

The case of Aba and its region, south-east Nigeria

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Background

South-east Nigeria is one of the most densely inhabited regions in the country, supporting about 25 per cent of its population on 8.5 per cent of its total area. Close to 70 per cent of the population live in rural areas. Urban settlements were virtually absent in the region until the advent of colonial rule during the second half of the 19th century, when a number of urban nodes were developed along the evolving rail and road-river networks. The study area is in Abia State, which in 1996 had an estimated population of just under three million, and is made up largely of Igbo people living in the forest zone.

Linkages and interactions between rural and urban areas, in the form of movements of people, goods, information and money, are an increasingly important component of livelihoods in the region, as in most parts of the world. This paper summarises these processes between the city of Aba, a major trading centre for the region and the country as a whole, with one of the widest migration fields in the region and a population of over half million in 1991, and two peri-urban settlements (Akwete and Owerrinta) and three rural settlements (Ndi Ebe, Abiriba and Uzuakoli) situated within a range of 100 km from Aba.

Agricultural production, access to land and access to markets

Farming and, to some extent, fishing are the predominant occupations in the rural settlements, even though there are significant variations between the villages and between residents. The abundant rainfall supports agriculture with little need for irrigation and the soil is generally fertile, although the area sometimes suffers from severe soil erosion. The main constraints faced by small farmers in the area are:

- **Land shortages:** these are particularly significant in the peri-urban settlements, due to changes in land use and demographic pressure. In other settlements, the trend among successful migrants to build large retirement homes has also affected the availability of farmland, and cultivation is increasingly confined to distant and often marginal plots;
- **Land tenure systems:** under customary tenure, land is owned by the 'extended family', that is, all those with a common ancestor. This coexists with private ownership through monetary purchase, and with land rights granted under the 1978 Land Use Decree. In the study area, private ownership is prevalent in the peri-urban settlements and customary tenure is most common in the more remote villages. However, in the latter case, migrant farmers face difficulties in securing permanent rights to land, a situation which is likely to worsen with increasing demographic pressure. Security of tenure for all groups of farmers is likely to have a positive impact on investment in production;
- **Physical access to markets:** in some remote settlements, the road infrastructure is so poor that only large-scale farmers have the means to hire tractors to transport produce to marketing nodes. Small farmers who cannot afford this often prefer to abandon their own farms and either migrate to urban centres or seek employment as wage labourers in larger farms which in many instances belong to urban-based owners. Improvements in physical infrastructure are key to the viability of small-scale farming;
- **Access to urban consumers difficult for small producers:** Aba is an important commercial node for agricultural produce from the surrounding region and for interstate trade. However, the urban market is controlled by a number of intermediaries and traders, making it difficult for small producers to gain access to urban consumers and to gather information on demand and prices. Organised negotiation through farmers' associations is likely to increase the bargaining power of smallholders in the market.

Patterns of income diversification

Because of the constraints on production for small farmers, and of the opportunities arising from proximity to a large urban centre, income diversification is increasingly common among rural residents.

- **Commuting** from the peri-urban settlements to Aba and to Port Harcourt is encouraged by the efficient and cheap transport system. Low-income women commute to work as cleaners and gardeners, men as construction workers and in the oil industry;

- **The location** along a major road of one peri-urban settlement has attracted medium-sized industries such as paper mills, which also benefit from the waterside location of the village. While this has created opportunities for local salaried employment, it has also had an adverse effect with water pollution from industrial effluents affecting fishing;
- **The proliferation of retirement homes** for out-migrants has led to the emergence of 'new' activities in the construction sector in some rural settlements, displacing agriculture as the main occupation and reducing the availability of farmland;
- **Traditional non-farm activities, such as women's cloth-weaving are declining** in rural settlements as they are negatively affected by competition from imported goods, lack of investment in technological innovation, lack of local backward linkages (such as yarn production), and the inadequate infrastructure such as electricity supply which affects most rural settlements;
- **Income diversification is the norm** in most rural settlements, although trade and service provision are usually dominated by in-migrants with limited access to land.

