

THE LAND HAS CHANGED

History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria

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CHAPTER SIX

THE AFRICAN ELITE, AGRARIAN REVOLUTION, AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE, 1954–80

In 1954, the Lyttelton Constitution, adopted as part of British political reform in Nigeria, transferred aspects of economic planning to the regional governments.¹ By this time, agriculture was still contributing about 60 per cent of national income and subsistence for over 70 per cent of the population.² In the Eastern Region, agriculture was seen as the most important route to economic development and increased welfare for the population.³ The palm produce trade still dominated the rural economy. Key policies focused around cash crop production on plantation models, incorporation of rural farmers into the government's agricultural programs, and the expansion of food production as a corollary of the government's overall agricultural program. However, the post-independence boom was short. By the mid-1960s, political and structural problems were holding back the progress and any gains made. Economically, this set the stage for the agricultural crisis that engulfed most of rural Igboland from the 1970s. This chapter examines the attempts made by the indigenous elite to expand agricultural production and the successes and failures of the agricultural programs implemented under the supervision of local state actors. It also explores how the unintended consequences of major political and structural changes in Nigeria, i.e., the Nigeria Civil War (1967–70), and later, the expansion of the petroleum industry from the late 1970s, affected the trajectory of agriculture. These two factors would drastically reduce the

contribution of agriculture to the total export earnings of the region in particular, and the country in general, and threaten the subsistence and ability of the rural population to survive through agricultural production.

PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIGENOUS REFORMS

The establishment of the Eastern Nigerian Development Corporation (ENDC) and Eastern Regional Development Board (ERDB) in 1954 marked an important step in the government's attempt to accelerate the pace of agricultural development, especially the oil palm industry. This pilot scheme, which began in Abak and Uyo Provinces, was extended to Owerri Province in 1954. It also marked the beginning of the indigenization of agricultural policy in Eastern Nigeria and the transformation of the nature and scope of government support for agriculture.⁴ The mid-1950s also witnessed further development of earlier programs. Extension services and demonstrations to improve the skills of local farmers were introduced.⁵ Practical school farms, field days, and agricultural shows were instituted to stimulate farmers' interest in new farming techniques.⁶ Extension work became available to all the divisions of the region with the opening of the new School of Agriculture at Umuahia in 1955. The Eastern Regional Production Development Board also encouraged peasant participation by paying a subsidy of £5 to individuals or communities for the rehabilitation of palm grooves.⁷

The desire to improve quality led to the introduction of innovations in palm oil production methods. According to Eno Usoro, the survival of local producers in the industry "depended upon changes in processing to meet the marketing board's export quality requirements, especially since low grade oil was no longer purchased by the boards."⁸ One of the significant innovations introduced was the hand press for extracting oil. Oil press operatives often carried out digesting and pressing procedures, after which the farmers took away their oil and kernels. Indeed, hand presses were much more successful than the manual method, extracting about 20 per cent more oil than the manual method.⁹ The traditional method was also more laborious. Owners of hand presses often provided their facilities to farmers for a fee. It was the

farmer's responsibility to strip the bunch and cook the fruit. The use of the hand press gained currency as a cheap competitor with the pioneer oil produced in the mills established by the government. There were over 3,200 hand presses operating in the Eastern Region by 1959.¹⁰

Another innovation introduced by the government was the installation of palm oil mills following the establishment of pioneer oil palm projects. The mills involved a simple factory process designed to process about three-quarters of a ton of fruit per hour. Between 1949 and 1954, the Board of the ENDC spent about £925,200, or 64 per cent of its expenditure, on the erection of oil mills.¹¹ By 1954, the 56 oil mills operating in the region employed a labour force of about 1,368 people.¹² The mills processed a total of 33,609 tons of fruits, producing 5,716 tons of oil and 2,331 tons of kernels, in the first quarter of 1953.¹³ The export of palm products gained momentum from the mid-1950s onward, with the Eastern Region producing over 40,000 tons of palm kernel and over 170,000 tons of palm oil per quarter by 1959.¹⁴ The numbers of mills would increase to more than 200 in 1962, producing about 25,000 tons of oil.¹⁵

However, there was resistance to the introduction of oil mills in some parts of Igboland.¹⁶ Women resisted the introduction of both hand presses and pioneer oil mills in Ngwa and neighbouring areas because these innovations threatened their control over palm kernels.¹⁷ They particularly resisted the attempts by European firms to buy the uncracked nuts.¹⁸ The innovations were resisted for other reasons. According to Chief Eneremadu, "There was widespread mistrust of the government's real intentions and fear that the introduction of these mills would result in loss of land and oil palms to the government."¹⁹ In addition, the substantial cost involved in acquiring hand presses discouraged many. The price of a press rose from about £45 in 1945 to an average of £65 by 1953 due to increased demand.²⁰ Overall, the 1950s witnessed significant increase in innovation and a corresponding increase in levels of production. The pace of government participation would accelerate after Nigeria gained full political independence from Britain in 1960.

INDEPENDENCE AND THE REGIONAL AGRICULTURAL INITIATIVE

“Agrarian revolution” became a household slogan in Eastern Nigeria from 1960 onward. The population was still overwhelmingly rural and the economy was based on the production of palm oil and kernels and on services related to the bulking and transportation of the products to major produce-buying centres. Therefore, agricultural development was seen as an essential part of the process of modernization after independence. The region’s agricultural revolution was shaped by the vision of the first premier of the Eastern Region, M. I. Okpara, and the minister for agriculture, P. N. Okeke-Ojiudu. Okpara was a strong advocate of what he called “pragmatic socialism.” Okpara believed that the region’s development lay in an agricultural revolution that created wealth for both the state and peasant farmers. As a pragmatist, he owned a large farm in his hometown. His proactive stance on agriculture was inspired by the desire to transform the countryside by creating an ideal agricultural economy that would embrace peasants.

The trust of the Eastern Region’s agricultural development strategy was the creation of large-scale state-run farm projects under its tree crop program. The tree crop initiative was a composite of three main programs: the Oil Palm Rehabilitation Scheme (OPRS), aimed at replanting 24,000 hectares (60,000 acres) with new hybrid palms,²¹ community plantations, and farm settlements. During the First Development Plan (1962–68), the government allocated £30.4 m, or about 37 per cent of its capital expenditure, to agriculture.²² Approximately 62 per cent of the investment in agriculture was allocated to tree crops.²³



Dr. M. I. Okpara: The architect of the agricultural revolution. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the National Archives, London. PRO, INF 10/253.)

