

Agricultural Stagnation And Poverty: The Case For The Oil Palm (*Elaeis guinensis*) in Igboland

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INTRODUCTION

"The man who farms as his forefathers did cannot produce much food no matter how rich the land or how hard he works"

- Schultz T.W. (1982) 1979 Noble Laureate (Economics).

The oil palm (*Elaeis guinensis*) is the most important crop in the agro-ecology of Igboland. It has been and remains the most important source of rural liquidity in Igboland (followed by overseas and local remittances since the 1990s). The economy of the former eastern region was built on the oil palm. The advances in education, infrastructure and industrialization in eastern Nigeria in the first republic was funded substantially from oil palm earnings, through the former palm produce board.

However, since the 1970's, serious macro-economic changes in Nigeria led to decline in the oil palm industry (as with other export crops, such as rubber, cocoa, and groundnut). Specifically, developments in Nigeria led to massive rural-urban migration, and shift in labor supply from agriculture to non-agricultural sectors. Higher returns to labor in the non-rural and non-agricultural sector was the inducing factor. Within the agricultural sector, as population grew, so did domestic demand for food. Consequently, resources (land and labor especially) shifted towards food-crops production, especially cassava in the south and maize in the north.

Inconsistent trade policies added to the woes of the oil palm economy. Importation of vegetable oils and tallow for industrial purposes depressed domestic demand and prices of oil palm. Returns to labor was low. Processing of oil palm fruits, being labor intensive, was discouraged because of low labor productivity. Low earnings led to low rural liquidity. This is a major contributing factor to rural poverty in Igboland, because real income has declined compared to the pre-1970 scenario.

The Problem

In addition to the discouraging macro-economic conditions espoused above, there are other problems that can be addressed at micro and meso- levels for the revival of the oil palm

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economy of Igboland. These problems exist at the farm- household and community levels. These include:

1. Over – grown wild stock of palm trees. An overview of Igboland will show dense vegetative cover, dominated by the oil palm, but these are over grown and wild. In some cases the heights are over 20 meters. Yield of these wild trees are low when compared to improved high yielding varieties, which are products of our research institutions and universities. The very tall trees are a nightmare to harvesters, most of whom are old men with age of up to 80 years. Lack of labor to harvest palm fruits is a major constraint presently in Igboland. Lack of harvesting labor is reinforced by relatively high charges by harvesters, sometime up to N50 per fruit bunch. This is a problem where lack of cash exists.
2. There is a problem with stagnant technologies. When one reads the description of Igboland of the 18th century by Olaudah Equiano, he describes a hoe and cutlass – technology agricultural sector. Today, after three centuries, the dominant technologies of agriculture in Igboland are still hoe and cutlasses.

For crops, which the colonialist decided to encourage, to the benefit of their home industries, they introduced some incentives, including technologies to boost their production. The colonialist introduced the manually- operated palm fruit press. The colonialist introduced the oil palm mills, which you find in many communities in Igboland. That is virtually the state of oil palm processing in Igboland since the last century. Yet the colonialist operated in an era of surplus rural farm labor. With serious rural farm labor scarcity arising from massive migration (only about 13% of Igboland reside in their ancestral homes (Nwajiuba, 2001), most rural farm labor in Igboland are old men and women. These old men use cutlasses to harvest the over-grown low yielding trees. The women and children use baskets to carry the harvest home, the men use cutlasses to thresh the fruits, and the family picks the fruits and takes it to the neighborhood oil mill. This is parboiled in drums using firewood (increasingly scarce). To digest (or pound) the fruits, pestles and mortars are used. This is a huge disincentive. Thereafter, the manually operated mechanical press (which the colonialist introduced) is used to extract the oil. A tin of oil may cost N1,000 in June, N1,200 in April, and N1,500 in July. Thereafter, the women and children manually separate the kernel from the fiber. The oil mill owner may be paid in cash (N200/tin), or in kind (1 paint of oil/tin, that is 5 litre/20 liters), in addition to some fiber and nuts. The family takes home oil, fiber and nuts.

The nuts are cracked using stones (usually) to release the kernel. One (1) paint of kernel fetches N350, which the family sells to buy “soup” materials. This can be a very critical source of cash for petty household purchases that are important for household food security. The above process, which is prevalent all over Igboland keeps the people at a low equilibrium peasantry level. It is however possible and desirable to reverse this.

What can be done

There are possible points of intervention with respect to the oil palm economy for the benefit of Igboland. These include:

1. Replacing low yielding over-grown wild stock. There are about 8 universities and many colleges of Agriculture and Colleges of Education engaged in agricultural teaching and research. In Imo State for instance, there are at least four of these: Imo State University (IMSU), Federal University of Technology (FUTO), Alvan Ikoku College of Education (AICE), and the Michael Okpara College of Agriculture (MOCA). This year, Imo State University Faculty of Agriculture bred about 1,000 oil palm seedlings for sale to the public at N85 each. This has a value of N85,000 (or \$600 ca.). This university has a capacity to produce about 10,000 oil palm seedlings each year. So can the other three institutions in Imo State.

In effect it is possible to produce 40,000 seedlings each year in Imo State using these institutions. It is therefore possible to produce 200,000 oil palm seedlings in Igboland each year using the institutions in Imo State. If this is done each year for five years, we can produce 1,000,000 oil palm seedlings in Igboland.

We can distribute these seedlings through our communities, town unions, and Women Organizations. Governments in Igboland could provide (and sell as they now do, fertilizers – urea and MOP, rather than mostly NPK). Governments in Igboland could use existing community health or environmental inspectors to insist after 5 years on cutting down all overgrown palm trees of a specified height, say 15 meters, and replacing same immediately with improved varieties

This scheme will replace wild low yielding stock with high yielding shorter growing stock, reduce the problem of harvesting and boost production. In addition, it will keep our universities and other institutions productively relevant, and help in the training of manpower.

2. Mechanized palm fruit digesters. These are already available in isolated cases in Igboland. They are also locally fabricated. Some cost about N50,000. It probably would have made more sense if Nigeria's billion-naira poverty alleviation program commenced in 1999, which simply granted pocket money to some people was devoted to this. It would make sense to commission indigenous fabricators with proven capacity to manufacture palm fruit digesters to be distributed to communities in Igboland. The colonialist, last century, promoted oil press.

Massive extension and diffusion of locally fabricated fruit digesters will generate employment and income, reduce poverty and crime. It will encourage palm fruits processors and boost output. It reduces drudgery and raises labor productivity. Output per unit of fruit is increased. (Nwajiuba, 2004).

3. Palm Nut Crackers: Mechanical devices for palm nut cracking are also available in a few communities in Igboland. These are also locally fabricated. These cost about N10,000 each. It should be possible to commission local fabricators to produce this for distribution to communities. This will boost palm kernel production, contribute to household income and welfare.
4. Value adding industries producing lubricant, detergents, soaps, pomades, creams and other products.

How these can be done

1. Igbo pressure groups have a responsibility to influence Nigeria's macro-economic conditions to favor production rather than dependence on imports, for even goods, which we have natural agro-ecological advantages to produce.
2. Nigerian government should be convinced that agriculture should be supported, not just for itself but also for wider societal well being, including income and employment, and for social reasons as crime control. It is noteworthy that industrialized countries spend up to \$300 billion each year on subsidies (Rogoff, 2003).
3. Igbo pressure groups such as the World Igbo Congress (WIC) and other Igbo diaspora could make their impact felt all over Igboland by supporting the revival of oil palm economy of Igboland.

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