

## POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TOWN UNIONS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF SOUTH EAST GEO-POLITICAL ZONE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

This study interrogated the political economy of town unionism in rural community development in south east Nigeria. Three research questions were formulated to guide the study. Descriptive research design was employed, involving the use of questionnaire for data collection. The sample size of 500 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling technique. Data analysis was by mean ratings, and standard deviation. The result showed that town unions contributed politically to the community development by providing effective community governance, security, participatory decision making process and community mobilization efforts. On the socio-economic sphere, town unions were found to have played major roles in local infrastructural development such as erection of market stalls, clinics, classroom blocks and local road maintenance. The study identified challenges to town unions to include lack of legal integration, politicization of town unions, poor funding of projects and activities. Notwithstanding these enormous challenges, town unions have made meaningful impact in the political and socio-economic life of the communities in south east Nigeria. It is therefore necessary to work on the recommendations proffered by this study to further strengthen and transform town unions as major force in rural community development.

**Keywords:** Political Economy, Town Unions, Rural Development, South East Geo-Political Zone.

### INTRODUCTION

The South east geo-political zone of Nigeria is inhabited by Igbo people. The Igbo people are an ethnic group native to the present-day south-central and southeastern Nigeria. Geographically, Igbo homeland is divided into two unequal sections by the Niger River – an eastern (which is the larger of the two) and a western section (Slattery, 2016). The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. In rural Nigeria, Igbo people work mostly as craftsmen, farmers and traders. The most important crop is the yam. Other staple crops include cassava and taro. The Igbo people are also highly urbanized, with some of the largest metropolitan areas. Some of the major cities and towns in Igbo land are Onitsha, Enugu, Aba, Owerri, Orlu, Okigwe, Nsukka, Nnewi, Umuahia, Abakaliki, Afikpo and Arochukwu (Mezie-Okoye and Asike, 2019).

Before European colonization, the Igbo-speaking people were not united as single people, but lived in small-dispersed compounds in the rainforest,

built up of clusters of huts belonging to the same patrilineage. The largest political unit was the village group averaging about 5,000 persons, who shared a common market, meeting place and common beliefs and cults. These village groups were ruled by a council of elder, age grades, lineage heads and influential wealthy men (Njoku, 2014).

The Igbo were a politically fragmented group, with a number of centralized Chiefdoms such as Nri, Arochukwu and Onitsha. Frederick Lugard introduced the Eze system of "Warrant Chiefs". Unaffected by the Fulani War and the resulting spread of Islam in Nigeria in the 19th century; they became overwhelmingly Christian under colonization. In the wake of decolonization, the Igbo developed a strong sense of ethnic identity. During the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 the Igbo territories seceded as the short-lived Republic of Biafra.

In the overall context, town unions have become an important leadership structure in Igbo land south east of the Niger. They have gained popularity now more than ever before; and their roles in political,





social and economic development cannot be ignored. In various Igbo communities Town Union, is responsible for development and organizing social events of the community. The members of the Town Union are elected by members of the community. The “town union”- or “home town association” (Honey and Okafor 1998), is a form of association widely known throughout Africa especially in south-eastern Nigeria since the late colonial period. “Town union” is the generic term usually employed in and with regard to Igbo land, and is used as such in this study. Specific unions are known under a variety of names, combining a reference to the locality or group with terms such as “clan,” “development,” “improvement,” or “progressive”) union or association. In Igbo land, the town union constitutes only one, albeit a very important, form of association among the numerous levels on which associations are formed.

Bearing the above in mind, political economy studies the basis of the development of societies. This centers on the production of material wealth and the mode of production, that is, it studies production and the basis of society from the point of view of the economic relations between people in the production process. In the view of Lenin (1987), political economy deals not just with production, but the social relations of men in production and the social system of production. The subject-matter of political economy is therefore, the production (economic) relations between people, the relationship of various social classes to political power and the interplay of politics and economy in the determination of power relations within the comity of nations.

Town unionism has a seemingly long history in Nigeria, particularly among the Igbo in south east Nigeria. It has emerged as strong force in community and rural development and wields enormous influence in shaping the socio-political life of the rural communities. The town union is perceived as the custodian of political sovereignty in most Igbo communities. Notwithstanding this, the roles of town unions have continuous to remain informal to a reasonable extent. It is still regarded as a traditional institutional structure without any defined roles within the legal framework of the Nigeria state. Worse still, not much scholarly attentions have been given to this area. Worried by

this scenario, this study sought to contribute to existing body of knowledge by appraising the political economy of town union in rural community development with the view to interrogating the efficacy and relevance of town unions in contemporary governance process. To achieve this, three research questions were formulated to guide the study. These are: what are the contributions of town unions to political development of the communities in south east Nigeria? What are the roles of town unions in socio-economic development of the communities in south east Nigeria? and What are the challenges facing town unions in rural community development in south east Nigeria? The findings of this study are expected to be of great relevance to traditional and town union leaders, and will equally draw government’s attention to the relevance of developing policy guide for regulating the activities of town unions in governance and development.