OIL PALM REHABILITATION SCHEME (OPRS)

The OPRS began in 1962 as part of the first six-year development plan and was arguably the most important project under the tree crop program in terms of its scope. The government aimed to tie the government's agricultural programs to peasant producers through intensified oil palm rehabilitation. The major objective was the improvement and replacement of old oil palms with seeds capable of improved yields per acre, producing fruits with increased oil content.²⁴ The department of agriculture supplied free seedlings and fertilizer and offered extension services for the first five years to participating farmers. Participating farmers were also paid up to \$28.00 per acre over the five-year period in which crops were expected to mature.²⁵ The incentives offered by the

government generated enthusiasm on the part of rural farmers. Philip Njoku, who started commercial farming in 1961, recalls: “We were given free advice by extension officers as well as £5 per annum in cash from the government.”²⁶ The OPRS accounted for 8.4 per cent of the total proposed expenditure on tree crops and by the end of 1966, about 50,000 acres had been planted with oil palm out of targeted acreage of 60,000, while over 4,000 farmers participated in the scheme in its first five years of operation.²⁷

EASTERN NIGERIA DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (ENDC) PLANTATIONS/ESTATES

The Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation plantations represented the most ambitious of the agrarian development programs.²⁸ In principle, the ENDC plantation project represented a major step towards the achievement of a comprehensive agricultural development policy. A total of 148,930 acres was acquired for plantation development in twenty-two locations in the first five years after independence.²⁹ By the end of 1965, 67,000 acres had been planted with cash crops, with 85 per cent coverage projected by the end of 1968.³⁰

However, the conditions in most parts of the Eastern Region posed a challenge to the project. While some of the plantations were located in areas of relatively “low” population density in the Calabar and Uyo Provinces, the rubber plantations at Ameke in Umuahia Division, Emeabiam and Obiti in Owerri Division were located in high-density areas. By national standards, even areas of “low” population density in Igboland have historically been relatively high in density.³¹ People living in these highly populated areas suffered the effects of large-scale land alienation. In addition, the establishment of plantations created land tenure problems and weakened local food security.³² Disputes between village groups over the ownership of particular tracts of land occurred frequently. This continues to generate tension between communities and the government to the present day. Furthermore, loss of peasant lands forced many to depend largely on the market for subsistence. Oral sources from Emeabiam, where a rubber plantation was established under the government’s plantation scheme, emphasize that local peasants

Table 6.1. Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation, Agricultural and Plantations Division Situation Report, 1963.

NAME OF PLANTATION	DATE STARTED	ACREAGE ACQUIRED	ACREAGE PLANTED BY 1963
Calaro Oil Palm Estate	Prior to 1960	11,000	7,700
Kwa Falls Oil Palm Estate	Prior to 1960	3,724	3,563
Ikom Cocoa Estate	Prior to 1960	4,707	3,089
Oghe Cashew Industry	Prior to 1960	1,870	1,870
Bonny Coconut Estate	Prior to 1960	1,000	860
Elele Oil Palm Estate	1960	7,500	3,100
Abia/Bendeghe Cocoa Estate	1960	6,000	3,514
Umuahia Cocoa Estate	1960	2,000	1,541
Arochukwu Cocoa Estate	1960	2,000	1,591
Eket Oil Palm Estate	1961	8,965	85
Elele Rubber Estate	1961	5,500	1,200
Obubra Cocoa Estate	1961	3,000	1,605
Obubra Rubber Estate	1961	10,000	380
Ibiae Oil Palm Estate	1962	12,000	120
Emeabiam Rubber Estate	1962	8,000	800
Amaeke Abam Rubber Estate	1962	8,000	300
Biakpan Rubber Estate	1962	8,000	300
Etche Rubber Estate	1962	15,000	500
Obrenyi Cocoa Estate	1962	4,000	103
Boje Cocoa Estate	1962	2,500	637
Nsadop Oil Palm Estate	1963	18,000	Nil

Source: NAE, ESIALA, 64/1/1.

resisted the alienation of their land for the rubber plantation. According to a former employee of the Emeabiam Rubber Estate, “the government has never compensated us adequately for our farm land which they took for the rubber estate.”³³

The plantation projects faced other problems, including inaccurate feasibility studies and topographic, pedologic, and cadastral map surveys. The lack of soil analysis and the planting of crops on unsuitable soils led to crop failures.³⁴ The Ubani section of the Umuahia Cocoa Estate and much of the



Onitsha Agricultural Show, c. 1962. (Reproduced from the library of the National Archives, Enugu.)



Tractor laying plastic water pipe at the Umudike Agricultural Research Station, 1963. PRO INF 10/250. (Reproduced from the library of the National Archives, Enugu.)

Arochukwu and Obubra Cocoa Estates failed to produce healthy trees, despite the heavy cost involved in the initial establishment of the plantations.³⁵ The Ubani and Arochukwu plantations were replaced with coffee and oil palm respectively because cocoa could not do well in these estates.

The mechanized nature of their operation did not generate the desired employment. It was estimated that the plantations would employ 80,000 elementary school graduates, 15,000 school certificate holders, and 2,000 university graduates.³⁶ Judging from the employment figures in 1966, the plantations did not create the desired employment.³⁷ In addition, agriculture by this time had become unattractive for young school leavers.³⁸ Planners also ignored questions of gender as officials followed a technocratic approach to agricultural development.³⁹ Zebulon Ofurum, who worked at the rubber plantation, located at Emeabiam near Owerri, remembers, “Women were not employed in the rubber plantations because the work was seen as men’s work.” They were employed occasionally to “weed the plantation,” he recalled.⁴⁰

COMMUNITY PLANTATIONS

The community plantation program was an important component of the first six-year development plan. The scheme aimed to change and modernize “village life in *toto*,” based on communal self-help, economies of scale, and crop specialization, and to maximize marketed output.⁴¹ There was the desire also to change the traditional land tenure patterns in order to guarantee larger land holdings to practising farmers and use local resources, especially “abundant labour, as a substitute for scarce capital.”⁴² Selected farmers received free seedlings and fertilizer to maintain their crops on land leased to individual members of farmers’ cooperatives by the government.⁴³ In addition to the main crop of oil palm, each farmer was required to grow food crops to support himself and his family. By 1965, there were twelve community plantations with 970 participants, occupying 11,750 acres of land.⁴⁴ The establishment of these plantations marked the beginning of what Floyd called the “plantation decade.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, there were obstacles to the successful implementation of the community plantation projects. A key requirement for participation in the new community farms was a farmer's ability to provide a minimum of five acres. But very few farmers had access to five contiguous acres that could be devoted entirely to oil palm. Indeed, over 85 per cent of the region's farmers cultivated less than 2.5 acres in 1963.⁴⁶ Most of central Igboland, including Mbaise, Owerri, Mbano, and Obowo, were already facing severe land scarcity. The communal land-tenure system in most parts of Igboland also precluded any large-scale organization of land to accommodate those who might have had an interest in participating in the program. The modernizing model adopted ignored the realities of rural life in Igboland. There were men and women who could have taken up cash crop farming on the scale envisioned by the government but abandoned such ideas. Substantial capital was required to employ farm labour and to rent or lease land. Farmers who did not have access to their own or family land could spend as much as £300 to purchase land.⁴⁷ Women faced even more obstacles than men did. They could not rely on family, friends, cooperatives, and *isusu* (thrift societies), among other sources, for loans as did men.

