ceased to arouse European interest until 1851, when Baikie sailed nearly 400 miles up the Benue. This expedition, sponsored by the British government had the task of exploring the Benue from Vagboh-the farthest point reached by oilfield 1933, to Adamawa.

A British consulate was established in 1867 at Lokoja and this development gave impetus for the rapid expansion of European firms and trading companies in the Benue Valley (Kirk-Greene, 1958). By 1870, it was estimated that annual trade on the Niger-Benue confluence area was 55,000 pounds. In the same year, the West African Company of Manchester began purchasing ivory at Ibi and Gbamasha. This firm was later joined by the Alexander Miller Brothers of Glasgow and James Pinnock of Liverpool (Greene, 1958, p.23). According to A.H.M. Kirk - Greene:

The most important items of trade were ivory and shea butter. The British firms had to compete with the French-led by de Senelle, an agent of the Camaigned de l'Afrique Equatorial, who started purchasing ivory, shea butter, and palm oil from Ibi, Lokoja, and Ega.

As a strategy to enhance commerce and trade, ports were developed on the banks of River Benue and Katsina-Ala. Among the important inland ports on the River-Benue was Abinsi, Makurdi, and that of Katsina-Ala; since this time/period River Benue has remained a viable source of economic activities with accrued benefits. However, before delving into these economic activities, the paper first provides some geographical briefs on the Benue.

According to C. Agbo, River Benue (also known as the Benue or the Benue River) previously known as Chadda River or Tchadda, is the major tributary of the Niger River. The River is approximately 1,400 kilometers (870 miles) long and is almost entirely navigable during the summer months. As a result, it is an important transportation route in the regions through which it flows (2001). It rises in Northern Cameroun at about 4,400 feet (1,340m) and, in its first 150 miles (240 km), descends more than 2,000 feet (600m) over many falls and rapids, the rests of its source being largely uninterrupted (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Benue-River>, accessed on September 09, 2021). During flood periods its waters are linked via the Mayo-Kebbi tributary with the Lagone, which flows into Lake Chad. Below the Mayo-Kebbi, the river is navigable all year-round by boats drawing less than 2.5 feet (0.75m) and by larger boats for more restricted periods. A considerable volume of goods is transported by the river, and cotton and peanuts are exported in the same way from the Chad region. Between Yola and Makurdi, the River is joined by the Gongola, and it flows east and south about 300 miles (480 km) (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Benue-River>, accessed on September 09, 2021).

The Benue has rich alluvial plains which supported agricultural activities. It also has a considerable quantity of sharp sand which called for sand dredging. The riverbank also contains loamy soil which motivated the burnt brick industry. The presence of fish has enabled the fishing industry to thrive in the State. It is the contents of River Benue that prompted the ocean economy and its accompanying benefits in Benue State.

ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF RIVER BENUE, 1960-2020

River Benue has offered a lot of economic opportunities/benefits to the host communities and the Benue area as a whole. These economic benefits include agriculture/agro-businesses, fishing, transportation and communication, sand dredging industry, and block and building industries, *et cetera*. The aforementioned activities are analysed one after the other to enhance a profound understanding and appreciation of the issues involved.

Agriculturally, River Benue (just like River Nile in Egypt) provided fertile soil for agricultural activities. The alluvial deposits and their tributaries make the soil a fertile area for the cultivation of crops like yam, maize,

rice, millet, potatoes, guinea corn, groundnut, and assorted vegetables, among others (Varvar, 2009). Agreeing on the above, S. I. Ugbegili emphasizes that, “the tropical ferruginous soils exhibited by the Makurdi (part of the Benue) environment were well-drained, very permeable and quite good for rain-fed agriculture” (Ugbegili, 2004). Similarly, T. A. Varvar and E. I. Yecho bring to the fore that “these fertile plains were put into good use by the indigenous inhabitants of the area. The production of agricultural commodities like yams and grains of various species was done on an extensive scale (2013). Relatedly, an oral informant, a vegetable producer, and vendor, Mrs. Mwuese Alakpa (nee Iorliam) (2021) noted that:

River Benue has enhanced the production of different vegetables and crops. Women usually start planting at the bank of the River when it dries up. This usually takes place between November to December and even in March depending largely on the time the River dries. The differences in planting periods apart from the dryness of the Benue also depended on the price of the vegetable seedlings. Seedlings are usually expensive in November but around December their prices usually dropped.

