

Journal of African and Global Issues Quarterly (JAGIQ) Volume 1, Issue 1, 2021
**“THE HUNGRY FOOD SUPPLIERS” : AN EXAMINATION OF
POVERTY AND FOOD PRODUCTION AMONG THE RURAL
FARMERS OF NKANU LAND**

CHUKWUEMEKA MBAH

Department of History & International Studies
Renaissance Univeristy, Ugbawka Enugu
chukwuemekajmbah@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Farming is one of the oldest professions of the Igbo man. And food production precedes any other agricultural practices in Igboland. Food production as used here means the production of edible root crops like yams, cocoa-yam, and cassava, and cereal crops like rice and maize. Citrus fruits like oranges and mangoes, among other fruits. Other food crops worthy of mention are Okro, Melon, Banana/Plantain, Vegetables and Oil palm products. Each of these has its place in the food production chain in Nkanu area of Igboland. Poverty on the other hand, denotes socio – economic conditions of deprivation or lack of the basic necessities of life, in particular of things which are imperative but are absent and renders life indecent. These conditions are prevalent in rural areas of which major part of Nkanu land falls under. This paper examines the contradiction where rural Nkanu which contributes a huge proportion of food consumed in Enugu metropolitan city, still wallow in hunger and poverty. Attempts shall be made to ascertain the linkage between rural food production and poverty level in Nkanuland. And conclude that both the food producers and policy – makers must look at the food question as a triangular relationship between food production, distribution and consumption. Oral and written sources – archival materials, files, government documents/edicts, books, among others – were used to enhance wider scope of research.

KEYWORDS: Nkanu, Rural Farmers, Poverty, Food Production.

INTRODUCTION

Food is a basic necessity of life. Its importance is seen in the fact that it is a basic means of sustenance and adequate food intake, in terms of quantity and quality, is key for healthy and productive life. The importance of food is also shown in the fact that it accounts for a substantial part of a typical Nigerian

household budget. However, in 2012, the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) of the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Nigeria the 80th nation among 105 countries with food affordability, availability and quality. According to the Index, Nigeria recorded weak scores in the areas of public expenditure on agricultural research and development, 0.0%; presence of food safety net programmes, 0.0%; gross domestic product per capita, 3.0%; proportion of population under global poverty line, 9.6%; food consumption as a share of household expenditure, 9.6%; and protein quality, 12.8%.¹ A brief explanation on the terrain under discussion is very important for proper assimilation.

Nkanu is a clan of people who have different migrational nature trail but with similar cultural and historical antecedents. She is one of the largest homogenous people among the Northern Igbo domiciled in the present Enugu State. Nkanu is made up of a block of twenty towns divided into five Local Government Areas, viz: Enugu East, Enugu North,² Enugu South, Nkanu East and Nkanu West. She occupies an estimated area of about 1602.22 square kilometres.³ The vegetation of Nkanu falls within the forest belt of Eastern Nigeria, which is characterized by tall trees and tall grasses. But the frequent soil exposure, resulting from bush burning and the cut-and-clear system of farming, has greatly deterred the vegetative Nkanu area. During the rainy season, the area receives an annual rainfall of 1,750 – 2,000 mm that lasts from April to October, with annual temperature of about 75^o F and 80^o F which combine to make the climate genial and equable for food production.⁴

For emphasis sake and proper clarifications, using Enugu metropolis as a case study based on the fieldwork carried out by this researcher in all the major markets in Enugu and three vegetable oil manufacturing companies; Nkanu contributes four out of every five gallons of palm oil sold in Enugu markets; and 45% of palm kernel used by the various vegetable oil producing companies in Enugu. 30% of garri sellers; 15% of sweet potato sellers; 27% of plantain sellers; 15% of cocoyam (*ede*) sellers; 12% of banana sellers;

25% of water yam (*abana*) sellers; and 5% of local rice sellers; all got their produce from Nkanuland. She also contributes 15% of vegetables (fluted pumpkin, *anara* leaf, *ewa* leaf, bitter leaf, and African spinarch or green leaf) and 23% of fresh maize, sold at the Odegba market (a daily market specifically for vegetables and other fresh commodities).

Food production systems are at the forefront of development thinking since the crisis of staple food in the 1970s due to its importance to man.⁵ In Igboland, food production is used interchangeably with agriculture. This is because of its dominating role compared to other agricultural practices, vis-à-vis other economic foundations of Igboland. In Nkanuland, economic activities before the invasion and intrusion of Europeans were largely restricted to the production of subsistence goods, mostly food crops for local consumption.⁶ The major food production of Nkanu people in pre – colonial times were yam and cocoyam, just as in other parts of Igboland. Cassava later joined the fray after its introduction in Igboland in mid – 19th century, 1857. Other food crops and vegetables found in Nkanu are maize, rice, garden egg, vegetable juste, cowpea, melon, green or African spinarch, African yam bean, okro, bitter leaf, pepper, fluted pumpkin, among others.⁷ Most of these crops serve both as food and cash crops.

This paper encapsulates two basic issues of historical research and the central argument running through it is the interaction between food production and rural poverty. Until now, the subject matter remains a neglected theme in the area under review. In the course of the research, attempts were made to ascertain the linkage between rural food production and poverty in Nkanuland. This paper is divided into six sub-headings. Following this introduction is an elaboration of what rural poverty entails; its challenges and problems. Then transition over time of food production chain in Nkanuland. Linkages between rural food production and poverty in Nkanuland will be established. Recommendations and way forward, and finally conclusion.