Although labour was readily available, it was expensive. Most of the labour was not family labour, and farmers hired men and women to clear the land, plant seedlings, and maintain groves on a daily basis. In the 1960s, farmers paid high wages to labourers in a combination of cash and provision of meals. Male labourers earned an average of 3 shillings and 7 pence with food and 4 shillings and 3 pence without food per day. Women earned about 10 or 11 pence less than men did. Wages for both male and female labourers were about 8 pence per day less when they were provided with meals.⁴⁸ In addition, the patriarchal assumptions about farmers and land tenure systems, which effectively vested land rights in men, limited the opportunity for women to participate in official agricultural programs. Philip Njoku, a beneficiary of the government's support for local farmers, recalls that men dominated oil palm production on the plantation model. He remembers, "Our oil palm cooperative had a membership of 100 men and two women."⁴⁹ Since women did not generally belong to the agricultural cooperatives, male-dominated cooperative societies defined the community agricultural schemes.

FARM SETTLEMENTS

The most elaborate of the government's agricultural programs was the farm settlement scheme. In 1961, the premier of the Eastern Region, Dr. M. I. Okpara, travelled on an economic mission, which took him to Israel, Malaya, Ceylon, India, West Germany, and the United Kingdom.⁵⁰ His visit to Israel, in particular, played a critical role in the development of the settlement schemes in the Eastern Region. On his return with a team of Israeli experts, the premier announced in a speech in 1961 that a number of farm settlements would be established at a cost of £500,000 each. Each settlement was expected to employ about 400 young settlers and their families on individual farms and villages with government financial and technical support.⁵¹ The government's vision of settler life was informed by an ideology referred to as "pragmatic African Socialism."⁵² P. N. Okeke, the minister for agriculture, noted that the farm settlements would serve as a model for the masses of the peasant farmers to emulate. This was the most important long-term aim of the scheme.⁵³ The government believed that the trickle-down effects of the scheme would ultimately improve peasant production, provide career opportunities for school leavers, and stem rural-urban drift.⁵⁴ The achievement of these objectives was predicated upon the availability of boys who would make careers in modern farming.⁵⁵

The scheme was based on the Israeli model of the "smallholder village" (*moshavin*), where settlers have secure title to their holdings as part of a larger cooperative.⁵⁶ The settlement scheme was expected to provide an alternative to the system of extension services, as a means of disseminating new techniques to farmers throughout the region, as well as to promote the social integration of different ethnic groups and communities.⁵⁷ The government enlisted the help of international agencies and organizations to assist in the realization of its agricultural development program.⁵⁸ In 1963, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided technical assistance in the form of a poultry specialist and an irrigation engineer.⁵⁹ During the same period, Israel provided technical assistance to the region for the planning and implementation of the farm settlement scheme.⁶⁰

By 1965, the government had acquired about 148,930 acres in 22 locations for various schemes under the plantation development program.⁶¹

Table 6.2. Farm settlements in Eastern Nigeria, 1962–66.

SETTLEMENT	TOTAL AREA PLANNED		AREA PLANTED DECEMBER 1966		TYPE OF CROP	SETTLERS BY DECEMBER 1966	DATE STARTED
	Acres	Hectares	Acres	Hectares			
Boki	11,541	4,616.4	528.65	211.5	Oil palm, citrus	240	Nov., 1962
Uzou-wani	10,562	4,224.8	619.00	247.6	Rice	190	Mar., 1965
Igbar-iam	6,560	2,624.0	1,775.00	710.0	Oil palm, citrus	350	Nov., 1962
Erei	10,385	4,154.0	1,338.00	535.2	Oil palm	360	Oct., 1964
Ulonna South	2,018	807.2	892.00	356.8	Oil palm, Rubber	240	April, 1964
Ulonna North	5,780	2,312.0	623.00	249.2	Oil palm, Rubber	120	Jan., 1965
Ohaji	14,929	5,971.6	2,053.40	821.4	Oil palm, Rubber	360	Nov., 1962
Total	61,775	24,710.0	7,829.05	3,131.7		1,860	

Source: H. I. Ajaegbu, *Urban and Rural Development in Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 65.

The government set up six farm settlements covering 61,775 acres at Ohaji, Igbariam, Erei, Boki, Ulonna South, Ulonna North, and Uzouwani.⁶² With 1,070 settlers in 1966, about 7,829.05 acres were planted with various cash crops, including oil palm, rubber, and citrus fruit.⁶³ The settlers were required to cultivate food crops, such as yams, cocoyams, and maize on their compound plots for their own subsistence. Equipped with modern facilities including maternity homes, schools, and modern farming equipment, these plantations represented the most ambitious of the government's agricultural development programs and its attempt to create "modern," self-supporting farming households.

The scheme did not work in practice for several reasons. The government hoped that there would be a steady inflow of foreign capital, to the tune of



Prospective settlers being interviewed for admission to a farm settlement. (Reproduced from the library of the National Archives, Enugu.)

nearly half of the total outlay of the budget. This was not realized.⁶⁴ In addition, conditions in Eastern Nigeria were different from the conditions in Israel upon which the government modelled the settlement project. The success of farm settlements in Israel is related to the peculiar historical circumstances in which the members of the Jewish Diaspora found themselves. With little agricultural experience, the scheme offered them the opportunity to acquire agricultural skills in a new environment.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the Eastern Nigerian farmers already had centuries of agricultural knowledge and many years of commercial agriculture experience behind them, so the new system operated under different socio-economic conditions.

Other factors worked against the settlement scheme. The policy of collectivization was implemented under unfavourable social conditions and was imposed on an unwilling rural population. The settlement projects, which amounted to forced villagization and relocation of peasants, was not very successful in attracting settlers because the project was adapted in a capitalist system that lacked the force involved in most socialist societies where collectivization had been adopted. The settlement schemes often took settlers away from their immediate localities, which tended to sever kinship-based labour

networks. The official report of the ENDC in 1963 acknowledged: “more attention needs to be given to the social implications of plantation development and to the impact on society and the social structure.”⁶⁶ Subsequent studies by a social anthropologist attached to the Uzouwani settlement agreed that the whole idea of a farm settlement was “strange.”⁶⁷ He noted that dormitory life, communal feeding, and the separation from home were like “taking a plunge into the unknown.”⁶⁸ Floyd and Adinde noted that sociologists or human geographers who studied the farm settlements could detect the phenomenon described as “settler shock,” and without difficulty.⁶⁹

Furthermore, the management of the settlements was not in line with indigenous ideas. The activities of government supervisors, the over-centralization of decision-making, and the bureaucratic approach of the civil service made work frustrating for those who had to do it.⁷⁰ In addition, many settlers saw themselves as civil servants working for the government and did not regard settlement farms as their own private, profit-oriented enterprises.⁷¹ This was more so for those settlers from the land-owning communities. Eugene Nwana, who was the administrator of the Ohaji Farm Settlement during the first five years of its establishment, explains:

Settlers from the land-owning communities were less committed to their work than their mates from other parts of the region. They were more readily diverted by events in their native homes, such as a festival, death of a relative or friend and the mourning engagements that followed, meeting friends outside the settlement, and general laziness.... It appears that what attracted them was the stipend that settlers were paid during the period when the food farm and plantation were established.⁷²

The desire to create employment was not very successful. The farm settlements were semi-mechanized and capital-intensive rather than labour-intensive and, therefore, employed very little labour. The number of settlers (1,860) in 1966 was very limited compared to the number of unemployed people in the region. Intakes of settlers continued to remain low, and, by 1970, the settlements had only 3,350 families, which represented what Floyd called “a drop in the bucket” compared to the employment needs of the region.⁷³ Similarly,

the system did not do as much to relieve congestion in high-density areas as had been envisaged. The Igbariam scheme drove a number of tenant farmers who had historically survived by working the land in the area to scatter. Since these tenant farmers were forced to forfeit their livelihoods in the Igbariam area, many moved to other parts of Onitsha Province, where they added to the rural over-population and under-employment.⁷⁴ The growth of dependency on imported food items was an indication of the failure of that settlement and other agricultural schemes.

