COVID-19 and the Food Deficit Economy in Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examines the significant impact of the total lockdown adopted by the Nigerian government to checkmate the spread of Coronavirus in the country. The policy has been commended but it had a devastating effect on the food economy of the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. The study argues that the pandemic actually entrenched and deepened food scarcities in the region. This food deficit in the region was only possible because, among the several Nigerian ethnic nationalities, the Igbo owe much of their food supplies from outside. The Coronavirus pandemic total lockdown introduced by the federal government of Nigeria between the months of March to May 2020 amplified the food supply challenge. So while the crisis of food deficiency had the effect of traumatizing the people between 1967 and 1970 on account of the federal government food blockade leading to the brutal defeat of secessionist Biafra, the pandemic completely shut down the region with high prices of food across the length and breadth of the region. Beyond the corona pandemic and as authorities are nearing the objective of flattening the curve, the study advances sundry opinions and suggestions on food security and food control agenda for the survival of the people. Data collections for the study was carried out through oral interviews basically focus group discussion from market men and women, newspaper reports, and participant-observer methods of research analysis as the researchers are residents in Igboland.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research unravels the implication of over dependency of food supply to the Igbo region of Southeastern Nigeria. As indicated, the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown order by the federal government of Nigeria helped amplified the existing food distribution ratio that gets to Southeastern Nigeria. This ordinarily could serve as a wakeup call to the people especially going through memory lane of the events of the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. During this period, the region suffered from food shortages as a result of food blockade as a war policy. Regrettably, the major policies initiated by the former Premier of Eastern Nigeria Dr. Michael Okpara in the 1960s in terms of farm settlements have been completely abandoned. Hence, this paper, as part of its recommendation, insists that food reliance cannot be achieved in circumstances of food-deficit dilemma as currently obtainable in Southeastern Nigeria.
Subjects: History; Archaeology; Cultural Studies

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1. Introduction
An Italian who works in Nigeria flew into Lagos from Milan on 25 February 2020 and had contact with a Nigerian from Ogun State, and on 27 February 2020, he was diagnosed with Covid-19. This was announced as the index case being the first recorded case of Covid-19 in the country (Bernard, 2020:526). The news came not as a surprise because earlier before that date a legislative member at the National Assembly in Abuja raised alarm over the absence of security personnel at the various international airports in Nigeria whose responsibility ordinarily should be to conduct a routine check of every passenger on arrival. Following this development, there was the enforcement of a 2-week lockdown on 30 March 2020 for three very busy commercial regions of the country, namely Ogun State, Lagos State, and the Federal Capital Abuja, following the advice offered to the Nigerian presidency by the National Centre for Disease Control (Bernard, 2020:526).

The lockdown of these three states was followed by other states in Nigeria in order to forestall the chances of contracting and spreading the deadly virus. There was the prohibition of interstate travel and general restrictions on the movement of goods and services with the exception of essential services (Been & Aziz, 2020:1). Scholars have researched on Covid-19 pointing its devastating impact of the disease on the economy as well as the health-care delivery system. As it is, Nigeria is divided into six geopolitical zones, namely, north–east, north–west, north–central, south–west, south–south, and southeast. The Igbo ethnic nationality, our primary focus in this study, occupies the southeast with states such as Imo, Anambra, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi State. There are other Igbo-speaking groups in Rivers, Delta, and Edo state, respectively, in south–south Nigeria.

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria has no access to the sea and thus landlocked with all their coastal neighbors in Calabar or Bonny having no linguistic sameness. This was the circumstance that made it possible for the federal military government to enforce the food blockade policy against Biafra that yielded defeat for the secessionists in 1970. The federal government’s greatest weapon amidst machine guns was hunger. The same inability of the region to cultivate sufficient food for its populace is still much of a challenge to the collective survival of the population. The southeast region currently suffers from a food deficit in terms of producing crops such as onions, tomatoes, yam, potatoes, carrot, oranges, and other crops. The major source of protein such as cows, goats, and the aforementioned crops is supplied from the northern region of Nigeria. The various established cases of clashes in Igboland between farmers and herdsmen stem from the wanton destruction of crops by cattle among other causes.