### **Interrogating the Role of Town Unions in Rural Community Development**

Scholars have not made clear distinctions between rural and community development. Consequently, this study in attempting to explore the nuances of these terms uses them interchangeably. Accordingly, community development is a self-help projects carried out by citizens of a particular community with a view to improving the living conditions of their various communities. It is overt manifestations of community associations’ efforts towards the improvement and transformation of their respective societies. The report of the Sub-regional Workshop on Community Development in Africa in 1974 defines community development as the process by which a set of technical, social, cultural, and institutional measures are implemented with and for the dwellers of the communities, with the aim of improving socio-economic conditions (see also Ahamefula and Nosike, 2010). Mabogunje (1980) conceives community development as a systematic attempt at re-organizing and mobilizing the rural masses in order to improve the capacity to cope effectively with their daily tasks and with the concomitant changes.

Community development is the improvement and transformation of the social, mental, economic,



institutional and environmental conditions of the low income rural dwellers through the mobilization and rational utilization of their human, natural and institution resources, so as to cope with their daily tasks of life and the demands of modern time (Olisa and Obiukwu, 1992). It is axiomatic to posit that the transformation of the rural areas in Africa is undoubtedly part of the whole question of national development. Africa like other developing societies is so obsessed with the issue of the national development that it has almost become an ideology by itself. The need to develop and creatively control the destiny of a polity and secure it for a recognizable place in the comity of nations has made the transformation of the rural areas inevitable.

According to Ollawa (1971:457-480), rural development means:

*the restructuring of the economy in order to satisfy the material needs and aspirations of the rural masses, and to promote individual and collective incentives to participate in the process of development. This involves a host of multi-sectoral activities including the improvement of agriculture; the promotion of rural industries; the creation of the requisite infrastructure and social overheads, as well as the establishment of appropriate decentralized structures in order to allow mass participation.*

Bearing the above in mind, town unions have come to stay as agents of rural community development in Southeast Nigeria is a truism. The town unions represent an enduring traditional institutional legacy, which has continued to play vital roles in rural community development. Consequently, the political economy of town unions Diwe (2014) commenting on the role of town unions in Igbo land urged the three tiers of government to partner with town unions because they are agents of community development. He further says that the objective of town unionism is grassroots development. His words:

*Town unions are the real agents of development which all levels of*

*government should partner with for the welfare of the people. There is no doubt that town unions have fast tracked development of their respective communities. Nobody can claim ignorance of the fact that town unions in many areas of Igbo land established primary and secondary schools, community markets, institution of scholarship schemes for indigent students, maintenance of roads, law and order within their jurisdiction. In fact, at the end of civil war in 1970, town union gave hope to the Igbos. So, town unions are synonymous with development in Igbo land.*

Diwe (2014) further asserts that “Town Unions have through various ways offered support to our people who were affected in the crisis in the North East and other crisis ridden areas. So, the importance of town unions in community development cannot be over-emphasized.” He debunked reports that town unions are political structures which are set up for the purposes of election. According to him; “Town Union is political, but not partisan. Town union members can belong to any political party of their choices but as a Union we don’t support any political party. Town Union is the only identity of the Igbo man that has stood the test of time. I assure you that it is the most democratic structure found in Igbo land. Town Unions can guide members on political decisions, particularly the election of quality people in leadership positions in the society. For instance, we have been sensitizing our members on the need to shun money politics. This is because the person who gives you money to be elected and runs to Abuja only to return during the next elections is not fit to be called a representative. So, we have a duty to enlighten our people to support people who are conscious of the development. Town Unions are only for development. This is why we say; Town Union, Development to the Grassroots,” (Diwe, 2014: 21).

More so, Eze (2016) noted the responsibilities of town unions in mobilizing and enlightening the citizenry for good governance and sustainable community development as well as the development of structures for improving the quality





of life of local communities in Imo state as well as other parts of Igbo land and her indigenes. Eze (2016) also commended the contributions of the President General of all town unions in championing the course of town unionism in Imo State and beyond and described them as a people endowed with rare leadership qualities.