Apart from vegetables, a lot of crops are being produced on the River Bank, the Benue has warranted dry season farming. Because of the River, some farmers engaged themselves in dry season farming. This they did, especially in the production of rice, cassava, and vegetables. After planting these crops, they made use of the water from the river for irrigation. Due to the unmechanized nature of Nigeria’s agricultural sector, irrigation is mostly done manually by going into the river with buckets and watering cans to fetch from the River and water their crops. Mrs. Mwuese Alakpa (2021) noted that few agro-businessmen had irrigation machines for which people hired services to water their crops. Those who used mechanized method of irrigation usually does it once before the crops are planted and after planting, if it is vegetable no irrigation is required because of the dew produced by the river especially in the morning and in evening and night. Those who used manual irrigation methods watered their vegetables twice in a day—that is morning and evening, consecutively for the period of two weeks.

A vegetable farmer who is also one of the informants, IversenNgobua (2021) revealed that the income generated from the sales of the agricultural produce varied and depended largely on the volume of production and harvest, that is input and output. She explained that she raised between N10,000 and 20,000 per month. A rice farmer who cultivated on the bank of the River named, Tersoo Iorliam (2021) noted that he usually harvested between 30 to 40 bags of rice with a selling price ranging from N 750,000 to 1000,000. Extrapolating from the above, it is apposite to state that River Benue has provided a good opportunity or a platform for a lot of farmers to excel in their farming activities.

Furthermore, River Benue has made it possible for a

lot of youth to engage in the fishing industry or business. Fishing is an important economic activity that provides foods from the sea and thereby creates employment for the fishermen and for others who operate in the entire chain from the construction of vessels (boats) and other equipment related to fishing (<https://link.springer.com>article>, accessed on September 02, 2021). M. O. Odey, describes Benue as an area with highly skilled fishermen from Abinsi to Makurdi (Odey, 2011). This is because several fishermen are available in the area and the fishing technology they had developed and made use of.

The Benue people used canoes, paddles or harpoons, nets, lines, hooks with bait, traps of all kinds, and poison as the main tools and principal means of fishing. Both men and women engaged in this collaborative effort, occasionally to satisfy their private demands. More specialized “tribes” like the itinerant Jukun and Nupe Fishermen engaged in the pursuit of fishing on a more extensive scale to exchange fish for rat and grain crops (Odey, 2011). Corroboratively, Teryima Ngobua in an oral interview (2021) espoused that:

Both men and women play vital roles in the marketing of fish in Benue. Men usually dominate the sea, they move with canoes and other fishing gadgets to capture fish while women dominate at the retailing level of the harvested fish. The traditional fish marketing system is characterized by fishermen, landing their catches on scattered jetties in fish baskets along the coast, known as fishing villages. Their catches were often bought by women who often pay the fishermen in advance, thus acting as a provider of informal credit.

Fishing methods and strategies varied from place to place. Communal fish drives (*Suwa* in Tiv) were organised among the Benue riverine communities. The so-called “Abinsi net” and the Benue net, is known as *Akuji*, were perhaps the most popular techniques employed in catching fish (Odey, 2011). They were fitted with floats and allowed to drift in shallow water while the surrounding water stirred so that fish would move into the net at night. However, the latest means of catching fish is by casting drag nets on the water as the canoe moved from one point of the River to another. Fish caught were dried by women by sunning or by hanging the fish on sticks or a rack and smoked above fireworks (Makar, 1994). This allowed the fish to be preserved for several months for future consumption or sales. A lot of people, especially the Jukun, Nupe, and Etulo people earn their living solely from the fishing industry which was necessitated naturally by River Benue.