RURAL POVERTY: CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

Poverty denotes socio – economic conditions of deprivation or lack of the basic necessities of life, in particular of things which are imperative but are absent and renders life indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order.⁸ Absolute poverty is a situation of being unable or only barely able to meet the subsistence essentials of food, clothing, and shelter. But M. G. Meier opines that:

It is difficult to measure the extent of poverty ... poverty means more than low income, malnutrition, poor health and lack of education – and not all the poor are equally badly off in all respects. There is also room for disagreement about where to draw the line between the poor and the rest, and the correct way to calculate and compare incomes and living standards at different times and in different places. To compound these difficulties, the data neither are inadequate Nor is direct observation necessarily a reliable basis for generalization.⁹

In agreement with him, it is extremely difficult to arrive at a tight estimate of the extent of global poverty at any point in time. In 1981, about 600 million adults in less developing countries were illiterate and poor. While up to 400 million people were recorded to have very low life expectancy and about 780 million live on very low income.¹⁰ Major World Bank reports issued within a couple of years of each other have provided estimates of the dollar-a-day headcount that differ by tens of millions of people. This reflects the difficulty of the task. The one dollar-a-day line was first set in 1987, and later the standard became \$1.08 using the 1993 United States purchasing power parity (PPP). In 2008, the equivalent line was reset at \$1.25 using the 2005 United States purchasing power parity.¹¹

Furthermore, it is generally agreed that poor people mostly live in rural villages rather than urban centres. Away in the villages, the poor work on the farms to eke out a living for most of the hours of the day. The rural poor lack social amenities and services like proper education, health facilities,

good road network, pipe-borne water, electricity and so forth. The database for analyzing the living conditions of the rural poor is difficult for Nigeria including the Nkanu area. For instance, it is difficult even for wage earners in Nigeria to clearly budget their monthly salaries specifically for food, clothing, medical care, school fees and other things; signifying that their standards of living are low which makes the analysis of that segment of society difficult. According to the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS), in 1960, about 15% of the population of Nigeria was poor. But by 1980, this had rising to 28%. By 1985, it rose further to 46%, although it dropped to 43% by 1992. However, by 1996, poverty incidence in the country was 66% or 76.6 million Nigerians out of a population of 110 million then.¹²

Table 1: Incidence of Poverty by sector and zone, 1980 – 1996.

	1980 (%)	1985 (%)	1992 (%)	1996 (%)
National	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6
Urban	17.2	37.8	37.5	58.2
Rural	28.3	51.4	66.0	69.3
South East	12.9	30.4	41.0	53.5

Source: FOS (1999) Poverty Profile for Nigeria, 1980 – 1996, Lagos.

Similarly, the rural diet of Nkanu people like every other Nigerian is not balanced. Malnutrition and protein – calorie famine are part of the everyday life of most village farmers in Nkanuland, and particularly affects old people, pregnant women and children who are perpetually exposed to infectious diseases without any choice or prospect of dealing with the problem. When one considers other requirements in the daily diets like milk, sugar, minerals, iron, to mention just a few, it becomes obvious that rural poverty referred to here is more alarming than one can imagine. The rural poor walk bare-footed for very long distances to markets and other places to sell their foodstuffs

and if they are sick and have to be treated, it must be in government unequipped clinics.

Indeed our present knowledge of rural poverty is not complete in any way. However, from the foregoing, the Nkanu rural poor are mostly non – wage earners, malnourished children, women and old people who manage to earn their living through the production of food crops by means of traditional methods. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in their 2009/2010 report, about 60% of Enugu State people are under absolute poverty line, of which 51.7% are classified as rural poor as if to live in the rural areas is synonymous with poverty.¹³ The report went ahead to say that 23% suffer severity of poverty in food trends.¹⁴

Table 2: Food Poverty Trends; 2003-2004 and 2009-2010. (Based on Per Capita Measure)

	Head Count (%)	Poverty Gap (%)	Severity of Poverty (%)
Enugu State	63.8 and 73.2	25.6 and 37	13.2 and 23
National	80.2 and 75.7	41.4 and 36.6	26.4 and 22.1
Rural	83.9 and 77.7	43.8 and 38.8	27.4 and 23.8
Urban	75.3 and 72.2	38.3 and 32.8	25.2 and 19

Source: NBS, Harmonized Nigeria Living Standard, 2012.

Not many rural farmers have a strong liquidity base to reinvest the cash derived from sale of food crops into other areas which one may regard as new economic ventures for future development. Though, there are a number of yam, cassava, palm produce and rice farmers who could do so but they are not much and the overall outlook is what may be considered as growth without development.¹⁵ The earnings from food producers are not enough to

provide for the maintenance of extended families, payment of school fees, among other. All these constitute the financial burdens of the Nkanu food producers whose general pattern of life has not yet experienced a radical departure from the austerity of the predominantly rural poor.

Finally, rural poverty as used in this paper encompasses lack of material comfort and necessities of life in the modern sense like goods and services. Overtime, it has been the rural poor farmers who provide both cheap labour and cheap food for urban dwellers. The inability of these food producers to use the sale of their farm produce to alleviate their sufferings is made possible through the activities of middlemen and non – indigenes that through the local markets and bought Nkanu foodstuffs cheaply hoard and resell it at exorbitant prices. Somehow, increased production of food cannot reduce this phenomenon.

TRANSITION IN FOOD PRODUCTION CHAIN

Nkanu towns, according to Geoffrey Horne, are prosperous farming people.¹⁶ Agriculture in pre – colonial Nkanu was the matrix in which economic activities were set, and every Nkanu man was a farmer.¹⁷ The traditional method of farming in Nkanu involved shifting cultivation. This has proved to be an integral part of as well as an evidence of a systematic order in African subsistence economy.¹⁸ Cutlasses, hoes, staking stick, and digger were among the commonest locally made farm implements extensively used by the farmers.