According to Obioma (2015) in contemporary Imo State which he used as the microcosm for his study of the wider Igbo phenomenon; he explored the link between town unions and their impact on emergence and development of autonomous communities in contemporary Igbo land. The article attempts to explain and understand the vehemence with which Igbo people through various town unions' clamour and fight for the creation of more autonomous communities, ceremoniously ruled by Ezes or Igwes and with the town union leadership as a vital executive arm. It is important to note, nevertheless, that the quest for autonomous community status is a common theme in Igbo history (Duruoha, 2014). It should be noted also that although the term autonomous community gained official currency after Nigerian independence and has become a new addition to the lexicon of Nigerian political science and history, its genesis is traceable nonetheless to the Igbo concept of Obodo, meaning a town or village-group. This desire for the creation of autonomous communities is not and has never been only for purely political and emotional reasons. On the contrary, town unions have always had a strong belief that attainment of autonomous communities status lead to more effective and better development at the grassroots level. Essentially, then, a town union is seen as a beneficial and innocuous sort of home rule that is crucial for Igbo and, indeed, for the wider Nigerian political, economic and social development (Njoku, 2013).

It must be recalled that with the onset of British colonial administration the political independence of Igbo towns was completely undermined. For both administrative convenience and imperial necessity, these towns had to be brought under the control of the British imperial power. Politically, economically, and socially they were progressively integrated into the larger Nigerian state. That the colonial government paid a lot of attention to these towns was, in itself, a measure of their relevance.

Effective control of the towns supported the control of the colonial Nigerian state (Eze, 2015).

The colonial town was the lowest level of colonial administration. Presided over, under normal circumstances, by the Warrant Chief appointed by the colonial government, the colonial Igbo town, through self-help efforts, played a crucial supportive role in the social, economic and political development of the town (Wikipedia, 2017). The town was also an important nursery for the new type of political education.

In addition, the diminution of the authority of Igbo towns and their traditional rulers climaxed in the 1976 Dasuki Report on local government reform. Following the report the then Imo State government promulgated a law that practically ensured that the Imo town lost its pre-colonial status as an independent, self-governing community. The law also transformed overnight the chiefs into Ezes and the towns into autonomous communities (Umeadi, 2001).

Town Union level is the highest political organization in Igbo land. A town comprises people from different villages. According to Ogbalu (2006) "it is made up of villages which have a common decent or have come to be one for one reason or the other." Orji (1999:10) asserts that "the government of the Igbo people before the advent of the white man was by consensus, organized in towns, community and family basis." Towns are bound together by one common interest such as the possession of one common market that is central. In some cases, it is compulsory for every woman in the community to carry wares, no matter how little, to the market. Farm work is usually prohibited on market day. Any violation of such rule attracts sanctions. These measures are taken, to ensure the growth of the market which could also lead to the firmness of the town. Other things that could bind the town together are the possession of one common shrine that is famous, and also the fact that they are living in one territorial background.

Leadership at the town union level is made up of people of integrity from the different villages. Olisa (2002:223) expressed that "the town assembly is like the village council, an informal body and not a







regular constituted executive authority...the summons to meetings is usually addressed to all adults, though sometimes to specific groups, such as age grades or titled men.” In the past there were no kings or traditional rulers in Igbo land except in few places where they existed. According to Okodo (2006) “The places include Nri, Arochukwu, Aboh and Onitsha”. He further asserts that each town has a council which is made up of village heads, ozo titled holders etc. they wield both political and administrative powers and ensures justices to all and sundry. In monarchical towns, Okodo (2006) asserts that none of the monarchs in these towns was autocratic because they operated what was more or less a federal system of government. They have representatives who govern parts of their jurisdictions in the respective areas or quarters, the king while in council with their respective village representatives or members of their cabinets, deliberated on various matters concerning the town.

Political organization in Igbo land is republican in nature, no doubt about that. Thus Monarchy and kingship is not general, and within the areas they existed, they ruled by consensus. “Eze” and “Igwe” which has the same connotation as king later gained entry into Igbo land as a result of contact with British system of governance. Since that time, the political system in Igbo land has never remained the same. No wonder Kanu (2015:325) observed that when the colonial authority came, traditional rulers were made warrant chiefs and subjected to the authority and supervision of British political officers. Thus, making them no longer accountable to their people but to the British political officer who appointed them. The result is that they betrayed their own people. Following the idea of warrant chiefs there was a mad rush to the position of chief. Businessmen, politicians and wealthy individuals in the society fought to buy these positions even with money. Character is no longer emphasized. The way and manner in which the wealth is accumulated does not bother people. Most of these groups of people with their various positions are now the rulers of various communities in Igbo land. They made laws which are draconian and are not challenged by any one. This was particularly so when we consider the assertion by Ogbalu (2006:23) when he warned that “Igbo political organization is republican in nature”.