Besides, River Benue has enhanced transportation and communication. Water transportation is one of the critical means of transportation. In the pre-colonial days, River Benue served as a crossing point for traders who participated in internal and external trade of the area. The presence of large pre-colonial markets which functioned as entrepôts into Tivland has been duly acknowledged by T. Makar (1994, p.75). Markets like

Wanter and Akpakmaja were located on the northern side of the Benue while Ikyobo, Tsumba, Awange, Shiriki, and Tyodough, among others, were located in the South. Because of the presence of the River, Makurdi was a convenient crossing point for the distant traders from Tiv, Bassa, Alagoa, Mighili, Udam, Batum, and Jukun, amongst others. Canoes were very important to this trade because they facilitated the movement of people to this modern era. An oral informant, Baba Sanusi disclosed that the Nupe people constructed canoes called Eyangbara. It was named so because it looked like a house and contained several things to make life more meaningful. These canoes were made from trunks of trees (Oral interview with Baba Sanus, 2021). Canoes have enhanced transportation and communication. Any time there is a crisis in Taraba State and other adjoining areas or states, some people used canoes to get back home for their safety. They sailed through the tributaries and finally got to the Benue safely and located their homes. Using River Niger and Benue, S.U. Fwatshak (2017) identifies the merits of this mode of transportation by saying that:

The advantage of water transportation are many and include cost-effectiveness, risk and crime reduction, creation of water transport entrepreneurs, revenue generation, employment creation, and business spinoffs. In terms of cost-effectiveness, ships, like trains are mass carriers. They carry on one trip, the large and bulky tonnage of goods and people. The advantage of volume also translates into advantages of until prices on goods so transported. This is the ground for cost-effectiveness.

As a result of the centrality of the canoe to the economic life of the inhabitants of the riverine communities of the Benue, there is a booming business of canoe-making. These canoes were usually purchased by both fishermen and the mariners-transporters. They were usually constructed by the Nupe, Etulo, and the Jukun people. Only a few indigenous technologists of Tiv extraction acquired the knowledge of canoe-making and use. However, the aforementioned ethnic groups depend on it as a source of their livelihood, whether by making it for sale or by using it for fishing or for transport business (Oral interview with Terzungwe Ujon, 2021).

River Benue also created an avenue for the establishment and operation of the sand dredging industry. Some inhabitants of Makurdi took advantage of the presence of the River and established dredging industries. For example, there is Mt. Sanai Rocks and Mineral dredging industry located at New Garage, behind the defunct John Holt Company Limited. This company was registered in 2019 with the Nigerian Inland Water Way Authority. It was also licensed by Makurdi Sand and Gravel Union (Oral interview with Mr. Clement Tanko, 2021). This and other dredging companies operated all year-round (but are usually more viable when the water level is favourable or moderate). When the River dries up the mobile dredger finds it difficult to move as it touched the soil and this automatically hindered the volume of

dredging. However, dredging activities at the Benue were done in large quantities. In explaining the volume of production (dredging) and transaction of sand, the manager of Mt. Sinai Rock and Mineral, Mr. Clement Tanko (2021) bemoaned that:

When the water volume was favourable and his operating staff members were using mobile dredgers (dredging machines) they produced about three to six trips per day. But when it is unfavourable, they dredged about two to four trips daily. The volume of selling the sand also varied. When the demand was high, it is about one hundred to two hundred trips per month. But when the demand was low the company sold between twenty to sixty trips monthly. As of now [the time of carrying out this study] sand is sold between N4,000 and N6,000 depending on the size of the truck (tipper).

Dredging had provided employment opportunities to both the employers and the employees of dredging industries. Those who operated dredging machines are paid daily and also per trip. They usually collected N3,000 per trip. Because their wages were depended on their production capacity, the operating staff usually works relentlessly to make more money.

Associated with the above is the block industry (both burnt bricks and cement bricks). The nature of clay on the bank of the River is fitted for making burnt bricks and as such many youths of the riverine communities were engaged in the burnt bricks industry for earning their living. An interviewee (who is also the operator of a burnt bricks industry), Terzungwe Ujon has enumerated the operators of this industry during the period under study to include the earliest ones like Ajia Gaji, Aer Nyamkighir, Ujon Kisoko, Tsua Ngur, Ngur Swande, and David (whose surname was forgotten) as at the time of this interview. The said interviewee listed the later operators ranging from Terzungwe Ujon (son of Ujon Kisoko), Aondona Tyo, Alexander, and Terese, among others (Oral interview with Terzungwe Ujon, 2021).