According to Marx, humans enter into definite connections and relations with one another and only within these connections and relations their actions on nature (production) take place. Whatever the form of the process of production in a society, it must be a continuous process of reproduction.¹⁹ During the pre – colonial period (even till date) of Nkanu history, the people were basically an agrarian region and this is significant because agriculture acted as a turning point of most historical developments even before

industrialization, scientific and technological revolutions. In the Nkanu area, every family masterminded its reproductive activities.

For most African societies, the three most popular modes of production include, the communal – lineage mode of production, the tributary mode of production, and the slave mode of production.²⁰ Marx and Engels believed that each society is unique and one should allow some elements of flexibility because of the inherent contradictions in most socio – economic formations. And this is undoubtedly why it is possible to have societies which are classified as classless and non – capitalist having modes of production peculiar to them in their “infinite variations”.²¹ The overwhelming majority of communities in Nkanuland, as well as in other Igbo communities, appeared to have had the communal – lineage mode of production.

The basic unit of production was the family or household, comprising the father and the mother of the house as well as the children and other relatives within the extended family system. Under this arrangement, the role of the head, usually the father of each household controlled almost every economic activity, especially the production of food for subsistence. When and how the farm calendar should be followed according to seasonal rains and when to allow farmland to go fallow were all elements of the man. The family head further determined the consumption of what was harvested and when, which crops/seeds would be reserved for the next planting season, and how much of the surplus would be sold or sent to extended relations.

Every domestic unit made deliberate efforts to ensure that all members of the household were well fed. But more importantly, the basic strategy enabled family heads to mobilize their entire household to produce more than enough food. It is also important to stress here that in pre – colonial Nkanu area, markets existed in the neighbourhoods where foodstuffs changed hands. This is because it was practically impossible for every household, village, community or town to embark on growing all the food crops.

Then came colonial rule with their economic agenda. Meanwhile, Nkanuland came under British colonial rule in 1910, two years after the famous Udi expedition in 1908 that led to the discovery of large deposits of coal in the Udi Hills in 1909. Nkanuland was under the colonial administration of Nkanu Sub – District of Udi Division in Onitsha Province.²² We must not also forget that the method of expanding colonial rule by the Europeans in the 19th century was by violence and non – democratic means. The overriding argument for material purposes is that the colonial domination in the Nkanu area offers perhaps the most significant factor in the explanation of the contradictions which gave rise to massive food production and rural poverty among the rural farmers of Nkanuland. Although poverty existed before colonial rule, but the integration of colonial Nkanu territories into the capitalist system was to exacerbate the phenomenon almost beyond human imaginations.

The structure of the colonial economy was by nature, complex and contradictory. This is because the whole edifice of colonialism was ostensibly operated and geared towards expropriation of economic surplus.²³ From 1915, every development of the Nkanu area was consciously designed to establish a relationship between the area and the British colonial power so that the surplus created by the peasant farmers could be expropriated by Britain in the form of labour – power and the creation of a taxable wage – earning class.²⁴ In addition, infrastructural developments were undertaken, especially the opening of foot paths, roads and railways²⁵ to facilitate the institutionalization of colonial administration. All these contradictions have continued to generate questions as to what or in whose advantage colonialism was instituted.

The components of the colonial economy in practice in Nkanuland were taxation, colonial labour systems and the commercialization of surplus agricultural produce and commodity relations. Taxation of colonial territories was a means of fully and effectively incorporating areas into the colonial state. According to Lord Lugard,

Taxation was a stimulus to production, a source of revenue for the support of the colonial administration. 'It marks the recognition by the community of the protecting power' and finally it serves as the basis for the development of the system of indirect rule. Without income from taxation they could not provide for development let alone the payment of officials on a regular basis. Without a tax there can be no treasury, and without a treasury no eventual measure of self – rule.²⁶

Here was the mode of operation and the fulcrum upon which the colonial economic structure rested. So in Nkanuland, every adult male in every domestic or household unit who was old enough to marry was assessed and earmarked for tax payment. In 1915, direct taxation was introduced in Nkanuland and later agricultural tax in form of produce was added, in the peak of World War 1.²⁷

The significance of taxing agrarian peasants in kind or produce was to stimulate farmers to produce more of certain crops to the neglect of others, on the case of Nkanu, the emphasis was on palm oil and kernel. This tax in palm oil and kernel, and forced labour in the railway construction, among other grievances resulted in what later came to be known as the Udi Revolt. When a number of towns in the fifteen mile radius of what is now Enugu, among them Akegbe(Awkunanaw), Akpugo and Amagunze, saw that the British soldiers at Udi went out for the Cameroon War; and concluded that they were going to capture the very small number of soldiers left and kill them. It took a combined reinforcement from Lokoja and the remnants of soldiers left in the Province to crush the rebellion. And the people collapse under superior firepower of machine gun.²⁸

In the 1920s, taxes were raised to 5s from 3s per adult male especially from indigenes living along the railway line who earn income from activities around the railway.²⁹ One of the immediate repercussions of these increased taxation was a sustained sale of palm oil and kernel, especially from 1919 when the people were relieved the burden of working in the coal mines.

Those who resisted taxation were made to suffer in a number of ways. Adult males who could not pay their taxes or evaded them were humiliated, tortured and punished by being made to roll on hot sand on a sunny afternoon, or to “frog jump” with their hands on their heads, facing the evening sunlight. Given the relatively high taxation on the Nkanu farmers, the people reduced their fiscal burdens through an active response and initiative towards the production of palm oil and kernel, and any of the food crops that attracts huge monetary income.