The Covid-19 outbreak with all its challenges is indeed a clarion call and pointer to the reality of food insecurity in Igboland creating an imperative for immediate response. In spite of the federal government’s directives that vehicles and lorries carrying food, water, and other essential services should be allowed free movement, the corrupt nature of the security agents such as the police, army, civil defence corps, federal road safety corps, and neighbourhood watch securities at the various security posts on the federal highways made this impossible. After extorting so much from lorries carrying food, the prices of commodities skyrocketed and the population suffered for their overdependence on food coming from the northern region of Nigeria. The purported claims of the food supply in the form of palliatives to the region from the federal and state governments were only heard on radio and television, respectively, while the voting population languished in total lack.

The importance of food cannot be overemphasized. It is an essential ingredient needed by all living beings for survival, and its availability determines the standard of living of the people at all times (Iwuagwu, 1999:52). The environment and geography of people determine what food they eat and its availability at all times. Within this context is the issue of climate and its suitability to
agriculture. This is closely linked to soil fertility evidenced inland content made possible by rainfall. In essence, there is an evident nexus between agriculture and the physical environment of Igboland (L. Uzozie, 1966). Igboland is peopled by subsistence farmers with emotional ties to the attributes of their land notably the “soil type, climate and vegetation” (Iwuagwu, 1999:3).

2. Covid-19 berths in Nigeria
In this study, we argue that before now there have been yawning signs of food deficit in the southeast of the country on account of several factors. However, with the outbreak of the current pandemic, our research has shown that the region is now at greater risk of deeper strains of food deficit given the fragile manifestation of our inability to contain the pandemic. In reality, therefore, we have established the interconnection between the worsening food crisis in Southeastern Nigeria and the outbreak of coronavirus in the country. An understanding of the berthing and impact of the virus is a requirement here to properly ground our position and argument on food deficit in the southeast region of Nigeria.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), which was previously known as a 2019-novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) (Chinenyenwa Ohioa et al., 2020), had its origins in Wuhan, China, where it was first reported in late 2019. The disease grew into a serious global health challenge when it killed over 100,000 people in 100 countries (Callaway, 2020) and was thereafter declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020. With weak and fragile health infrastructure, Africa was considered a critical playground for the pandemic, and given Nigeria’s current dwarfed health systems, response to the pandemic was a major source of concern with infected patients requiring admission into intensive care units (ICUs) for acute respiratory diseases and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2) pneumonia. Outside the health challenge, the pandemic has grim implications for Nigeria, especially as the lockdown affected the movement of goods, services, and humans. For the southeast of the country, this was a critical time similar in impact to periods of the civil war that ended in 1970. It is true that the pandemic caught the world unawares, but it must be stated that the impact on the food sector in the southeast would not have been so grim if food security initiatives put in place long before the outbreak were sustained. The lessons emanating from the Covid-19 outbreak require a sustained interrogation of our understanding of the pandemic, on the one hand, and a detailed appraisal of the various agricultural programs in Eastern Nigeria, especially piloted by such credible leaders such as Micheal Okpara, Sam Mbakwe, Jim Nwobodo, and others between 1960 and 2019. What has been the food economy in Igboland and what were these initiatives that could not be sustained?

3. Methodology
The study adopts both the descriptive and qualitative method of research. The various active stake holders in the food distribution chain were interviewed. These include focus group discussions (FGDs) of food retailers in Nsukka in Southeastern Nigeria, and food merchants in Taraba and Benue from where the people in Igbo land rely on for their food supply. Existing materials on food history in the Igbo area were consulted, synthesized, and analyzed descriptively in this paper. The relevant information provided from selected interviews has been incorporated in this paper as well as in building relevant data to justify the empirical concern of the research.

4. Igbo food economy up to 1920
Agriculture occupies a vital place in the economy of Nigeria (Levi Chukwuemeke Uzozie, 1979:68) as it provides employment to over 70% of the working population (Federal Ministry of Economic Development, 1975:30), especially before crude oil swept away its relevance. Food crops grown for consumption within the country constitute about 76% of the total agricultural production, thus amplifying the stark reality that agriculture enterprise in Nigeria is navigating toward subsistence level only.

The Igbo economy rests on a tripod of sectors, namely, agriculture, non-agricultural production, and trade (Chukwu, 2015:39). An Igbo ex slave Olaudah Equiano, who published his autobiography in 1789, recorded thus: “Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and
women, are engaged in it” (Equiano, 1969:76). This probably is expected as the geographical location of the Igbo, in the center of the rain forest, makes their soil extremely fertile and most suitable for agriculture (Adiele E. Afigbo, 1981:126).