Taken cognizance of the above account, Okere (2011) posits that town unions have now evolved with time in terms of fostering development in Igbo land. It has become a norm for each community to have a town union president whose duties are to see to the unity and development of the town. Some of these groups have left their agenda to pursue shadows. Instead of uniting their communities, they have become the bedrock of disintegration. It is not far-fetched to notice the power tussle in various communities where two presidents general emerge side by side at the same town. They are not fighting for the common good of the members of the community, rather for their own selfish interest. It is now perused with impunity. This struggle has led to a number of ills such as burning down people’s houses and destroying properties worth millions of naira in the affected communities (Ezeagwula, 2012).

### METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** This is a descriptive research design in which questionnaire was used for collection of data.

**Study Area:** The study area was south east Nigeria, which is made up of five Igbo States, namely, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The zone occupies an approximated land mass of 58,214.7 square kilometres, the area lies between longitude 6° 50’ and 8° 30’ E latitude 4° 30’ and 7° 5’ N. South-East Nigeria is bordered in the east by Cross-River State, in the west by Delta, in the north by Benue and Kogi States, and in the south by Akwa-Ibom and Rivers States. The area lies within the rainforest and derived savannah regions of the country. The sample for the study was 500 respondents selected by stratified random sampling technique.

**Sample/Study population:** The sample comprised of community leaders from 25 selected Local government areas across the five states of south east Nigeria.

**Data collection:** Structured questionnaire was used as the instrument of data collection. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information from the five hundred respondents based on their understanding of the subject matter. The questions raised in the questionnaire were meant to address





the research questions and objectives of the study. The questionnaire items contained both open-ended questions and close-ended questions. In the open-ended questions, the respondents were asked to provide their own answers to the questions for the researcher to know what they understand with regard to the contributions of town union to political development of the rural communities. While in the close-ended questions, respondents were asked to select answers from among options provided by the researcher. The questionnaire was validated by three experts while the reliability was done by Cronbach Alpha, which indicated 0.84 reliability coefficient.

**Data analysis:** Data collected were carefully edited to ensure consistency, accuracy and completeness.

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software version 20.0, employing statistical tools such as mean rating, and standard deviation.

**RESULTS**

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

The result of the study is presented below as analyzed by mean scores and standard deviation.

**Research question one:** What are the contributions of town unions in the political development of communities in south east Nigeria?

**Table 1:** Mean Scores, Standard Deviation and Pooled Mean on contributions of town union to political development of the rural communities in south east Nigeria

S/N	Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
1	Town unions contribute in providing effective community leadership.	2.79	0.89	Agree
2	Town unions contribute to decision making in the community.	2.71	0.93	Agree
3	Town unions work for the effective security of the local community,	2.60	0.99	Agree
4	The town union complements the efforts of the Eze or Igwe in community governance,	2.67	0.99	Agree
5	Town union serves as a unifying force in effective community mobilization for self help projects.	2.65	0.89	Agree
	Pooled Mean and SD	2.69	0.81	Agree

In the context of the above data, all items recorded above 2.50 mean score which in the overall implies that for research question one the computed pooled mean is 2.69 and standard deviation is 0.81 respectively. Simply put, it shows that town unions despite the challenges confronting them have made some contributions in the political development of

their communities. These contributions include providing effective community leadership, taking part in decision making in the community, working for the effective security of the community, complementing the efforts of the Eze or Igwe in community governance, and serving as a unifying force in effective community mobilization.





**Research Question Two:** What are the roles of town unions in socio-economic development of the communities in south east Nigeria?

**Table 2:** Mean Scores, Standard Deviation and Pooled Mean on roles of town union in socio-economic development of the communities in south east Nigeria

S/N	Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
6	Town unions have played roles in construction and reconstruction of local market stalls.	2.75	0.93	Agree
7	The town union has built and renovated classroom blocks in schools.	2.73	0.91	Agree
8	In my community the town union has built and equipped a health centres.	2.23	1.35	Agree
9	The town union involves in the grading and maintenance of village roads.	2.71	0.94	Agree
10	The organization of community festivals is always done by the town union.	2.70	0.98	Agree
<b>Pooled mean and SD</b>		<b>2.69</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>Agree</b>

The above data indicates that all items recorded above 2.50 mean score which in the context of the study implies that for research questions two the computed pooled mean is 2.69 and standard deviation 0.90 respectively. This goes to show that town unions have made efforts in the socio-economic development of rural communities in the following ways; construction of local markets, building of classroom blocks in schools, construction of community health centres, grading and maintenance of village roads and organization of community festivals.