The colonial labour system refers to a broad phalanx of all British colonial strategies of labour organization employed to exploit the labour force of the Nkanu people. These include forced labour or conscription to the coal mines, human portage, wage – labour, and whatever might stimulate labour migrations. The other important aspect of this was engagement of labour for public utilities like railway construction project in 1913 and roads construction.³⁰ Able – bodied Nkanu young men were forcefully recruited to clear access roads along the proposed rail route. Most of them worked corvee labourers in a variety of jobs ranging from “earth - work” to track – laying and bridge building at 12s per three weeks.³¹ From this meagre amount, the colonial government still collected their tax. This railway construction work was called *oru owa ito*, for it lasted normally three months for every set of recruited workers. This was due to the excruciating and dehumanizing condition of the work.³² In 1928, the construction of direct road from Enugu (passing through Nkanuland) to Port Harcourt was started. All at the hardest labour of Nkanu young men and in an effort to open up interior of Nkanuland for maximum exploitation of its human and material resources.

The end of the railway construction in 1916³³ ushered in a new scenario in the colonial labour system in Nkanu area. From 1916, the mining of coal in the Udi Coal Mine began in commercial quantity that yielded 24,511 metric tons of coal and the bulk of the labourers for the Colliery were recruited locally. Picks and shovels were used, head pan carriers were engaged, and prospectors worked from 6:00am to 5:00pm. So deplorable were the labour

conditions that many lost their lives. To ensure a steady supply of local forced labour, the Colliery Management signed and sealed an agreement with the two paramount Chiefs of Udi and Nkanu areas: Chief Onyeama Nwaeze Nwa Owushi of Eke and Chief Chukwuani Nwangwu of Ozalla respectively. The terms of the agreement provided that the two Chiefs would be paid recruitment fees, contingent on the number of labourers each was able to recruit for the mines.³⁴ But the Nkanu groups, because of their flair for agriculture and the availability of large parcels of fertile land, preferred to work in their farms, producing foods for the rising immigrants in the coal mines, rather than work on the coalfields themselves. Some who were already recruited abandoned it and returned to their farmlands. According to Dan O. Chukwu, by 1919, the colliery management had been ordered to terminate the recruitment of labourers of Nkanu origin. At the time, the production of palm oil and palm kernel had steadily been on the increase in the Nkanu area, and was gradually engaging the attention of the indigenes.³⁵ The reason for this stoppage was to enable the Nkanu people concentrate on palm oil and kernel, and other food production.

With the preference of food production by the Nkanu people against working in the coalfields or even the modern civil service, the colonial power embarked on the commercialization of “surplus” agricultural produce in the area. The method adopted by the colonial government to achieve this aim was the introduction of the Marketing Board, who fixed prices of every food produce brought to market and the fronting of its Licensed Buying Agents to buy them at such cheap prices. This negates the capitalists’ principle of demand and supply as determined by market forces. What this means was that Nkanu food producers no longer get commiserate amount of money from what they produce, yet they had to sell in order to get money for tax payment. This made their concentration shift to goods that brought higher market prices like palm oil and kernel, garri, rice, guinea corn, among others. This separation of cash and food crops made some individuals who couldn’t cope with the production of the former to join the trade sector.³⁶ Thus, reducing the manpower further.

At the dawn of independence in 1960, the Eastern Nigeria government gave high priority to agriculture in its 1962 – 68 Development Plan, especially the establishment of Farm Settlement. But the farm settlement programme proved to be far less successful than the dream which conceived, bored and nurtured it. First, the programme turned out to be too expensive to be sustained, at 4,000 pounds per settler.³⁷ Yet, the crop yields in the settlements hardly justified the cost of the programme. Second, its high cost precluded emulation of the system by ordinary farmers in the neighbourhoods of the settlements. It thus failed in the important function of having a demonstration effect on surrounding communities. And could not bring about the modernization of the indigenous rural agricultural system.

Third, the programme focused mostly on the established export staples, namely; palm oil and kernel, cashew, among other tree crops. This position seemed a reversal of the official commitment to diversify the narrow base of the agricultural economy. The all important issue of increasing food production was underplayed. Food prices, especially in urban areas continued to rise. Thus, the vast majority of the rural farmers, untouched by the government programmes, continued to rely on their age – old system of cultivation and tools. Finally, many of the settlers had thought that the programme was designed to get them white collar employments as agricultural personnel. When this hope did not materialize, most of them deserted. The system, thus, failed in the important task of stemming the drift of youths from rural to urban areas.³⁸ Nkanu was even worse off, as none of her indigene benefitted from the programme nor was any of the farm settlement established in her territory.

With the burgeoning population of Enugu city by all classes of people from different areas of Igboland and other parts of Nigeria, the demand for food produce increased in the city. Fulfilling this demand rested on the shoulders of rural food producers of Nkanuland, the closest agrarian locality to Enugu. Just as during the era of colonialism, the people responded spontaneously to the increased demand for food produce. Thus, every market day in the

different Nkanu communities – Eke Agbani, Orié Mba Akpugo, Eke Amagunze, Afor Ugbawka, Orié Nara, Eke Nomeh, Eke Nkerefi, Afor Ugwogo Nike, Eke Obinagu Nike, Afor Ogbodo Amechi Idodo, Eke Owo, Afor Ubahu, among others – saw several line ups of vehicle thronged them to lift food produce to urban areas. But most of these traders brought their buying price very low so that they could make their own profit. Since there were many sellers who might depend on the proceeds for their daily feeding and upkeeps, their only option was to sell at the asking price of the buyers.³⁹ The resultant effect of this poor pricing was disenchantment among the producers and production dwindled.