There was much government control of settlers' lives. The contracts which settlers were forced to enter into made them tenants-at-will to the government of the region for a period of thirty-five years, which was considered the length of the active working life of the first settler.⁷⁵ Settlers undertook to work hard each day in accordance with a regimented timetable. Absence from work except in cases of certified illness incurred a fine of £1.⁷⁶ A settler could not sublet or fragment his holdings. A tenancy could change hands under three conditions. First, a son could inherit his father's holding on the death of his father. Second, the settler could be evicted if the conditions of entry into the settlement were violated. In this case, the new settler inherited the capital liabilities involved in establishing the holding. Third, a settler could leave the settlement voluntarily, after which the holding would be transferred to a new settler under the same conditions as above.⁷⁷ It is doubtful that settlers could easily break away from their contracts since they were required to repay subsistence loans of three shillings per day provided for the first two years. Besides being forbidden to form trade unions, settlers were forced to belong to farm settlement co-operative societies and to sell their produce to the co-operative societies for wholesale marketing.⁷⁸ This organizational structure, the insecurity of tenure, the fear of eviction, and the regimented settlement life could not have made for optimum production. In actuality, the settlers were mere labourers instead of owner-operators.

Acquisition of land was not easy. The alienation of large tracts of land created problems in some of the settlement communities. In the Ohaji settlement, for example, Nwana noted that different communities owned the 6,085 hectares of land acquired for the settlement. Since settlers were supposed to enjoy the right of ownership, tension arose between local and "foreign" elements in the settlement communities. Some villagers opposed the recruitment

of non-indigenes, in particular Igbo, into the settlements located in the non-Igbo areas. Many in these areas viewed this as the colonization of their land by the Igbo, since each settler was perceived as enjoying rights of ownership of his plantation land in perpetuity. Others saw the project as “land snatching and rather than co-operate with it, even by copying good methods of agriculture, tried as much as possible to get even.”⁷⁹ One village group remarked: “a time will eventually come when a large proportion of our productive land will pass into the ownership of non-indigenes. It is a dangerous threat to our interests and those of our posterity.”⁸⁰

There were demographic issues. About 7,828.05 acres of land had been alienated from rural communities for the settlement schemes by 1966.⁸¹ With population densities far above the national average in a land-hungry society, land alienation remained a potential source of conflict.⁸² In addition, farm settlements, the activities of migrant farmers, and the expansion of land-hungry communities took a “heavy toll on the natural vegetation of the region.”⁸³ The entire program was far too costly, and any achievement came at a high environmental and ecological cost, and as had been the case with previous state-sponsored agricultural projects, the government was mainly concerned with export crop development. Few farm settlements cultivated food crops such as yams, cocoyams and maize in their compound lands, but all the farm settlements grew export crops.⁸⁴ Because the mono-cropping system of agriculture practised in the settlements was based, for the most part, upon the practices of other societies, the issue of local conditions and sustainable practices was not fully considered by the government.

Life in the settlements and the contractual arrangements there revealed an implicit and explicit bias against women. The notion of a self-supporting farming household inevitably drew women into the farming settlements, but the program emphasized their reproductive role as child bearers and their productive role as subsistence producers. Men were responsible for cash cropping, while women provided domestic services, raised children, and tended food crops in the farm plot.⁸⁵ Only male settlers could enter into a contract with the government for the duration of the contract.⁸⁶ The conditions under which tenancy could change hands also favoured male children over a settler’s spouse or female children. Tenancy changed hands under three conditions – by a man’s son inheriting his deceased father’s holding, including assets

Table 6.3. Marketing board purchase of palm oil and kernels, 1960–66 (in thousands of long tons).

Year	PALM OIL		PALM KERNEL	
	Nigeria	Eastern Region	Nigeria	Eastern Region
1960	190	170	423	208
1961	173	161	430	208
1962	128	121	362	169
1963	149	139	414	197
1964	148	139	401	203
1965	164	158	449	n.a.
1966	130	128	415	n.a.

Note: One long ton is the equivalent of 2,240 pounds.

Source: Federation of Nigeria, *Federal Office of Statistics, Annual Abstract of Statistics, 1964* (1965) and Central Bank of Nigeria, *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts, 1966* (Lagos, 1967).

and liabilities, by the eviction of a settler if he violated the conditions of his contract, and by the voluntary relinquishment of a holding at the settlement. The settlement scheme was structured to benefit male farmers, and passing land and property from father to son(s) was the norm.

The objective of social integration and improvement in the economic status of settlers could not be attained. The scheme operated as a state enterprise in a region where peasants were historically the backbone of export production. Although Floyd identified what he characterized as positive gains, reflected in neatly kept farms and modern houses as opposed to the “primitive” dwellings of the farmers,⁸⁷ such a view is reflective of the official idea that the key to agricultural development lay in the “transformation of peasant life.”⁸⁸ Officials ignored indigenous knowledge and failed to recognize that peasants had other interests and motivations that often did not fit into the official concept of development. The removal of settlers from their roots and communities and the setting up of settlements in new, unfamiliar locations was contrary to basic Igbo ideals that emphasized the primacy of locality and space as a source of individual and group identity. Moreover, the young boys who were supposed to be drawn into the program did not show interest in farming. By the 1960s, the civil service provided what most of them perceived as a more

prestigious form of work. Yet the regional government saw its mission as a noble one. It increased its hold on the peasants through market intervention and the extraction of peasant surplus and land.

Overall, there was progress in the cash crop sector during the first few years of independence. By 1963, the government had made significant progress in the palm rehabilitation scheme, the rubber planting scheme, the cocoa improvement scheme, extension services, and in the extension of agricultural credit to farmers.⁸⁹ Agriculture still contributed about 80.3 per cent of the total value of Nigeria's exports in the first few years after independence with a significant percentage coming from the palm oil sector in Eastern Nigeria.⁹⁰ Although, Okpara's policy began as a revolution in favour of rural farmers, the agricultural programs were state-centred and continued to be guided by government "experts." But, the post-independence era differed in some respects from previous years.⁹¹ There was recognition of the need for a balance between export crop production and the production of food crops for the population. The incorporation of rural farmers was deemed essential to achieving the dual goal of expanding both cash crops and subsistence production.