**Research Question Three:** What are the challenges facing town unions in rural community development in south east Nigeria?

**Table 3:** Mean Scores, Standard Deviation and Pooled Mean on challenges facing town unions in rural community development in south east Nigeria

S/N	Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
11	Lack of unified operational legal framework hampers the efficiency of town union in rural development.	2.74	0.86	Agree
12	Manipulation by government officials and its agents is a threat to progress of town union.	2.77	0.89	Agree
13	Politicization of town union leadership by wealthy	2.79	0.87	Agree



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	members of the community is a serious challenge.			
14	Town unions do not have a clearly defined source of funding its activities.	2.73	0.90	Agree
15	Power tussle confronting leadership of town union in some communities affects its activities.	2.73	0.85	Agree
	<b>Pooled Mean and SD</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>Agree</b>

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The above results indicate that all items recorded above 2.50 mean score which in the context of the study implies that for research questions three the computed pooled mean is 2.75 and standard deviation is 0.92 respectively. Relying on the above computed data the study affirm that town unions in south east Nigeria are constrained by some challenges such as lack of unified operational legal framework, manipulation by government officials and its agencies, politicization by wealthy members of the community, poor funding and power tussle confronting leadership of town union in some communities.

**DISCUSSION**

There are three objectives pursued by this study, all of which agree with the three research questions posed by the study. The research questions sought to find out the contributions of town union in the political development of rural communities; the role of town unions in the socio-economic development of the community; and the challenges facing town unions in community rural development. The results for research question one indicates that the computed pooled mean is 2.69 and standard deviation is 0.81 respectively. This therefore affirms that town unions have made some contributions in the political development of their communities. These contributions include providing effective community leadership, taking part in decision making in the community, working for the effective security of the community, complementing the efforts of the Eze or Igwe in community governance, and serving as a unifying force in effective community mobilization. These findings are in agreement with Diwe (2014); and Eze (2016) both of which gave credence to the political relevance of town unionism in Igbo land.

The result for research question two indicates that the computed pooled mean is 2.69 and standard deviation at 0.90 respectively. This further shows that town unions have made efforts in the socio-economic development of rural communities in the following ways; construction of local markets, building of classroom blocks in schools, construction of community health centres, grading and maintenance of village roads and organization of community festivals. These findings also concur with Eze (2016) who gave cognizance of the roles played by town unions in various spheres of community infrastructural development. This study reaffirms

Research question three sought to find out the challenges facing town union in community development. The computed pooled mean is 2.75 and standard deviation is 0.92 respectively. Relying on the above computed data the study affirm that town unions in south east Nigeria are constrained by some challenges such as lack of unified operational legal framework, manipulation by government officials and its agencies, politicization by wealthy members of the community, poor funding and power tussle confronting leadership of town union in some communities. These findings agree with Ezeagwula (2012) in the challenges facing town union activities in Igbo land.

**Recommendations**

Relying on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are apt;





1. There is need for the governments of the five south east states to come up with a unified legal framework that will be aimed at integrating town union structure in local governance.
2. The government should give serious consideration to funding and supporting viable town union projects with grants and incentives as a way of encouraging rural community development.
3. It is timely and essential supervise the activities of town unions to ensure they do not indulge in acts of impunity in the course of carrying out their function.
4. There is need for cordial relationship between the town union leadership and the Eze or Igwe in the community.

### Conclusion

This study interrogated the political economy of town union in rural community development in south east Nigeria. Three objectives and three research questions were used. The study identified some contributions of town union in political development of the community by providing effective community governance, security, participatory decision making process and community mobilization efforts. On the socio-economic sphere town unions were found to have played major roles in local infrastructural development such as erection of market stalls, clinics, classroom blocks and road maintenance. The study identified a number of challenges such as lack of legal integration, politicization of town unions, poor funding of projects and activities and many more.

In the final analysis, this study makes bold to assert that town union has come to stay. Despite the numerous challenges facing its operation it has made meaningful impact in the political and socio-economic life of the communities in south east Nigeria. It is therefore necessary to work on the recommendations proffered by this study to further strengthen and transform town unions as major force in rural community development.

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