The Nigerian – Biafra civil war, 1967 – 1970 that disrupted economic activities especially on the Biafran side brought another dimension to food production in Nkanuland after 1970. Immediately after the war, able – bodied Nkanu young men joined the frenze of rural – urban migration in pursuit of education, trade and artisanry. There were massive food exports to other parts of Nigeria, especially of palm oil to northern part of the country. With this new phenomenon, the increased production of certain food crops to the neglect of some became rife. The emphasis shifted to those crops that attracts more buyers for maximum profit.⁴⁰ Since there have been reduction in the production of food crops like yam, cassava, maize, etc, from Nkanuland, Enugu food consumers who had been the major absorber of food produced in Nkanuland resorted to importation of those food. A survey shows that from 1970 – 1990, 60% of yams eaten in Enugu came from northern Nigeria. 50% of garri and 45% of rice came from Abakaliki. 80% of beans from northern Nigeria.⁴¹

Federal government’s neglect of agriculture during this period owing to massive revenue coming from petroleum never helped matters. From the early 1970s, oil and gas accounted for between 95% and 98% of the country’s export earnings and hardly less than 83% of the central government revenue.⁴² This resulted to deepening and widening poverty among rural farmers as the country turned to foreign food importation. No

wonder the era witnessed a proliferation of several poverty alleviation programmes by the government; viz – National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) in 1972, the Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) in 1974, the River Basin Development Programme (RBDP) in 1976, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1978, the Green Revolution (GR) in 1979, the Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) in 1986, the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLRWP) in 1987, among others. All these bodies were tasked to reduce poverty among the citizenry, especially rural dwellers. On the part of Nkanu food producers, due to low patronage of certain staple food crops, productions were reduced also to subsistence level and total neglect and/or abandonment of some. The manpower was also no longer available as the craze for oil money pushed several young farmers to the urban areas.

LINKING RURAL FOOD PRODUCTION AND POVERTY

The nature of rural poverty in Nkanuland was neither natural nor an act of God. It was not a function of malevolent environment like natural disaster. Rather, it was caused primarily by human beings. In this case, the argument is that the British colonial rule started it and the early independence government of Eastern Nigeria did nothing to correct the trends. According to Karl Marx in his preface to a contribution to the critique of political economy; the capitalist mode of production means the development of all forms of capitalism since the 18th century in Europe. However, this subsequently involved exportation (expansion) of capital to other areas of the world via colonization (imperialism and monopolistic tendencies).⁴³

For the period of fifty years when the Nkanu area was kept under the British colonial rule, imperialism went through the highest stage of capitalist development. The bane of the capitalist system in Nkanuland was that, rather than using the surplus value to reduce human suffering and develop the area, it was siphoned to Europe for investment purposes and so forth. To what extent the British colonial administration laid the basis for and contributed to rural poverty in the Nkanu area of Igboland, and the neglect of the

agricultural potentials of the area by the subsequent independent Nigerian governments, is the real issue here.

First and foremost was the fact that the colonial system neither completely destroyed nor preserved pre – capitalist modes of production that existed before its advent. Claude Ake captured the essence of this argument by saying that “the colonial economy was characterized by disarticulation or incoherence”⁴⁴ of parts that are neither complementary nor acted upon each other in reciprocal harmony. More specifically, it needs to be recalled that Nkanu people were agrarian long before the British colonial rule. However, with the introduction of commodity production and the social relations of production as well, the farmers were constrained to maintain a delicate balance of food and cash crop production; one for subsistence needs and the other for purposes of taxation. The desire to satisfy both ends remained insatiable since prices for primary produce were kept low by the colonial administration. The food producers had no choice but to adapt themselves to the dominance of the capitalist system. The situation would have been better if the system had forward and backward linkages between food production and the cash crop sector or any other that could produce by – products from the primary or raw materials. It put undue strain on the people and gradually led to the collapse of their means of survival.

Another way in which the British colonial economy created rural poverty situation in Nkanu area can be seen in their choice of what to produce, to whom to produce and distribution and/or consumption pattern. It is instructive to note that the cash crops from the area had both local and international markets but food crops at best had only local and inter – regional markets. During World War II, the colonial government encouraged and enforced the production of palm oil and kernel, as against other food crops, to enhance adequate supply to Britain in assisting the war efforts. According to the Resident Officer, Onitsha Province; over – production of garri means that the people are not bothering about palm oil and kernels. Palm oil and kernels help to win the war. Garri is merely a source of profit

to the producer of it and to the garri trader. As such therefore railments of garri have to be severally quota-ed. I know very well how easy it is to make garri and what good profits is to be had.⁴⁵

In order to reduce garri production, they increased the taxation on garri and other food produce. The people defiled this increased taxation and continued in their food production. The colonial government decided to place strict control on the distribution of food produce in order to control price and profits. On August 28, 1944, the colonial government placed a ban on the sale of garri without government approval.⁴⁶ The same ban was also placed on yam, especially yams from the Idodo axis of Nkanuland, who are predominantly yam farmers.⁴⁷

On the side of palm oil and kernel production which the colonial government encouraged, and the Nkanu people responded positively, was facing the challenge of who to produce for and how much to sell. The colonial government stopped the railment of palm oil and kernel to the north, so as to have enough for export to Europe. The military was given preference in getting palm oil that commencing from the 1st November, 1943, no non – military oil will be accepted by the railway in any month until 1,000 tins have been railed to Enugu for the military.⁴⁸ Prices were also controlled to favour the colonial agencies as against the local producers, and storage was discouraged so as to enhance availability of the produce. Thus, the production of food crops was not really encouraged by the colonial administration and the culture of saving was not inculcated.