FOOD CROP DEVELOPMENT

Significant effort was made to improve food production through both direct and indirect support for peasants from 1958. The inclusion of foodstuffs and poultry production was to reduce the dependency on imported food. Although 75 per cent of the capital outlay for agriculture in this era was allocated to tree crops, an important aspect of the regional agricultural program was intercropping food crops in oil palm plantations. About 67 per cent of the land under the rehabilitation scheme was intercropped with food crops. Indeed, the allocation of 7.6 per cent of the agricultural budget to food crop production was a significant improvement over earlier years.⁹² Cassava accounted for 85 per cent of the cultivated acreage. Yams accounted for 5.8 per cent, and maize, cocoyam, bananas, plantains, okra, pepper, and other vegetables made up the remaining proportion of crops.⁹³

The cultivation of rice, for example, continued to expand into the mid-1960s. The government distributed improved rice seeds (B.G. 79) to farmers. It increased the distribution of rice to farmers from 3,799 lbs. in the 1958/59 planting season to 47,809 lbs. during the 1963/64 planting season.⁹⁴ Rice cultivation in Abakaliki, Ogoja, and Enugu Provinces received a major boost because of favourable growing conditions. In 1964, 145 of the 225 privately owned rice mills in the Eastern Region were located in Abakaliki.⁹⁵

The regional government also aggressively pursued cassava improvement. The Ministry of Agriculture developed a new strain of cassava, which doubled previous yields. In 1964/65, the government distributed 1,214 bundles of 50 cuttings to farmers. This was one of several attempts to improve agricultural productivity by rural farmers.⁹⁶ The popularity of gari and fermented cassava (*akpu*), the low cost of production and the ease of storage contributed to the extensive cultivation of cassava throughout the region.⁹⁷ These advantages compelled increasing numbers of farmers to embrace cassava cultivation.⁹⁸ The expansion of cassava cultivation led to an increase in the quantity of gari exports to northern Nigeria.⁹⁹ Once gari became a popular staple, Sarah Emenike of Item recalled, "Every man and woman turned their attention to cassava."¹⁰⁰

In 1966, the Ministry of Agriculture published a guide as part of its overall development program, which included provisions for the extension of rural education to women. The department of agriculture argued that rural women need "an opportunity to develop their potential" and to "broaden their experience to meet and bridge the demands of a growing Nigeria."¹⁰¹ Thus, the department sought to provide rural women with "an informal educational service in home economics and related and pertinent agricultural interests." The specific areas of interest to women under this program were listed as food preparation, nutrition, clothing, home improvements, child care and care of family members, and garden and livestock production (for use in the home and marketing).¹⁰² This line of thinking was at the centre of the agricultural development strategy of the region.

Overall, the state's agricultural policies in the early post-independence period were pragmatic, but the broad contours of development ideology did not change radically. Indeed the revolution was incomplete. Onyegbule Korieh recalled that many rural farmers had hoped that prices of palm oil and

kernels would improve under the new government. According to him, “We hoped that our own people will provide better prices than the European offered us. We thought that our conditions would improve, but this was not always really the case.”¹⁰³ At the same time, the government’s policies developed bureaucratic and anti-peasant aspects that ignored the social and cultural dynamics of the region’s people. The top-down approach that marked colonial agricultural development and the emphasis on cash crops continued in the post-colonial era.

The government’s extension services did not reach the majority of rural farmers. This was especially the case for those who did not engage in cash crop production. Participation in official agricultural schemes was not often possible for women or the average rural farmer. A survey in 1968 indicated that the participants in government schemes were “not typical farmers.” The average participant was “a married man about 40 years old with some formal education and some non-farm and commercial experience.”¹⁰⁴ Sybilia Nwosu, like many others, could not recall ever encountering an extension officer or receiving any support from the government with regard to her farming.¹⁰⁵ Despite the rhetoric, the exclusion of women from state-supported agricultural programs, which began in the colonial era, continued. As Jerome Wells has noted, the agricultural policies of the post-independence state were patriarchal, paternalistic, and reflected the anti-peasant stance of local bureaucrats.¹⁰⁶

In spite of the temporary boom of the early years of independence in 1960, the agricultural sector was in decline by the late 1960s. The most devastating impact on agricultural and rural life were the outcomes of political crisis linked to the Nigerian civil war and the structural changes in the overall economy rooted in the emergence of petroleum as a major source of revenue for Nigeria. These two issues and the responses of the state will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR AND THE AGRICULTURAL CRISIS, 1967–70

Emergent Africa has known more than its share of strife and bloodshed, from the Mau Mau terror in Kenya to the carnage of Congolese secession. But in scope of suffering, in depth of bitterness, in the seeming hopelessness of any solution short of wholesale slaughter, there is no parallel to the tragedy that has been gathering force the past 14 months in Nigeria – once Africa’s brightest hope for successful nationhood. One of the opposing forces, wielding a full array of modern weapons from Britain, Russia and much of Europe, is the federal government of Nigeria. It is determined to crush a rebellion that it feels will destroy its republic. On the other side, armed chiefly with determination, stands the secessionist state of Biafra, the home of Nigeria’s Ibo tribe. The Ibos [*sic*] are convinced that they are fighting not only for independence but for their survival as a people. – *Time*, 23 August, 1968

The story of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war is frequently told in many Igbo families. While the stories of the horrors visited on individuals are well known, the economic and social effects of the war, particularly for agriculture, have not been studied. The memories of men and women reveal that they starved and were desperate for food. The level of food insecurity and starvation was something that had not confronted the region before. “My son, do not remind me of that war. It is something you want to forget,”¹⁰⁷ was how my own mother, Amarahiaugwu Korie, began when I asked about her experiences during the war. Personal and community life was transformed. It is estimated that in the years of the war, 90 per cent of the Igbo population lived below starvation levels because of the disruption of agriculture and trade. “The horror of the war remains indelible,” notes Onyegbulu Korie, concluding, “I have never seen human suffering and death on such a scale before.”¹⁰⁸ Alpelda Korie recalls, “The war and the disruption it brought created the kind of poverty and hopelessness never experienced in the region before.”¹⁰⁹ Charity Chidomere described it as a period “characterized by pain and hopelessness.”¹¹⁰ Most households were

not able to farm during the war. “I did not farm a lot under such insecurity ... no one was sure of living to harvest the crop,” Susan Iwuagwu explained.¹¹¹ These memories provide an important entrée to an analysis of the social and economic changes that occurred among the Igbo because of the civil war.

By the mid-1960s, the Nigerian federation was in a political crisis that led to a civil war between the predominantly Igbo-speaking people of eastern Nigeria and the rest of the federation.¹¹² In January 1966, the civil government of Nigeria was overthrown in a coup carried out by army officers and replaced by a military government under Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi. In July, a second coup by Hausa officers from the Northern Region removed the government, which was headed by an Igbo. What followed were the massacre of Igbo men, women, and children in the north and the mass migration of many living elsewhere to their homes in the Eastern Region. Following the massacres in northern Nigeria and the failure of negotiations, Lt. Col. Chukwemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu proclaimed the secession of the Eastern Region from Nigeria on 30 May 1967 and declared the establishment of the Republic of Biafra. The federal government declared war and imposed economic sanctions on secessionist Biafra. Despite initial successes in the war, the Biafran army suffered heavy losses, and there was large-scale disruption of economic life, including agriculture. Severe food shortages followed until the war ended in 1970. The severe nature of the economic crisis has to be understood in the context of the structural weakness of the prewar agrarian economy – an economy that did not have the capacity to withstand any significant disruption of its fragile base.