Apart from the establishment of burnt bricks industries, there were cement block industries. This was made possible because of the large content of sharp sand in River Benue. Cement blocks were laid and sold at the rate of N100 and N120 respectively. The makers and sellers of these blocks had made a lot of money from this business (Oral interview with Saaondo Atetan, 2021). The sharp sand dredged from the Benue is usually used for building and construction of different infrastructural facilities such as schools, hospitals, market stores, and roads, et cetera.

Additionally, the Benue has facilitated/enhanced rice milling industries. Many rice milling industries are located on the bank of River Benue. This is because the owners of those industries took advantage of the water from the River (Oral interview with Gideon Riga, 2021). The whole process of parboiling rice usually demands some water and because of the presence of the Benue River, milling of rice is usually done throughout the year. Miva Rice (the largest rice milling industry in Benue) got its

source of water from the Benue River. This had reduced their cost of buying water from the water tanker vendors. The Benue State Marketing Board also situated the rice milling market in Makurdi at the bank of the river to enable easy access to water. The above analysed economic activities had their daunting challenges that have hindered the realisation of their full economic potentials.

CHALLENGES OF THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AT RIVER BENUE, 1960-2020

A lot of factors have limited the economic activities at River Benue. These factors/challenges varied with the type of economic activities. To enhance a proper understanding of these factors, the study treats them one after the other. In the area of agriculture, flooding constituted a critical challenge to both the farmers and crops. Flood occasionally destroyed crops and also killed some farmers. It is doubtless that flood became an annual or a yearly occurrence in the riverside communities in Benue State. Any time it occurred, it destroyed the cultivated and the storage crops (Oral interview with Daniel Ashilewua Unde, 2015). The most critical of these floods was the Makurdi flood of 2012 that caused a lot of destruction. Quantifying the quantum of the damage, a retiree and an agri-business man, Danie Ashilewua Unde, revealed in an interview that, he had a fish farm that contained between 12,000 and 15,000 fish which can be quantified in the monetary value of ₦23 million, since each valued between ₦4,000 to ₦6,000, but during the flood, the whole farm flooded because it was located in a water-logged area (Oral interview with Daniel Ashilewua Unde, 2015). In discussing his bitter experience, D.M. Igba and T.T. Ityonzughul captures an oral informant, Stephen T. Dzapine who recounted that:

The flood was a total blow (loss) on me. I hired two hectares of *Fadama* with ₦6,000 each and also hired the services of labourers at the cost of ₦12,000 each. I also purchased 2 bags of rice seedlings but when I planted, the flood came and wiped it all away (Igba & Ityonzughul, 2016).

In addition to the above damages arising from the Makurdi flood of 2012, every year, people lost some crops to flooding. Another challenge that has been noticed is that majority of the cultivators of the river bank usually hired land before they could have the right to use it. The least amount they paid is ₦5,000 for a very small piece of land (Oral interview with Mrs. Mwuese Alakpa, 2021). The labourers who constructed ridges or heaps for them also charged them very high, justifying that the *Fadama* area (soil texture) is very hard to till. This had led to a lot of expenses for their farm work, thereby in a way reducing their gains.

Fishermen who operated on the Benue within the period under review suffered from a lack of modern equipment. According to Emperor James (an Ijaw man

who was born and brought out at New Garage, Makurdi and also in charge of a particular area of the River, behind John Holt Company) noted that:

Even though globalization has occurred in all aspects of economic activities all over the world, fishermen on River Benue operated with crude equipment. Their fishing activities were carried out with the use of manual boats, nets, native traps, fish hooks, *et cetera*. The use of crude implements had reduced their catch and made fishing so tedious for them (Oral interview Emperor James, 2021).

The fishermen also lacked modern processing and storage facilities. They took a long period to sundry or smoke their catch to enable them to preserve it for future consumption or sales. In the course of smoking, some fishermen used toxic materials such as cow droppings (cow excrements) which are not good for human health.