Another way in which colonial rule in Nkanuland contributed to the emergence of rural poverty was through the drafting of young men into rail and road construction, while some were drawn to work in the coal mines at Iva. As earlier noted the people disdained this forced labour and showed it in their work ethics. Even though the recruitment of Nkanu indigenes was stopped in 1919, not all went back to farming. The result of this loss of young, able-bodied people from the area was the beginning of the neglect

and corresponding decline in agricultural production, especially in the food sector which has been left in the hands of old men and women.

Another way through which colonial rule enhanced rural poverty in Nkanuland was the operations of the domestic economy based on foodstuff marketing and distribution that was basically in the hands of non – indigenes. It will suffice to say here that in the complex arrangements of the colonial food market systems, indigenous entrepreneurs had not yet emerged to reinvest the gains they derived from foodstuff business to develop the area. The produce control board monopolized the export of major agricultural crops and also fixed prices they paid for produce, which were always far below the prevailing international market prices. O. N. Njoku attests that “Nigerian farmers at best received only 60% of the value of their produce”.⁴⁹ In Nkanu area, one Madam Lydia Eze of Nomeh was given a permit on September 14, 1944, to rail garri to the north. She later added palm kernel and oil, and other food crops with specified quantity.⁵⁰ She was expected to have access to 6 tons of yams per month from Agbani terminal and 2 tons per month from Nomeh terminal for movement to the north.⁵¹ One Moses Nnaji of Enugwu Ngwo was given the sole license to transport yams from Idodo axis by lorry to Enugu for further distribution. He was also given the instruction not to carry more than 30 bags of palm kernel at a time in his lorry.⁵² This non – liberalization of the food produce trade contributed to rural poverty in Nkanuland.

Finally, at the dawn of independence, Nkanu farmers demonstrated its readiness to fight poverty and hunger through massive production of food for the ever increasing population of Enugu metropolis. However, certain factors still hampered this progress. According to Francis Idachaba, “there is food in the rural and even urban markets, except that there is no money to buy it”.⁵³ Given the fact that Enugu was predominantly inhabited by civil servants whose vast majority fall under the category of minimum wage – earners, any off – set in salary payments automatically brings about collapse in food supply. Apart from the problem of insufficient and irregular

wages/salaries, food poverty in the Nkanu area was also caused by the fact that the people often have large families who must be cared for. So it has been that regardless of whatever quantity of food was produced, there were more than enough mouths to consume it. Against this background, it was easy to locate the food problem of the Nkanu people as partly occasioned by lack of means to purchase the necessary quantity and quality of food. But that was not all.

Also, there was no controversy about the fact Nkanu apparently produces or has the potential to produce more food than her domestic food needs. But the problem was that food was sold immediately after harvesting. Every market day in Nkanuland, vehicles loaded food produce bought to different urban areas in Igboland and the northern part of the country. This was caused by the inability of both farmers and policy makers to provide storage facilities, develop the agricultural sector in Nkanuland, and faulty marketing and distribution network.⁵⁴ As Idachaba puts it; there is enough aggregate production, but the observed food shortages are the results of unequal economic access to available food supplies, a situation rooted in unequal distribution of income and wealth.⁵⁵

This situation gave room for the traders to exploit the Nkanu rural farmers. The policy makers of Eastern Nigeria, having known the role of the Nkanu rural farmers didn't do much, if at all to encourage them. None of the farm settlements established by the M. I. Okpara government was sited in Nkanuland. Except for the railway that crossed few communities and some roads opened by the colonial government, access to the interior of Nkanu communities and villages were never considered until 1979 when Jim Nwobodo became the Governor of Old Anambra State.⁵⁶ On the part of the people, immediately after the civil war, young men abandoned agriculture and food production and moved in droves to various urban areas where they engaged in animal butchering,⁵⁷ and other ancillary economic ventures.

The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1986 put the final nail on the coffin of any hope for eradicating poverty among rural farmers, not only in Nkanuland but Nigeria as a whole. SAP enhanced wide – range of food markets, abolition of subsidy, restrictions on importation of food to encourage exportation of food, and the encouragement of individuals rather than government in food production. Thus, food production became very expensive for food producers due to the high cost of production ranging from land clearing to harrowing and harvesting, with the result that every item of food in both rural and urban markets became expensive.

The nature of rural poverty in Nkanuland during the post – colonial era can be analyzed from two other angles: one is from the point of view of the capacity of the small – scale subsistence farmer who is obviously incapable of using the arable farmland to produce adequate food. Small – scale farmers are still using the hoe and cutlass for most of their food production activities. Implements that would increase productivity, such as tractors and fertilizers, are unaffordable. All they can do is to try and cope with their subsistence strategies which are driven largely by rainfall and other weather conditions. The second angle is the nature of the food policies of the governments (Eastern Nigeria, East – Central, Anambra and Enugu States), which are more or less a repetition of the colonial – liberal approaches to the food question. This has been more of verbal expressions in fiscal planning without implementation. However one sees it, rural poverty in Africa is largely traceable to European imperialism as rightly conceived by the materialist conception of history.⁵⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

A major contribution of this paper lies in unraveling the seemingly intractable mystery of poverty in Nkanuland. It points to the fact that, overall, Nkanu has not experienced any decisive structural change in spite of its proximity to the seat of power of Enugu. For this reason, this paper includes a humble but workable redefinition of development strategies

aimed towards uplifting the occupational base of rural farmers in the area. First, both producers and policy makers must look at the food question as a triangular relationship between food production, distribution and consumption. The campaign should not only be on boosting food production towards self – sufficiency in general, the people has never failed on that. Rather, important aspects like intervening variables of production cost, how to transform the means/process of production, and whether and when to sell or withhold foodstuff from the markets, should be included. This is because a careful examination to locate areas of dysfunction in the Nkanu food chain constantly suggested that the most serious problems of poverty lies with the distribution/marketing system, which is yet to be effectively dealt with.