WAR AND A FOOD-RESERVE-DEFICIT ECONOMY

I do not want to see any Red Cross, any Caritas, any World Council of Churches, any Pope, any Mission, or any United Nations Delegation. I want to stop every single I[gb]o being fed as long as these people refuse to capitulate. I do not want this war. But I want to win this war. – *Major Benjamin Adekunle, August 1968*

Most parts of Igboland were what could be characterized as “food-reserve-deficit economies.” As a period of “food reserve-deficit,” the war, despite its relatively short duration, left many households vulnerable and exacerbated the agricultural crisis that parts of Igboland were already facing because of population and ecological factors. Igbo subsistence farmers, in most cases, were unable to produce enough to meet their food requirements exclusively from their own farms. Subsistence levels varied widely and were “nowhere very high,” W. T. Morrill noted for the Igbo.¹¹³ Food intake in most parts of Igbo territory was highest in November and December, but the hungry season or period of low food intake (*unwu*) occurred after the planting season, between February and June. People relied more on the market and wild food items during these annual periodic famines.

Although the region was not prone to persistent drought, high population and poor soil led to chronic food shortages. Low or late rains often upset the food security of the rural population. Early colonial reports mentioned the vulnerability of some areas to food insecurity. The district officer for Owerri had reported as early as 1928 that “looking back over a period of years I cannot recollect seeing in the market any quantity of yams for sale.”¹¹⁴ By the middle of the twentieth century, these ecological variables had made it imperative for most parts of Igboland to depend on yams, rice, onions, meat, and other consumables from outside the region. However, most parts of Igboland could support themselves in basic carbohydrate foodstuffs before the war. Kenneth Lindsay, former professor of history at the University of Nigeria (renamed the University of Biafra for the period of the war), writing in the *Globe and Mail* in 1968 noted that the areas under Biafran control in Septem-

ber 1968, with a normal estimated population of two and a quarter million, produced about 2 million tons of yams and a substantial amount of cassava and plantains in peace time.¹¹⁵ So even in peacetime, production was less than needed. The disruption of regional trade made matters worse when the war broke out for many parts of Igboland that were already food-deficient.

Although the unfavourable food outlook already endemic in some parts of Igboland did not lead to a food emergency as soon as the war broke out, the civil war fell upon the Igbo like an eclipse, judging by the experience of rural households. The Biafran government had some time to prepare for war after the initial massacre of Igbos in 1966. In the months following the massacre, the government turned its attention not only to building the necessary infrastructure for a possible war but also to increasing the food supply. An American CIA report stated that farmers were encouraged to plant more and “with additional labor available from the refugees, they almost certainly did so.”¹¹⁶ While cassava and yam production in the region was expected to alleviate the carbohydrate need, the CIA concluded that a “large segment of the population, however, will remain in need of protein from outside sources.”¹¹⁷

Some Igbo areas faced a serious food crisis one year after the war began as the previous year’s harvest depleted. In addition, the use of food as a weapon of war by the federal government was quite effective.¹¹⁸ A *Time* report on 23 August 1968 describes the food crisis faced by the Igbo:

Crowded into hardwood forests and mangrove swamps that cannot possibly support them, Biafrans are starving to death, by a conservative estimate, at the rate of 1,000 a day. Most of the 4,500,000 refugees from all corners of Nigeria who returned to the Ibo heartland live in makeshift camps, totally dependent on scanty government and missionary rations. The price of staple foods has risen fantastically (cost of a dozen eggs: \$4), and salaried work is almost nonexistent.¹¹⁹

In October 1968, UNICEF predicted a “serious famine crisis in Biafra in December 1968, when it was expected that supplies of yams and *garri* in the enclave would be exhausted.” An ICRC agricultural expert reached the conclusion in October 1968 that a “catastrophe of enormous dimensions was on

its way due to a forthcoming carbohydrate shortage.”¹²⁰ Pacificist Lord Fenner Brockway, head of the Committee for Peace in Nigeria,¹²¹ in a speech at a Washington public meeting on 11 January 1968 said that the carbohydrate shortage and the lack of seedlings for the new farming season could mean 25,000 deaths daily “in a few months.”¹²² Mr. Nordrum, an ICRC agricultural expert, stated in an article in *Aftenpost* on 18 November 1968 that hunger had “forced a good many farmers to start harvesting too early with the result that total yields of foodstuffs were a good deal below that of a normal year.” At the same time, there was double the normal number of inhabitants. “It was therefore realistic that the fenced-in population in the enclave had only 40 percent of the amount of food which would have been consumed normally to last them until next harvest,”¹²³ he concluded. In November 1968, the Biafrans were already “consuming next year’s seed crop, and once that had gone the area would be faced with famine on a massive scale,” a visitor to Biafra quoted the relief agencies.¹²⁴ The threat to household and farmers’ security was not limited to crops alone. Several families were killing off their domestic animals because they could not move with them as they left their homes to escape soldiers who ravaged villages seizing whatever valuable crop or animal they encountered.

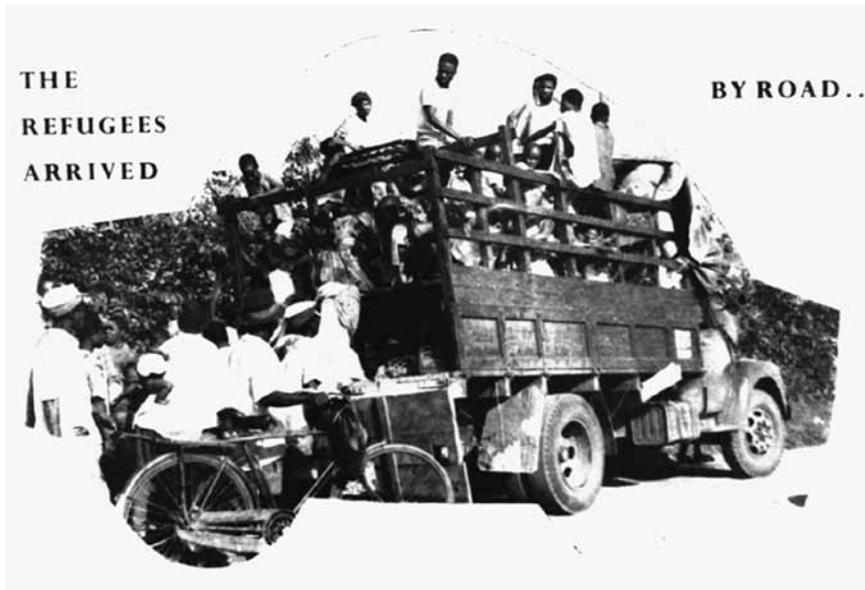
The food requirements within Biafra were not precisely known because of inadequate information about both population and food production. The population estimates ranged from 4 to 7 million. According to a British report, the area under Biafran control supported perhaps about 3.5 million people before the second influx of refugees in 1968.¹²⁵ With diminishing areas under Biafran control, much of the population required full feeding from various humanitarian agencies. The large number of returnees to Igboland exacerbated the food crisis. Refugee figures varied widely. Kenneth Lindsay estimated the number of Igbo refugees in Biafra at 4 million, of whom he thought 571,000 were in refugee camps.¹²⁶ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) based its November 1968 appeal for food in aid of Biafra on an estimated refugee population of 3 million by February 1969.¹²⁷