The aspect of transport and communication is associated with some challenges; in the process of using water transportation for business voyages or missionary work, among others. Many people lost their lives as a result of boat mishaps. Incidences abound to back up this fact. For example, in July 2020, a *Vanguard* reporter, Peter Duru from Makurdi reported that no fewer than 28 persons were capsized and feared dead on Sunday afternoon when a canoe they were traveling in capsized in River Benue (Duru, 2021). It is gathered that the ill-fated local boat was conveying mainly members of the ECAN Church Ijaha in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State to a meeting across the River when it sank. According to the *Vanguard* Newspaper, the boat had a carrying capacity of 15 passengers but was overloaded with 30 passengers which prompted its sinking (Duru, 2021). At times, the mariner-transporters also died in the course of faring the River. Another challenge is that boats are usually expensive (whether locally fabricated ones or wooden ones) and for the mariners to replace the old ones with the new ones are usually tasking and as such, they continue using the old and weak ones paving the way to boat mishap.

Moreso, the fishing aspect of the River Benue economic activities also plagued with certain challenges. Firstly, the fishermen and sand dredgers had some disagreements in the course of their operations. The fishermen complained that their set gadgets were usually displaced or destroyed by the sand dredgers. The sand dredgers also insisted that paid heavily on the portions of the River that dredged the sand. Secondly, they pay double taxation to the Nigeria Fishery Board to operate on the sea and they also paid different taxes at their selling points, amounting to double taxation or too many expenses (Oral interview with Emperor James, 2021).

Owners of the dredging industries faced some critical challenges. For example, the cost of maintaining a dredger is so high. This is due to its numerous interconnected parts. In discussing the cost of maintaining a dredger, the Manager of Mt. Sinai Rocks and Mineral Dredging

Company, Clement Tanko was more forthcoming when he made the following points:

The cost of buying and maintaining a dredger is very high even though it is locally fabricated. A new dredger cost between 15 and 20 million naira. It is made up of 5 engines and 2 water pumps. If one engine is faulty, the other ones will not work. One engine in 2020 was sold at the rate of ₦1.7 million (second hand one) and ₦3 million (new one). The water pump is sold based on inches and quality. The 8 inches Warri pump cost about ₦700,000 as of 2019 and 2020. The servicing of the engine used to cost ₦150,000, while serving the whole dredger attracted the sum of ₦250,000. When the impeller was to be changed it cost ₦110,000 and its longest duration was two months only (Oral interview with Clement Tanko, 2021).

The abovepoints to the fact that purchasing and maintaining a dredging machine is very expensive. The implication is that if the dredging business is not viable enough, it may be closed down because of the operational cost. Starting a dredging business is also very costly and the maintenance of the machine(s) is the same. This is to say that the business is not meant for the poor.

The operation of block industries (cement and burnt bricks) was hampered by certain challenges. The cost of operating these industries is very high. The cement industry operates with cement and the cost of procuring cement is very high. Since the price of cement in Benue State has increased astronomically in 2014 from ₦1,500 to ₦3,000, the price has not been reduced till the time of carrying out this research. This has made it difficult for the operators of the cement industry to buy many bags and this has reduced their level of input and output (Oral interview with Mhen Cosmas Tseaa, 2021). A layer of burnt bricks, Terzungwe Ujon identifies paucity of the fund as a major challenge with this business. Ujon noted that a lot of labourers are needed to work on the site to lay, arrange, and fire the blocks. At all the stages they collected a certain amount of money (Oral interview with Terzungwe Ujon, 2021). The labourers were fed three times a day to enable them to work well and it is the tradition in the burnt bricks industry all over the riverine communities in Benue State. In firing/heating the bricks since it is an indigenous industry, timber was needed and a trip cost up to ₦45,000 which may or may not be able to heat 20,000 bricks. Labourers who can heat bricks to the above number charged between ₦5,000 and ₦7,000 respectively (Oral interview with Terzungwe Ujon, 2021). After finishing the processes, they sold one block at the cost of ₦10.00 (when it is December of every year) and ₦12.00 (January price). When middlemen were involved they deduct ₦2.00 on each block for their wages (Oral interview with Terzungwe Ujon, 2021).