To be involved in agriculture presupposes that such people must be well made in terms of strength and discipline. This much was captured by Hugh Crows to the effect that:

The Igbo … are a well formed people of the middle stature: many of their women are of remarkably symmetrical shape and if white would in Europe be deemed beautiful. This race is … of a more mild and engaging disposition than the other tribes particularly the Quaws … they are preferred in the West India colonies for their fidelity and utility as domestic servants, particularly if taken there when young as they then become the most industrious of any of the tribes in the colonies. (Adams et al., 1977:56)

Traditionally, the Igbo are subsistence farmers focusing on such staple crops like yam, cassava, okra, melon, beans, cocoyams, plantains, and pumpkins. Evident division of labor exists between the men and women. While the men were involved in yam cultivation and harvesting, the women engaged in the cultivation of other crops. Cash crops in Igboland were mainly palm products, notably palm oil and, to a lesser extent, palm kernels. Women dominate rural trade as they engage in all manners of economic activities to help out at the home front. They mine salt, especially women from Ikwo and Ezza in the Abakaliki Division. Women also weave mats, make pottery, and monopolize the sale of cooked foods.

Agriculture is a serious business in Nigeria, including Igboland, until oil was struck in commercial quantities in Oloibiri in 1956 (Victor, 2008:140). In the First Republic, agriculture received credible attention with government initiatives tailored to increase and boost production. Within this period, there were the farm settlement schemes, back-to-land campaigns, and Operation Feed the Nation scheme in the Second Republic. In spite of these laudable initiatives, the fortunes of agriculture have greatly dwindled and have kept plummeting. Scholars have observed that there is a curious tendency to relegate the farmer to the background. His point of view is either not sought or is neglected in decisions involving his well being. Undue emphasis is also laid on alien crops as opposed to indigenous annuals and perennial tree crops ideally adapted to the local environments. (B. N Okigbo, 1975: 15-16; Coursey, 1967: vii)

Three broad reasons have been advanced for the neglect accorded agriculture and agricultural systems outside the discovery of crude oil in recent years. Whereas “some felt that as the crops grown were essentially, foods for peasants they were not worthy of research efforts” while many others believed that “western oriented and western-trained agricultural scientists claimed some indigenous staples were too difficult to study.” On the third level, “methods of cultivation deeply rooted in indigenous thought and culture appeared strange to western-trained agricultural scientists, some of whom wished to see the systems of production changed without even understanding their function” (Coursey, 1967: 12). All of these kept agriculture at the back door.

For the southeast region, it was a double challenge with the civil war obstructing the strides in agriculture. As observed by Iwuagwu (2012), “Most of the policies and programmes of the post independence administration of Eastern Nigeria were either temporarily halted or completely abandoned following the eruption of the civil war.” Essentially, plantations, farm settlements and other agricultural establishments that characterized government policies at the time were abandoned. Even the aggressive marketing of fertilizer and other government agricultural extension services suffered severe neglect. More than ever before, food crop production came under severe threat as the outbreak of the war disrupted food production, resulting in massive food importation given that the conducive environment necessary for agricultural production was lacking. (Iwuagwu, 2012)
In the same way, infrastructures of agriculture established by the government of Eastern Nigeria where the Igbo are domiciled between 1962 and 1968 were decisively abandoned or destroyed by the war. It could be argued that the civil war years contributed to the deficit in food production in Igboland. The war also took away the manpower that ordinarily would be deployed to agriculture in the form of the recruitment and enlistment into the Biafra war effort. This much was the position of government propaganda of the period captured by a scholar thus:

That young man who sneak about the village, avoiding service in his country's armed forces was unpatriotic; that young and able-bodied school teacher who preferred to distribute relief when he should be fighting his country's war, was not only unpatriotic but was doing a woman's work, while those who helped these loafers to dodge their civic duties should henceforth re-examine themselves. (Kirk-Green, 1971: 357)

At the end of the civil war, food crisis ensued and this was evidenced in the soaring cost of food items in Igboland with the average citizen being at the receiving end (Steve Elechi, 1977:1). It has been stated and thus a consensus that in terms of agricultural production the Igbo are first and foremost agrarian and produced sufficient food both for home consumption and retail at their various local markets. Oludah Equiano's position on this is very clear as it involved the whole family. This has been justified by V.C Uchendu's (1965:30) postulation about how an average Igbo detests being called ori mgbe ahia laro one who eats only from when there is a market. The world of commerce existed in traditional Igbo setting, but everyone was eager to contribute to it and hence more interest was on agriculture.