The crisis was clear enough to attract considerable international attention, most of it not supporting the breakup of Nigeria but attempting to save Biafrans from genocidal starvation. The Catholic Church was particularly important, probably because of the role of Irish Catholic priests in Biafra. In North America, the Igbo Diaspora played a major role. They created aware-



Starving Biafran children. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.) RH, Mss Afr. S. 2399, Britain – Biafra Association.

ness and ran circles around the better funded representatives of the federal government of Nigeria. The members of the diaspora wrote articles, talked to newspaper editors, spoke to any group that would listen to them, and organized many propaganda efforts.¹²⁸ “In the shadow of the Nazi Holocaust, and recalling the profound Jewish anxiety over the Arab threat to massacre Jews in Israel last year,” Marc H. Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee wrote, “clearly the Jewish conscience ought not to permit us to remain silent in the face of such an incredible tragedy.... We have an obligation as Jews and as human beings to help alleviate the suffering of so many men, women and children.”¹²⁹ The American Jewish Committee combined efforts with Catholics and Protestants as well as other organizations to raise money to defray the cost of airlifting food and medicine to Biafra. Each flight carried 13 tons of food and medicine at a cost of \$6,300 to São Tomé (off the coast of Nigeria), from where it was transported to Biafra. It was hoped that such joint Christian and Jewish efforts would help sensitize the conscience of



Biafran refugees returning from northern Nigeria. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.) RH, Mss Afr. S. 2399, Britain – Biafra Association.

America and other countries to respond more generously. The Catholics and Protestants made it clear that they would welcome “even a single symbolic effort for its important publicity value.”¹³⁰ This effort yielded significant results, including donations of medical supplies by Dr. Richard Hahn, director of the Alliance for Health, San Rafael, California.

The large influx of returnees and displaced persons into the region created social and economic problems never previously experienced in the area. In December 1968, a British agricultural expert estimated that there were two and a quarter million refugees living with relatives and 3 million refugees without relatives to help support them. Other reports supported this estimate. By October 1968, about 3 million people who had no family connections with local farmers were being fed at feeding centres, according to an ICRC agricultural expert.¹³¹ The forced repatriation of Igbos into the Biafran territory put increasing pressure on the already fragile environment. Stealing of farm produce increased astronomically. Mbagwu Korieh recalled, “Refugees ravaged

farms and pulled out freshly planted seed yams from the ground for food.”¹³² This type of abominable act that would have attracted severe sanctions and ritual cleansing in peacetime was a way of life during the war. “People had to survive at all costs,” Jonah Okere of Umuekwune, Ngor Okpala, remarked.¹³³ This was the beginning of a serious, prolonged agricultural crisis for many peasant farmers, as many never recovered from their losses. Many farmers related the experience of losing their yams during the war as marking the end of their farming occupation and role as breadwinners. It was difficult to rebuild decimated villages and the rural economy at the end of the war.¹³⁴

Federal policies from 1968 crippled the region by starving it of food supplies. Forced displacement and indiscriminate violence left hundreds of thousands of rural farmers in a precarious situation. The federal government blockaded the considerable interregional and intraregional trade in foodstuffs that had taken place before the war.¹³⁵ Food imports including cattle, soya beans, and corn from northern Nigeria and practically all fish and European products that came through Port Harcourt were blockaded. This eliminated the principal sources of high-quality protein that had added significantly to nutritional balance given the high carbohydrate diets derived from local food.

The price of essential food items rose beyond the reach of even wealthy Biafrans. The greatest need was primarily salt, high protein foods, and baby food, which often came in the form of powdered eggs and fishmeal. *Ofe mgbugbu* or soup with no salt was normal for many families. Gari, a staple food among the Igbo, “rose in price by 18–36 times during the period [1968] to 3–18 Nigerian shillings per cup; four bananas increased by 40 times to 10 shillings; a pound of salt rose over 1,000 times to £N14-16.”¹³⁶ By mid-1968, many parts of Biafra were in dire need of food as result of the federal blockade, a situation exacerbated by a high population density that was two and half times the national average.¹³⁷

Insecurity prevented any meaningful farming or internal trade. Yam, cassava, and rice production in the Abakiliki and Ohaozara areas was severely disrupted. The supply of cassava and fish from Etche and Ikewere in the south faced similar disruption.¹³⁸ The occupation of much of the east by federal troops by late 1968 led to the resumption of some trade, particularly along the borders of the region. Yet Biafra “remain[ed] almost totally cut off

from its normal sources of high-protein foods,” according to a CIA report.¹³⁹ Hunger continued to be widespread throughout the federally controlled portions of the former Eastern Region because of unsettled conditions in these areas, the lack of central government authority, and the low level of cultivation.¹⁴⁰ Toward the end of the war, however, USAID began a discussion with the Red Cross to purchase seeds and yams in the Abakiliki area for distribution to farmers in northeastern Igboland. Plans also were made to purchase 100,000 machetes for farmers who had “resorted to sharing tools.”¹⁴¹

FOOD CRISIS AND “AHIA ATTACK”

“The last days of 1969 were the worst time we ever had,” recalls Chilaka Iwuagwu, of Umunomo, Mbaise. “We just wanted the war to end; we scarcely could get enough to eat.”¹⁴² The Biafran leader, Colonel Ojukwu, in a broadcast on 18 January 1969, launched an emergency food production program. Each community, he said, should be able to produce enough food for its people. Ojukwu enjoined every family to maintain a small vegetable garden. Farmers were urged to lend to others any land that they might not be able to cultivate themselves in order to utilize the “vast areas of uncultivated land” in the region. The Biafran leader emphasized that “Biafrans should not sit back and expect to be fed by relief organizations.”¹⁴³ He urged individuals to keep small poultry farms and children to collect yam heads for planting.

The Biafran government responded to the crisis by changing the priority of the former regional government, which had emphasized the production of cash crops for export.¹⁴⁴ The Biafran government established the Biafra Development Corporation (BDC) and Food Directorate to oversee and coordinate food production in the territory.¹⁴⁵ From 1967 onward, the BDC utilized some of the forestland acquired by the government for the plantation programs for the production of maize, rice, onions, tomatoes, groundnuts, pigs, and poultry.¹⁴⁶ By 1969, about 15,906 acres of land had been cultivated in this way. The BDC hoped to achieve three main objectives: to commence the production of food for the population immediately; to raise immediate cash revenue; to plough back any surplus into the tree crops program; and to convert available



Col. Chukuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, head of state of Biafra. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the National Archives, London. PRO, INF 10/253.)

land under the plantation program into farmland in order to increase food production and increase the potential for export.