The challenges associated with rice milling were identified from the context of the inability of the rice millers to get one species of rice. This had presented a difficulty for this class of businessmen because it is not easy to parboil different species of rice mixture. To

buttress this point further, T. T. Ityonzughul's Thesis touches in Miva Rice emphasizing that:

Although Miva Rice recorded some achievements, the company is still bedeviled with multifarious challenges. Noticeable among these were: the inability of the company to get one species of rice. A combination of different species of paddy by farmers creates considerable difficulties in the parboiling process throwing up the soaking temperature and overcooking challenges. Paddy usually contains a large amount of chaff, dust, and immature grains which generate Black Rice and overload the mill's optical sorter (2019, p.196).

These and similar challenges were equally faced by all other rice mills and this has reduced the quality of production. There was also the challenge of the seasonal availability of paddy. The dry season farming was done on a minimal scale and the over-reliance on rain for cultivation and primitive planting methods on the bank of the Benue resulted in simple cropping per year by farmers. Because the paddy is only fully available for a period of 90 days at harvest time once a year, this has imposed on the milling companies the need for a long period of stock-holding (Oral interview with Erdoo Iorliam, 2021).

CONCLUSION: PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AT RIVER BENUE

The paper has in the foregoing analysis highlighted the economic importance of River Benue between 1960 and 2020. However, in the course of getting to the core issues, references were made to the period preceding the scope of the study to give clear historical links. The paper has discussed the historical and geographical context of the River. In doing this, it has emphasized the relevance of the Benue in the pre-colonial and colonial eras and pointed to its source and location. The study espoused the economic benefits of the river from diverse perspectives. Particular attention has been focused on agriculture and agribusinesses, fishing, transportation and communication, sand dredging, block and building industries, and rice-milling industries. The paper further discussed the challenges of the aforementioned economic activities necessitated by the Benue River. These factors/challenges have been dissected from the lenses of flooding, paucity of funds, lack of modern equipment, spatial contestations, and double taxation, among others. Due to the negative effects of the above factors, it is glaring that River Benue contributed marginally to the development of the Benue economy, this is to say that the economic potentials of the Benue are yet to be fully tapped.

Considering the obstacles which have hindered the maximum exploitation of the River Benue's economic potentials, this paper would make some recommendations that would serve as solutions to some of the challenges identified. One of the recommendations is that proper

and workable measures of containing floods should be put in place. In this wise, the Nigerian Government should construct a buffer dam to hold the incoming waters from the neighbouring countries like Cameroun that occasionally open the Lagdo dam which usually floods the Nigerian riverine communities, killing people and destroying crops. The Benue State Government should complete the drainage channels that have been abandoned under construction since the Makurdi flood of 2012. Inhabitants of the Makurdi area should take the task of maintaining the available drainage channels as their responsibility. If the drainage channels are properly maintained, it will reduce the effects of the flood on the economy and society should it recur again. The dredging of the Benue should be done as earlier promised by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) since the administration of the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua.

Lack of modern equipment has been identified as a challenge that has impeded fishing activities. The study recommends that fishermen should form viable cooperative societies that would enable them to access capital loans to buy modern fishing and storage facilities. This would enable them to have more catch and sales and this, in turn, would increase their economic strength. Fishermen should stop using cow excrements for smoking fish since it endangers human health.

It has been discovered that overload is responsible for some boat mishaps. In this regard, the mariner-transporters should consider the safety of their passengers and business and be based on the carrying capacity of their boat, to prevent frequent boat mishaps. There is also a need to register all non-conventional ships and conduct regular inspections to ensure their safety. Besides, it is important to examine all vessels sailing on River Benue and to review the existing rules and regulations governing domestic shipping trade to reclassify the ships and redesign licenses and other permits as a way of enforcing limits of their operations.

Sand dredgers and fishermen should stop contesting on the River spaces. Both groups should be aware that they are pursuing their economic course (individual businesses) and they also pay taxes to the relevant authorities and as such have equal access to the portions of the River they pay for. To achieve this, there should be a common understanding between them. Finally, most of the industrialists who operated on the Benue faced the challenge of double taxation leading to too many expenses and business failures. To lessen this burden, the study recommends the centralisation of taxes. If the above recommendations are considered and implemented, the economic activities associated with the Benue will be more viable as the full potentials of the River will be tapped and nurtured.

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