Achebe (1958:16) accounts of the Igbo exploits in agriculture in the protagonist Okonkwos family in his classical novel Things Fall Apart mentioning about the gendered nature of Igbo agriculture as follows: “Her mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crop like coco yams, beans and cassava. Yam the king of crops was a man’s crop. The eminence once occupied by yam in Igbo economy has since faded away.” Apart from the difficulties associated with growing yams, poor soil, rural urban migration, Nzimiro (1965:53–54) pointed to the increased rate of migration due to land hunger and increasing cost of farming has been responsible for the decline in yam farming and agriculture in Igbo region. Korieh (2007:227–228) have argued in favor of the fact that yam is a very difficult crop to produce, when compared to cassava, which became a famine relief staple food and strives well in poor soil as a staple food. The absence of bush fallowing and shifting cultivation among the Igbo could be responsible for poor yield in yam production, compelling them to depend on the outside for survival. The Igbo people have other foods like breadfruit and cassava, but depend largely in contemporary times on the northern axis of Nigeria for cattle, goat, sheep, onions, yams, potato, maize, and other crops.

In Igboland, there was in existence from the onset peasant agriculture with limited mechanization, which affects the economic prosperity of the region (Ijere, 1989:33). Regrettably, the kind of rearrangement introduced by Christianity since its inception to the region in 1857 in terms of monogamous marriages paved way to lesser number of labor forces that will embark on producing sufficient food. Iwuagwu (2008:13) is in firm support of the fact that in Abakaliki and Ohaji polygamy seems to have persisted over the years mainly for agricultural purposes while Nzimiro (2001:19) reveals that

the practice of polygamy was possible in the peasant mode of production. The factors of production were the tools and human labour. Production was organized by the domestic group of which the husband, the patriarch, was the head. He mobilized the labour of his domestic group in which the labour resources of his wives and their grown up children were exploited.

A.E. Afigbo (1980:2) is of the view that agriculture in Igboland was organized in a way that most families produced staple foods such as yam, cocoyam, cassava, and vegetable that will last for 1 year. He points to extra Igbo groups such as the North Eastern Igbo (Ogu Ukwu), the Eastern
Igbo (Ikwerre), and riverine Igbo, who despite all odds produced sufficient food and their surplus foods were exported outside Igboland. Justifying this claim, Korieh (2010:251) further reveals that between 1938 and 1942, 4,000 to 6,000 tons of garri per annum from Igboland was sent to the northern region of Nigeria. There was sufficient production of yam in Abakiliki in the period before 1960 due to lesser population of the people cultivating ample lands available to them when compared to other densely populated regions of Igboland (Floyd, 1969:189).

Scholars have claimed that land question and mobility from rural areas to urban centers were responsible for the diminishing level of agriculture in Igboland. By extension, this has to do with increasing decline in manpower to engage in agriculture. The exactitude of what became of Igbo agriculture has been captured by Ozigbo (1999:76) as follows:

Agriculture in Igbo land has remained partially traditional and partially modern. Apart from rice production in Independent Igbo land, the provision of food crops, farming, animal husbandry, fishing, hunting and gathering has largely been neglected. On the contrary, the production of cash crop witnessed a number of innovation because of the interest of the British colonial government in those crops. It was not in the British interest that agriculture be modernized in Igbo land.

The British colonial administration, as we have seen, was only interested in cash crops and not food crops. The focus of agriculture in Igboland during the colonial era was centered on palm oil. Palm produce export from the eastern region of Nigeria between the periods of 1900–1960 was valued at about £1.5 million in 1900 to over £40 million in 1960 (Njoku, 2014:223). Ijere remarked that following the 1962/1963 census about 70% of about 3,670,800 were engaged in palm production (Ijere, 1989:37). The palm oil from the Igbo region had an impact on national economy as follows:

