

Revive Massive Production of Food and Nutritious Plants in South East Nigeria: A Fallout from the Food Blocked by the North

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The news about recent move by farmers and interest groups under the aegis of amalgamated union of foodstuff and cattle dealers of Nigeria (AUFCON) in Northern Nigeria to impose embargo on food supply to the south [1] as seen in figure 1, has implicated a huge food production gap in the southern part of the country. This development has created food security challenges in Nigeria especially in south eastern Nigeria. Nigeria is a sextuplet federation resting on double tripod of six geopolitical zones; more broadly divided into North and South. But concerns are heightened during the blockade because, the term "south" was an envelope word used to specifically represent the south east Nigeria.

By that ban, they made the south east to look like clochard mendicants, pauperized panhandlers and obligate parasites in a nation that sprouted on synergistic symbiosis. This is because the South east has deviated from commercial agriculture to merely subsistence and over dependence on food buying in order to face other life challenges.

Though the Middle Belt Forum, also called North central Nigeria, an association of all ethnic nationalities within Nasarawa, Kogi, Benue, Plateau, Kwara states and FCT dissociating themselves from the pronouncement, the customary silence of the presidency in this regard was not golden.

Figure 1: Intercepted Lorries transporting food to the South during food blockade.

It is not that lands in the North is exclusively more arable than that of the south easterners, in anyway as study have revealed numerous vast of land that are rich for farming that produces good yield [2-4]. Though the diffusion of gun powders of the civil war acidified the soils in Igbo land making it less fertile back in the Biafran-Nigerian war days, liming where necessary could have rectified it and possibly overcome by years past [5].

However, the importunate order may have done more good than harm to the south, if the south eastern people can make good use of

Figure 2: Onions in large quantities waiting for Buyers in Kano and Gombe markets during food blockade to the south.

the insult to turn their agricultural potentials and nature's fortunes around. Though their ill-advised sanction was self-limiting and unsustainable to say the least; yet the South East should not let it pass without reverting to massive farming so as to feed themselves and for export opportunities.

Lessons for the South eastern people and their leaders

Igbo proverb had it that orphans learn wisdom by eavesdropping the advice other parents give their children. This should serve as a challenge for the South East Governors Forum (SEGF) to look inwards and revolutionize Agricultural sector in the entire east. It was John Boozman, who said, "now listen, the one thing about agriculture is: we may have lost our manufacturing, we've lost a great deal of jobs, lots of our industry. But the last thing in the world we need to do is, lose the ability to produce our food". The experience and love for agricultural practices and nutritional cultivation made him to become the ranking member of US Senate Agricultural committee [6].

The south east people left commercial farming for mercantile commerce after the civil war so as to recover from the devastating poverty that the war brought and that of General Gowon's post-war austerity policy that was marred with 20 Pounds uniform sharing among account holders amidst starvation [7]. But fifty years down the line, the North by this blockade has indirectly reminded the easterners that the time for diversification of their economy as a region has come as failure could lead to another starvation.

There is no doubt that Nigeria is the poverty capital of the world and inside Nigeria, it is popular and regularly reported that the North is the poverty capital following the World Poverty Clock of

2018 report by Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. However, the food blockade has increased the cost of food and nutritious plants in the East and calls for self-sustenance of the south east in terms of food. The easterners should not brag about the wastage and dropping of the prize in the North as seen in Figures 2 but cross examine the implication of inability to feed self.

It is time to launch a viable southeast agro-economic renaissance, of which erstwhile Ohaneze Ndigbo President General, Chief Nnia Nwodo advocated while in office [8]. There is urgent need to revitalize the regional chambers of commerce, industrial mines and agricultural farming potentials in order to make food and nutritious plants readily and cheaply available for the teaming masses of the east. Agricultural mechanization could be used urgently to forestall food and nutritional plants challenge from the next year.

The eastern leaders and governors should urgently provide grant subsidy and loan leverages to farmers, and where possible initiate regional equivalent of FADAMA projects. This would go a long way to engage many unemployed youths and to the used of vast rich lands in the east.

It is important to recall between 1989 and 1991, when there was a fecund agricultural policy formulated and implemented by Military Governor, Col. Nnaemeka Akonobi, called Mobilization of Schools for Agriculture and Industry (MOSAI) [9] in old Anambra state, south east Nigeria. This programme incorporated agricultural and industrial trainings into the curriculum of all primary and secondary schools in the state, in the spirit of "catch them young" for diversification of the state's economy. This programme was handed over to civilian administration which was scuttled. The south east leaders should as matter of urgency resurrect or replicate the programme in all south east states.

It is also the right time to launch an inter-ministerial committee of all south east Commissioners for Agriculture with terms of reference to facilitate new agricultural programme or replicate already practiced programmes in the past. This committee can come up with white paper on better agricultural programmes like mechanization and digitalization of food and nutritional products production within the shortest time.

Notably is for the south east leaders to identify areas of vast land mass in Igbo land and possibly address all land disputes be-

tween villages, communities, LGAs and States in a bid to enthrone commercial farming and curbing land conflicts for successful new agribusiness programmes. Land border crises for instance Iseak-waka-Iseulo in Ezebunagu Enugu State, Aguleri-Umuleri in Anambra state, Ezza-Ezillo in Ebonyi states and others all over the states should not be the cog in the wheel of the new agricultural plans. The authors suggest an amicable resolution in the public interest for better south east food and nutritional mass production

The lessons will not be complete if the south eastern people do not understand that the food blockade should be regarded as sensitization programme and may eventually come one day as a full blown supported programme to punish the eastern people with hunger by totally stopping supply of farm products to the south even when in excess in the north without buyer as in figure 3 and or possible diversion of the food to other neighbouring countries to the northern region as result of secession agitation [10].