Second, the Enugu State government must identify or re-evaluate the current areas of food problems and formulate the relevant food policies accordingly. It is also imperative they re-evaluate the poverty indices in line with the contemporary meaning of poverty, which goes beyond the description of gross national product (GNP) per capita income. Today, the phenomenon of poverty encompasses the very problems of living daily without the basic necessities of life for the vast majority of Nkanu rural dwellers. These problems include gender dimensions of poverty, illiteracy, and lack of pipe-borne water, electricity, good roads, clinics/hospitals, schools, etc. If the government’s integrated rural development programme is to have an impact, then all these must be considered. An effective rural development programme will most likely increase the people’s life expectancy, reduce rural – urban migration and decrease the mortality rates for infants and the general population as well as reducing unemployment and dependency burdens.

Third, reducing poverty among rural farmers of Nkanu is to adopt successfully traditional farming techniques and modern farming methods. This strategy involves a flexible interplay between shifting cultivation and crop rotation. Introduction of high yielding/pest-resisting seeds and sophisticated water management approaches for large farming activities with

or without artificial water supplies. The combination of old and modern farming techniques is like “a marriage of convenience” as most farmers in Nkanuland are not willing to relinquish their old methods of farming to stick to new methods. It is this synergy that performed the magic we saw in the Asian tigers of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, China, Japan, India, among others.

Fourth, it is absolutely necessary to identify and empower genuine rural farmers who are literate with at least primary school education and accessible loans and/or credit facilities for the specific purpose of boosting rural food production. Here, the two major obstacles are the identification of genuine farmers and the frustrating rigours of loan procurement. Those mostly in need of loans for food production are the poor, small – scale rural farmers who are mainly women and illiterate. These groups of people have been the main producers of food crops in Nkanuland and as vanguards of sustainable economic growth, their access to loans or other factors of production – land, capital, and labour markets, will substantially reduce rural poverty. Rural farmers can be organized into Co-operative Societies, on the basis of crop acquisition, loan schemes and so on. These rural farmers are the best cornerstone of a comprehensive programme of poverty reduction. This is because a few of retired civil servants and political officers who venture into farming and food storage activities do not use the agricultural loans to generate the surplus necessary for dealing with food shortage. Apart from ensuring that only genuine farmers are the main beneficiaries and recipients of farm loans in cash, production loans could be secured in kind in the form of tubers, grains (rice paddy, maize, etc), and chemical fertilizers. The basic advantage of giving loans to farmers in kind is that unlike with cash loans, the issue of the money being used for things other than expansion of food production will not arise. It is rural farmers that know where poverty pinches most and stakeholders need to determine how they can be genuinely assisted.

Fifth, to reduce hunger and poverty in the Nkanu area, the people and government need to establish modern and/or proper storage facilities that are simple to maintain in and out of harvest seasons in every communities and villages. These lack of storage facilities results in much food being wasted or sold off at harvest times throughout Nkanuland. Foodstuffs that cannot be distributed or marketed at good prices during harvest times should be reserved for the interest of consumers during months of scarcity. If this is efficiently administered, it will forestall the profiteering operations of middlemen who hoard foodstuffs at harvest to re-sell at exorbitant prices.

If these measures are adopted, rural farmers of Nkanuland will likely experience enhanced liquidity base and this will as well lead to a reduction in the crippling poverty in the area in the long run. While the analysis contained in this paper and its efforts at finding solutions to rural poverty in the area are far from conclusive or definitive, it must be observed that the options are broad enough to meet the challenges of the current situation. Poverty do not only arise from lack of food or material possessions but also as problems of the mind, attitude, habit as well as the pedigree and orientation of people in life. So, this call for policy reforms is compelling because food insecurity and rural poverty in the midst of food production is a ridiculous, inexcusable contradiction and must be resolved.

CONCLUSION

By now it would appear that the logic of the contradiction that poverty are almost always found in the midst of plenty. This has been explained in the best way possible, using the available statistical evidence on the Nkanu area of the present – day Enugu State of Nigeria. This is a strange phenomenon which is difficult to conceptualize. However, as the issues played out and examination proves, it is difficult to contradict this truth, at least for the farmers of Nkanuland. This paper has thus far sought to redirect attention to the activities of the overwhelming majority of Nkanu small – scale rural farmers upon who most people in Enugu metropolis and Nigeria depend for their food supply. Obviously, these rural farmers have never ranked among

the elites and/or policy makers, but no perspective economic historian on northern Igbo studies can ignore them because they constitute the main fulcrum around which the history of the region pivots.

ENDNOTES

Abdallah el – Kurebe, “Nigeria ranked 80th on food Security”. Vanguard, September 2012. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/09/nigeria-ranked-80th-on-food-security>. Assessed on April 5, 2017.

Some part of Enugu Ngwo Community is included in Enugu North LGA. Viz: Coal Camp area down to Mgbemena, GRA, part of Ogbete up to Aria (New) market areas of Iva Valley, Iva Pottery; to Enugu Ngwo itself. Etiti Ngwo community is also laying claim to some part of Uwani and Idaw River layout, both in Enugu South LGA. See Enugu State Boundary Commission, Deputy Governor’s Office, Government House, Enugu.