For the Eastern Region, the agricultural produce of export consisted mainly of palm produce with cocoa and rubber added after 1960 under Okpara’s regime. But the bulk of the proceeds was from palm produce of which Nigeria was for a while the largest exporter to the world market. In 1963, Nigeria exported some £172(N344) million worth of goods of which palm oil and kernels accounted for £30.2(N60.4) million of 16.4% shared between the Eastern and Western Regions the latter being dominant in the palm kernel trade while the East dominated the palm oil trade. (P.N.C Okigbo, 1993:100)

Palm produce yielded so much benefits that part of its proceeds was used in building the University of Nigeria Nsukka, previously owned by the Eastern Nigerian government (Ijere, 1989:37). Apart from palm produce, the introduction of rice cultivation in Abakiliki in 1942 by the colonial government gave birth to a new Igbo staple food of commercial importance. Available records indicate that by 1960 Abakiliki was an important destination of rice cultivation as Lorries moved rice from Abakiliki to Benin, Lagos, Ibadan, and was even shipped to Ghana. There was also patronage of Abakiliki rice from Port Harcourt, Abo, and Calabar (Ottenberg, 1995:137). By 1963, thus noted N. M. Elechi (2000:33), rice export from Abakiliki to Ghana fetched M.I Okpara administration in Eastern Nigeria about £3 million sterling. Southeastern Nigeria was an important food destination of Nigeria’s economy.

The government between the periods of 1960–1970 in Igboland was committed to agriculture. There was the establishment of seven farm settlements in Uzo-Uwani, Igbariam, Ohaji, Ulonna, Ere, Abak, and Boki. In addition, poultry farms were established to augment food production (Ozigbo, 1999:74–75). The Obudu cattle ranch was built to ensure that sufficient meat as a source of protein was available (Offodile, 1980:43). Meanwhile, the humplless cattle ehi Igbo found mainly in Ohaozara and Nsukka axis in Igboland were for household economy and not for large commercial purposes (Njoku, 2014:45). Capturing the challenges of animal husbandry among the Igbo, Ndubuisi (2006:146) noted thus:
Livestock industry is one of the sources of elementary means of life-food and raw materials. In a developing society such as Igbo land, or the larger country, Nigeria, the deficient structure of primary production creates under employment and a generally low living standard.

This claim is true of the fact that by 1964 there were about 19,000 planted hectares of land and about 2,000 acres of land planted in the farm settlements (Kilby, 1969: 44). The Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 offered new ilmus test for the assessment of the development of agriculture in Southeastern Nigeria. This is because the untold hardship suffered by the people was alarming as a result of food blockades. The collapse of the Igbo food hubs in Abakaliki, Ikwerre, and some other agricultural zones implied the end of the secessionist attempt. Hunger, not even bullets, killed people immensely (Okonkwo, 2010:94; Aworawo & Adinuba, 2016:205). Since the end of the Nigerian Civil War, many government food policies such as Green Revolution, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), and others have been more of political programs than revolutionary agriculture programs. As a result, essential food items such as cow, beans, yams, onions, carrot, groundnut, pepper, sugarcane, and others are made available in Igboland from the near-total dependence on the northern region. Moses Udeh, a food merchant in oral interview granted to the authors in Wukari, Taraba state, Nigeria, blamed government neglect on agriculture and youths’ loss of interest for the problems of decline in agriculture (Moses, 2021). As a result, the Igbo rely on Benue and Taraba State axis for their major supply of Food (Danladi, Adi, Joel, and Emmanuel, Oral Interview 2021).

5. Covid-19 pandemic and food deficit in Igboland

While the Covid-19 ravaged the globe, one major concern for all humans is the impact of the pandemic on food availability. There have been reported cases of food crisis across the world for which the United Nations World Food Programme warned that

The COVID-19 pandemic could almost double the number of people suffering acute hunger, pushing it to more than a quarter of a billion by the end of 2020 .... (UNWFP, 2020)

Food deficit in Igboland has become more pronounced and put many people and groups at risk. Such people that groaned under the weight of the restrictions of the pandemic include individuals with uncertain and irregular incomes, individuals without capacity to save up reserves of money and food, folks in poor health or those living with stigma, the homeless, the elderly, orphans and vulnerable children, caregivers, people employed in occupations that may be severely impacted, and individuals who rely on public transportation to get to job as well as individuals that migrate for income.