Figure 3: Tomatoes in a Northern market seeking for buyers during food blockade.

The farming and rich land potential of the East

The eastern land is rich and very high productive yield of food and nutritional plants [2-4]. Igwe and Okebalama [4] only advised that one needs to know the type of soil is farming to ensure that right irrigation and fertilizer (manure) is used in eastern Nigeria. The poor attitude to farming by various communities with vast land may be necessitated by lack of mechanization, poor rural development, and poor policy decisions of the politicians and leaders. The desert-ridden Northern lands could not do much better than the rain forest savanna of the south. Ordinarily, with optimal

annual rainfall, and sufficient sunlight, the South are supposed to be producers and suppliers of food stuffs to the north. Where and when there is poor rain fall or in the dry season, the eastern states can adopt irrigation farming to ensure continuous food production.

Asadu and Asadu [3] described northern land as less fertile and for the southern land stated thus: "although these soils can readily be leached and lose their fertility, they are the most productive agriculturally". Edeh., *et al.* [11] endorsed Nsukka southeastern soil for agriculture and massive food production but recommended rumen digesta (animal droppings) as manure when necessary especially in the areas affected by war [12].

Reviving and salvaging the farming capacity of southeastern Nigeria

Currently, the northern region has been in the midst of perennial war with itself against banditry, boko haram insurgency and kidnapping. This inadvertently affects northern farming negatively. It is on this note that the authors recommend that the eastern leaders and the people should not allow any security threat to their agricultural life. Therefore, the east should work to ensure self-dependency in the aspect of food and nutritional plants.

The political leaders and the people should have a meritocratic system of recruiting the best hands for government jobs especially in agricultural areas starting from community, LGAs and state levels. It will be very productive to have supervisory counselors and commissioners of agriculture who are competent in the agribusiness. Due to the fact that most policy-making process in Nigeria lacked technocrats and skilled bureaucrats, technical tools of analysis such as Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA), many policies and their successes were not evaluated. The south east leaders should not be permit such political error in order to make serious headway in revitalizing agribusiness in Igbo land.

There was exit of USAID in the '80s from research activities in agriculture sector and this could be followed up now with genuine political interest to get international collaboration where necessary. The food security of a people [13] should not be joked with as adequate food distribution impacts on a population of people [14,15].

The leaders should organize an agricultural new fair or summit as a way to make agricultural sector to thrive again in the east.

This shall update participants on the place of technology needed to kick-start and consolidate crop production and animal husbandry. While, over the past twenty years, various states made policy statements to achieve good goals, such as providing food for their people and for export markets, the technology needed to achieve them was never available. The impacts of domestic socio-political factors also played prominent role in the in the failure of agriculture programmes as conflicts and political violence that transverse the polity trickled down to irregularities in the policies made. Knowing fully well that the soil affected by wars could be treated and managed for good yield [16-18], the effort of various leaders is needed to identify such areas for immediate action.

The southeastern states should utilize the presence of University of Agriculture in Umudike and other agricultural research institutes to gain needed input towards better agriculture.

Imo River Basin Development Authority, Imo palm produce industry, Sunrise Flour Mill, Adani rice, Mmiata, Anam as well as Abakaliki rice projects needs urgent green light from entire governments in the southeast. The ones that never existed like cucumber, carrot, ginger, garlic, turmeric, water melon farms needs new ideas and approach to ensure massive production in the southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

It is time to kill corruption and personal agenda among the southern leaders so that all available resources should be channeled to agribusiness. Due process and innovative ideas are urgently needed for policy transfer protocols with government officials than paying more attention to personal interest or receiving gratifications.

The southeastern leaders should create appropriate feedback mechanism about agricultural products and yields from various communities, LGAs and states. This shall transform early agriculture policy into a learning point and facilitate avoidable implementation failures in the sector. It is also imperative to consider domestic socio-political conditions while integrating lessons drawn from successful policy systems with home-grown solutions.

The states like Enugu State that had Agricultural Development Program (ENADEP) [19] between 2001-2006 should revisit it and give other states the template for start off and for collaboration. There should be continuity and perpetual implementation of agriculture development policies by successive governments for the

impact of the policies to be felt on our regional economy. All the Supervisory Councilors for Agriculture in the Local Government Areas in Igbo land should be charged with grassroots campaign for green revolution, under the guidance of Local Government Chairmen.

The Igbo race who are major occupants of the southeastern region of Nigeria [20] is known for Spartan survival instincts, industrialization, development, and progressive. The idea of self-sustenance and massive production of food and nutritional plants should be an added advantage to their progress and existence. The numerous food categories and vegetables produced and eaten by the southern people should be rejuvenated and massively produced, processed and possibly exported to various parts of the world. This should be the message to entire southeastern Nigeria people, their leaders and collaborators to trigger a massive and successful agricultural revolution using political will, understanding and futuristic agenda. With this the food security of the southeastern people is assured.

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