Information from the Survey Department of Enugu State Ministry of Lands and Survey, Enugu.

J. C. Mbah, “Oil Palm Produce in the Socio – Economic Development of Nkanu, Enugu State, 1960 - 2000”. M.A Thesis, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, 2016. 22.

M. Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*. (Berkeley: California University Press, 1983), xxi.

Anayo Enechukwu, *History of Nkanu*. (Enugu: Kaufhof Publishers, 1993), 153.

Enechukwu, *History of Nkanu*, 159 – 161.

NAE, PA/1/3. Vol. 10. UDDIV 8/1. 31

Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*. (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2012), 143 – 146.

M. G. Meier, *Leading Issues in Economic Development*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 20.

L. F. Newman, S. Millman and R. W. Kates (eds); *Hunger in History: Food Shortage, Poverty and Deprivation*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1990), 240.

M. P. Todaro and S. C. Smith, *Economic Development*. (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2011), 229.

Federal Office of Statistics (FOS), *Poverty Profile for Nigeria*, Lagos, 1999.

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), *Absolute Poverty Rate in States*, Lagos, 2012.

National Bureau of Statistics.....

Abel N. Nwobodo (Ezeudo), 86. *Traditional Ruler, Awalagu 1 of Umuawalagu Autonomous Community in Nara Unateze*. Interviewed on 5/04/2017.

Enechukwu, *History of Nkanu*, 154.

Onwuka N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th – 21st Centuries*. (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers, 2014), 29 – 30.

Karl Marx, *Capital*. Cited in M. Watts, *Silent Violence* 60.

K. Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade: An Analysis of an Archaic Economy*. (Seattle, C. Hurst Publishers, 1966), 18.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2008), 274 – 294.

Enechukwu, *History of Nkanu*, 272 – 276.

Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*..... 190 – 191.

Dan O. Chukwu; “Coal and the Rise of the City of Enugu, 1909 - 2008” in Onwuka N. Njoku & Obi Iwuagwu (eds), *Topics in Igbo Economic History*. (Ikeja: First Academics Publishers, 2008), 82.

The Northern – Eastern railway line criss – crossed rural Nkanu and to the extent that Nkanu has four rail terminals – Ogbaho (Ubahu), Agbani, Ayo and Nomeh.

F. D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1922), 218. Quoted in M. Watts, *Silent Violence*160.

NAE/EN. 97. Vol. II. Enquiry into Tax Incidence. UDDIV. 3/1/23

NAE/ONPROF. 1/5/3. Denn to Commissioner, Onitsha Province, Nov. 1914.

Journal of African and Global Issues Quarterly (JAGIQ) Volume 1, Issue 1, 2021
NAE/EN. 97. Vol. II. Enquiry into Tax Incidence. UDDIV. 3/1/23.

Abel N. Nwobodo (Ezeudo), Interview.

Enechukwu, *History of Nkanu* 277.

Ezeudo Abel Nwobodo

Railway construction started in Nkanuland in 1913 and completed in 1916.

Dons Eze, et al, *The Wawa Struggle: A History of Factional Dissension in Iboland*. (Enugu: Delta Publishers Ltd, 1999), 58 – 59.

Chukwu, “Coal and the Rise” 85.

Micheal Ede, c. 75. Rtd Teacher and Farmer. Interviewed at Imeoha Nkerefi on 2/04/2017.

Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*.....304.

Njoku, *Economic History*

Obiageli Ogbu, c. 75. Palm oil trader. Interviewed at Amafor Ugbawka on 2/04/2017.

John Nwafor, c. 78. Rtd Teacher and Farmer. Interviewed at Obinagu Nike on 3/04/2017.

Documents from Enugu State Ministry of Agriculture, Produce Marketing Department, Government Printer, Enugu.

Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria* 312.

Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. (London: 1971).

Claude Ake, *A Political Economy of Africa*. (New York: Longman Group Ltd, 1981), 3.

Letter written by the Resident Officer, Onitsha Province to the Asst. District Officer, Nkanu. See NAE/185. Vol. 4. UDDIV 9/1/24. Food Control and Trade, 1943. 690.

NAE/185. Vol. 4. UDDIV 9/1/24. 815

NAE/185. Vol. 4 UDDIV 9/1/24. 816.

NAE/185. Vol. 4. UDDIV 9/1/24 690.

Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*282.

NAE/185. Vol. 4. UDDIV 9/1/24. 850.

NAE/185. Vol. 4 UDDIV 9/1/24. 858

NAE/185. Vol. 4. UDDIV 9/1/24. 893

F. S. Idachaba, “The Nature of the Nigerian Food Problem” in Journal of Agriculture, Science and Technology, J.A.S.T UAM (June 1, 1991): 1 – 11.

Francis Aninwede, c. 65. Farmer. Interviewed at Nومه on 2/04/2017.

Idachaba, “The Nature of the Nigerian Food Problem” 1 – 11.

Chief Jim Nwobodo, Governor of Anambra State, 1979 – 1983, constructed the Owo – Ubahu – Amankanu road. Making it easy to locate the railway terminal at Ubahu from Enugu – Abakaliki expressway. And also the Agbani – Akpugo – Amagunze – Ihuokpara road, connecting Akpugo, Amagunze, Akpawfu and Ihuokpara from Agbani.

Of every five butcher in the various markets in Enugu, three are Nkanu indigenes. Same applies to other markets in Igboland and other parts of Nigeria, with variations. Personal survey from the author. This calls for further research.

The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced and how the products are exchanged. See Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.