The warning by the UNWFP is a clear admission of a looming crisis. At the moment, 17 August 2020, 49,485 Nigerians are infected with the last daily figure of 417 recorded and 2 fatalities (Obadofin, 2020:11). Problems thrust upon the country by the pandemic are yet to abate as the southeast region remains most vulnerable to food crisis. There was already a verified problem of food supply in Igboland long before the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, but the restrictions to curb the spread of the pandemic have worsened the situation. The lockdown measures declared by the president on 29th March 2020 and similar declarations across the states have disrupted internal supply chains halting food production across the country. This has become more pronounced in Igboland as the Igbo are farmers whose maximum farm output does not satisfy their subsistence consumption, thus the external sourcing from outside. With food production disrupted across the country on account of the pandemic, Igbo dependence on external supplies from the north of the country became a double dilemma. Food prices escalated beyond the reach of peasants; a situation that traumatized families. For instance, in Nsukka, Enugu state, Ngozikia Omeje, fruitseller and a mother of five, sat down dejectedly on a hot afternoon in front of her makeshift shop gazing fixedly at nowhere. “Demand is low, painfully low,” she muttered under her breath, as she has been unable to make any sales the whole day. Her grim face was a sight to behold but most painful to her was that.
all foodstuffs is beyond my reach in this market and I am yet to sell anything to enable me buy our daily stock of food. Imagine a painter of garri we bought #400.00 now #1200.00 this morning. (FGD, Omeje, 2020)

Johnson Igwe, a miller in Obollo Affor, Igboeze North Local Government Area of Enugu state, moaned “My God. I can’t mill because the marketers are not coming,” making reference to wholesale buyers, as he sat at a market stall in the semi-urban location. The signs were already there for discerning eyes to see. Some of the indicators that the pandemic could engender food crisis in Igboland were apparent because food supplies became hard to get locally, economic activities became disrupted, and industries that relied on import and export began to struggle. In all of this, it is important to examine the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic promoted food insecurity in Southeast Nigeria (FGD, Igwe, 2020).

The increase in cost of living associated with the Covid-19 outbreak is so alarming in Nigeria. The lockdown phase was a major blow to the Igbo food economy. Some have argued that the lockdown did not affect (Ayade, 2020:27), but at the same time they forgot the growing rate of insecurity was a major setback to farming as many farmers were attacked in their various farms by suspected Fulani herdsmen. The Igbo people are the worst hit because even if farmers are attacked in Benue, Plateau, or anywhere in the north where food is grown, it automatically affects the food supply, and its cost effects were borne by residents of Southeastern Nigeria – the Igbo region.

The increasing activity of the Fulani herdsmen in food-producing area of Nigeria where the Igbo region depends is alarming. The implication is that food prices coming to Igboland have skyrocketed. For example, the Benue axis has been on constant attack as a result of the Opening Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law prohibiting the Fulani herdsmen to take over the ancestral land of the people of Benue for cattle grazing (Ejembi, 2020:5). Apart from Benue, in Abia state axis, the people of Ukwa West Local Government Area in August 2020 protested against the move to relocate the cattle trade to their place on the account that their farmlands may no longer be safe because of previous experiences (Nwankwo, 2020). In June 2020, a 65-year-old man lost his life following a clash between farmers and herdsmen in Agwa community in Oguta Area of Imo State, Nigeria (OMPALAN,2020:19)

Ejinkeonye (2020:12) frowns at the impact of herdsmen attack on farms as follows:

It is true that beef is required as a source of protein for humans, but that is not the only thing that Nigerians feed on. The farmers need to work on their farms too to produce yam, cassava, vegetables, grain and several other food items for the consumption of the people.

Focus Group Discussion with Traders at Nsukka/Ogige Market Axis (2020) at Nsukka reveals the growing insecurity in Uzowani axis by the notorious activities of Fulani herdsmen. The herdsmen on several occasions attacked peasant farmers in the area and even in the Abakiliki axis. The combination of these factors was a major threat to food production since the aforementioned areas are the food hubs of Igboland. The outbreak of Covid-19 was taking place at the time the planting season was still ongoing. Following the combination of several factors already mentioned, the hike in the price of the commodities was inevitable. Available evidence from field work suggests the destination of many food coming into Igboland. This will help to elucidate our claim of the nature of food-deficit economy currently operational in Igbo economy:

The Covid-19 has led to an increase in inflation of up to 12.82% in food prices (Usim, 2020:25). Besides, there is global impact of climate change on food production as frequent droughts in many parts of the continent with hitherto no history of floods is a major problem militating against food production (Biotechnology Strong Investment for Africa Farmers, 2020:25). In August 2020, food-producing communities of Imo and Abia states, Nigeria, like Umunneochi, Osisioma Ngwa, Isiala Ngwa North, Ukwa West, Ideato South, Owerri West, Owerri North, Ohaji/Egbema, and Oguta were
warned by the federal government such as National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), National Meteorological Agency (NIMET), and the National Hydrological Services (NIHSA) to relocate from impending flood disaster (Duruiheoma, 2020:30).