Migration trends

Migration has long been an important element of livelihoods in the region. Population density and the resulting scarcity of farmland is a significant reason for movement. There is also a prevailing perception of urban centres as places providing economic opportunities and better physical and social infrastructure. Views on migration are determined by both economic and socio-cultural factors:

- **Economic and social success:** migration from the rural settlements to the urban centres is considered essential to achieving economic and social success. Young men who do not migrate are seen as 'lazy';
- **It is increasingly acceptable for young rural women** to seek employment in the urban centres, although in most cases they are closely supervised by relatives at their destination;
- **Destinations for rural-urban movement** include local centres such as Aba and Port Harcourt, but also Lagos and Cotonou, in neighbouring Bénin. Migrants engaging in menial occupations or in activities carrying social stigma, such as prostitution, often prefer distant destinations since this will decrease the possibility of their situation being known in their home village;
- **Latent inter-ethnic conflict** in Nigeria influences movement direction – for example, recent clashes between Hausa and Igbo people in Northern Nigeria – has been associated with waves of return migration of Igbos to the Southeast;

- **Return migration** from the urban centres to the rural settlements is high. Most migrants tend to return to their home villages upon retirement, often leaving behind their grown-up children who will support them through remittances. However, the average age of returnee migrants is becoming lower, especially in those rural and peri-urban settlements which offer non-farm employment opportunities. Another reason for return migration is the increasing competition in the urban labour markets;
- **Migration between rural settlements** is primarily related to farming activities and therefore includes seasonal as well as long-term movement. Because migrants have restricted access to land ownership, kinship ties are a major regulator of rural to rural movement.

Remittances and exchanges

Urban-based migrants maintain close links with their extended family in the rural settlements, through frequent visits, especially for holidays, Christian festivals and village celebrations, and by supporting them through remittances. Exchanges between urban-based and rural-based relatives take place in both directions, and gifts from rural areas include locally-produced foodstuffs such as *garri*, condiments and leafy vegetables. Flows from urban areas to the rural settlements are, however, far more important, and are a significant component of the incomes of rural households.

- **Cash remittances are often crucial to cover education costs.** Goods sent to rural-based relatives include clothing, manufactured goods and unprocessed or semi-processed foodstuffs such as rice, beans, onions which are viewed as being of better quality;
- **The increasing acceptability of the migration of young, single women** is often related to their contribution to the rural households' income;
- **It would be socially unacceptable for migrants not to send remittances** and gifts. Doing so also ensures that they maintain a foothold in the rural settlement and will be welcome upon their return;
- **The quantities of remittances and gifts have declined** in the past decade, as costs of living in the urban centres have soared;
- **Better-off groups invest in the home areas**, while low-income households use remittances to supplement consumption. Typical investments consist of small-scale food processing enterprises and cash crop farms, both relying on local labour. Support to

productive investment by migrants in their home areas is an important but largely neglected area for policy initiatives.

- **Housing is an important investment sector**, partly because of the traditionally strong attachment of migrants to their home areas, and partly as a safety net against civil strife and inter-ethnic conflict.

Social networks and associations: the role of civil society

An important distinction is made throughout Nigeria between ‘indigenes’, who trace their ancestry to a specific settlement, and ‘strangers’, who include migrants and their descendants, including those born in the settlement. By exacerbating ethnic differences, the Nigerian Civil War has also reinforced Igbo support networks. The ties between indigenes and home villages are underpinned by social networks and associations which often play an important role in assisting migrants and in channelling resources for local development:

- **Apprenticeships are commonly the first form of employment** of new migrants. Young migrants usually become apprentices to a relative or acquaintance from the home settlement, through formal or informal arrangements. The ‘master’ is responsible not only for training the apprentice, but also for her/his welfare and behaviour. Support may also include facilitating access to urban trade associations and assistance in starting the apprentice’s own business;
- **Town Development Unions, home-based social clubs and age-grades** serve a dual purpose. Among migrants, they provide a financial and emotional safety net, facilitate access to local resources such as housing and employment and ensure that a sense of cultural identity is maintained through celebrations and other traditional activities. They also act as a highly organised method of channelling resources to home settlements by raising funds for, and organising the construction of public facilities such as schools, town halls and water points. In several cases, the contribution of migrant associations to infrastructural development in rural settlements has outstripped public investment. Their significant role as civil society actors should be better supported by the public sector.

Key issues for policy

Farming remains a major occupation for most rural people, although small producers face the highest risks. Access to markets is a critical factor for the viability of small-scale farms. Physical access in the form of roads and transport network improvements is essential. Social access is

equally important, and the representation of farmers' interests and bargaining power needs to be improved by strengthening producers' organisations.

As the relative contribution of agriculture to the income of rural households declines, local non-farm employment opportunities become increasingly important. Rural-based enterprises should be supported, but their impact on natural resources carefully monitored and regulated.

Migration rates are high, and include groups such as young single women who were previously excluded. Migration is perceived as socially desirable, and remittances are a significant part of rural household incomes. However, most migrants wish to return to their home areas at some point. Supporting the investment of migrants in home areas will increase the options for local farm and non-farm employment for both migrants and non-migrants.

Migrant associations play important roles in supporting migrants and in channelling resources to home settlements. A better synergy between these civil society actors and the public sector is key to improving rural infrastructural development.