The federal government’s ban of the importation of food (especially rice) by smugglers through the borders of neighboring countries like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon and Benin republic was for food security in the country including the Igbo areas of Nigeria. This is because the Igbo domestic rice products from Abakaliki, Ishiagu, Adani, and Uzouwani remain insufficient for the consuming public in the region. The available imported rice into the region is now sold twice its former price. Regrettably, the constant adjustments to fuel pump price from N150 down to N125, and later sold for N148 and much later N150, thus made the prices of goods and services unstable. According to Obienyi (2020:25):

Nigeria’s inflation worsened by last year border closure and the Covid-19 pandemic, has been on the upward trajectory for months, triggering a hike in prices of staple foods like rice, vegetable oil, processed foods and others. In the latest report, the composite food index rose by 15.48 percent in July compared to 15.18 percent in June 2020.

The supply of maize, which constitutes 50% of poultry feed, has reportedly gone down in the era of Covid-19. Before this period, a report has it that estimated losses of 8.3–20.6 million tons (52.48-56.19 billion) of maize was recorded in 12 major maize-growing African centers including Nigeria as a result of a new pest known as Fall Army Worm (FAM)(Biotechnology Strong Investment for Africa Farmers, 2020:25). Available evidence indicates that the rising cost of maize is threatening the livelihood of small businesses in Nigeria as value chains of feed producers, chicken and egg vendors, processors, grain traders, veterinary doctors, and drug vendors have suffered significantly (Anyanwu, 2020:25).

In early March 2021, arising from a series of security challenges, especially purported attacks of northern Nigerians in some parts of Igboland, there was stoppage of food supplies from northern Nigeria to Igboland. The food prices skyrocketed in parts of Southern Nigeria while in the north there were losses as a result of the actions of the Amalgamated Union of Food and Cattle Dealers of Nigeria (Taiwo-Obalonye, 2011:27). The Association of South East Town Unions of Nigeria (ASETU) saw the action of northern food vendors as a wakeup call to Igbo people against what it described as the imperialism of northern agro-cartels (Eze, 2021:27).

The implications of the aforementioned development are enormous for the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. The persistent food deficiency in the region speaks in volume of the total neglect on agriculture by post-civil war leadership. Osazuwa (2020:14) captured the impact of the Covid-19 on the food economy as follows:

Before Covid-19, prices of food stuff (staple food) were relatively stable for a longtime. For instance, a bag of foreign rice was sold for between N18, 000 and N21, 000. It is now sold for between N27, 000 and N29, 000. A plastic (paint) bucket of white and yellow gari rose from between N250 and N400 to between N600 to N900. Prior to this time, one could get a tuber of yam for as low as N300, but it suddenly jumped to about N800 for the least size.

In Igboland, relative primitive mode of production is ongoing; producing household consumption in palm oil, yam, cassava, rice, maize, groundnuts, banana, cocoa, goat, poultry, pigs, and dogs. The production on subsistence level in agro products makes the region the food-deficit hub of Nigeria.

6. Conclusion
The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has opened up and entrenched the dilemma of food insufficiency in Igboland. It further reveals critical issues on the correlation between food and crime as witnessed in several cases of theft during the period of March to June 2020 lockdown policy of the
federal government of Nigeria. There is a need therefore for a policy document and implementation strategy that will encourage food crop as well as animal husbandry productions in commercial quantities in Igboaland. Since the return of democratic rule in 1999 after several years of military dictatorship, the region has been exposed to various forms of violence emanating from marauding cattle herdsmen in the absence of indigenous animal husbandry production at the commercial level. With the rising unemployment profile of the region, the reintroduction of commercial agriculture could help address the numerous problems of crimes in kidnapping, advanced fee fraud, prostitution, and youth restiveness militating against the development of the region.

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