Biafrans did not wait to be reminded to be resourceful despite the hopelessness of their situation and the damage to the local economy. Both men and women went to war, but they fought on different fronts. One of the immediate and enduring impacts of the war was the significant transformation in men's and women's roles in the economy. New doors opened to women in transregional trade as they struggled to feed their households in a time of war. The channelling of men's labour to the war effort left women to support the household, with the result that women bore the burden of the crisis in the agricultural sector. The Biafran government capitalized on the availability of female labour, incorporating women into the food production drive. Women organized food campaigns, assisted in the food production effort, and supported the Land Army Program.

The destruction of the rural agricultural base and the food crisis in Igbo-land forced many women to enter into long distance and cross-regional trade. Although rape was a constant threat, especially for young women and girls, they foraged for food and traded in areas where men could not. This was popularly known as *ahia* attack (trading on the war front). Those who survived the horror reminisced about this form of trading. Maria Gold Egbunike was a thirty-one-year-old school teacher at the beginning of the war in 1967. Maria, who traded salt and other goods during the war, recalls: “Many women traded during the war. Women would go to the relief centers and get stockfish, salt and other goods, and sometimes they will trade it with other people or sell it. This trade is what sustained the Biafran economy.”¹⁴⁷ Ezenwanyi Anichebe of Eziowelle town, Anambra, recalls:

Igbo men, who were not soldiers, were afraid of both the Biafran soldiers as they were of the Nigerian troops, so trading across the war zone was essentially women’s business because of the potential danger men could face if caught by the Federal troops or the Biafran soldiers. Women therefore took advantage of this situation to dominate the frontier trade.... The profit we made was enormous, and served in saving the families during this critical period.¹⁴⁸

The resourcefulness of the Igbo of both sexes and ages was important in their survival. Young children learned to survive on their own by collecting wild fruits, vegetables, and palm kernels.

The women’s war effort was especially channelled toward cassava production. The importance of cassava, previously regarded as a reserve against hunger and as food for the poor, increased tremendously during the war. This drastic change was induced both by the hunger that many families faced and by the policy of the Biafran government, which compelled rural people to cultivate the soil to ensure their own survival. The total acreage of cassava was estimated to have increased and *gari* production intensified to supply the “refugees and ... the army.”¹⁴⁹ A Reuters report of 15 January 1969 spoke of forest areas being “hacked down in late 1968 to grow cassava.”¹⁵⁰ This crop had several advantages over yams under the war conditions. Amarahi-augwu Korieh recounts that early maturing species known as *Ofomi iwa*

[Cameroon cassava], *Nwa ocha* [White child], which could be roasted and eaten, and *Nwayi Umuokara* [Umuokara lady] were introduced during the war to stave off hunger.¹⁵¹ Women and children were resourceful in other ways. Snails, rats, ants, and grasshoppers collected from the forest provided much-needed protein supplements. Palm oil, the normal cooking ingredient, became a good supplement to the nutritional deficiencies of the available starchy food.

The war also had a liberating effect on women, as Oruene Olaleye pointed out. The war forced them to assume new responsibilities as breadwinners of the family but at the same time enhanced their status.¹⁵² Women increased their participation in trade during the war to meet household food needs and to fill the void created by the recruitment of men into the Biafran army. Dependency on the market for household subsistence created avenues for women's mobility on a scale unprecedented in Igboland.¹⁵³ The war also broke the social barriers that had constrained women's mobility in the past. Onyegbule Korieh remembers, "the survival of the family depended largely on the resourcefulness of women who did not stand the risk of being conscripted into the army. Men allowed their wives to travel more freely than before. This did not stop at the end of the war."¹⁵⁴ Women's changing roles eroded the patriarchal assumptions about the male as breadwinner, thereby introducing changes in gendered relations of production and power. The Igbo accepted, it seems, a reconfiguration of male and female roles in trade and a greater concentration of female labour effort on food production.

At the end of the war, many rural people went back to their farms to eke out a living, but many women continued with the regional trade that they had started during the war. Nwadinma Agwu recalls how women sought to help each other through collective farming and pooling of resources to acquire land and seedlings, and the proceeds were shared among the contributors after the harvest. Thus, "women were able to raise money to start petty trading and sustain the household."¹⁵⁵ Others, like Edna Okoye of Umudunu, Abagana, left her village as a migrant farmer to escape "poverty and infertility of soil."¹⁵⁶ Migrant farming became a major source of income, which helped to sustain the domestic economy. Margaret Nwanevu of Amumara Mbaise, who had lost her home during the war, was able to rebuild it with the proceeds from her palm oil trade. "I was able to build a mud house with zinc roof where

the entire family lived after the war.... I sustained the family for a long time after the war because my husband had nothing and had to begin all over again in life."¹⁵⁷ Still others formed trading guilds to bring in essential commodities into places like Mbaise. Chinyere Iroha of Uvuru Mbaise recalls:

Postwar hardship and poverty necessitated the formation of women trading guilds in our area, which brought fish and other seafood from the Rivers area into Mbaise. These were sold in local markets here as well as in neighboring towns by the women in the guild. With this, we were able to assume the role of providers for the families when our husbands were still disillusioned at the loss of a war. We really moved the economic fortunes of this area after the war.¹⁵⁸

The Nigerian Civil War had the most important long-term effect on agriculture among the Igbo. The civil war ruined the Eastern Regional government agricultural programs and destroyed the optimism of the early 1960s. With the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967, palm oil exports, the major cash crop for the Igbo, declined to 16,000 tons, compared with 165,000 tons in 1961. Palm kernel export, a major source of income for women, also declined, to 162,000 tons in 1967 as against 411,000 tons in 1961.¹⁵⁹ The trajectory of economic policy and governance followed a new path leading to the abandonment of the agricultural projects. Thus, the potential ability to revolutionize agriculture and the rural landscape may never be known, as the war sowed the seeds of the agricultural crisis that was exacerbated by the development of the petroleum industry.

THE PETROLEUM ERA AND THE AGRARIAN CRISIS IN THE 1980s

Before the 1980s, Nigeria was the world's leading exporter of palm oil and peanuts and a major producer of cocoa.¹⁶⁰ Most of Igboland was also largely dependent on palm oil and kernel production for income. Beginning in 1970,

however, the Nigerian economy was significantly transformed by the expansion of the petroleum industry. The struggle over control of the petroleum resources in the eastern part of Nigeria seems to have played a significant part in shaping policies before, during, and after the Nigerian Civil War. Many foreign countries recognized the important role Nigeria's oil would play as the demand increased from the United States and the emerging nations such as China. A CIA intelligence memorandum rightly noted: "The brightest feature of Nigeria's postwar economic scene is the rapid rise in oil revenues. After being hit hard in the early years of the war, the industry since has expanded dramatically ... making Nigeria one of the ten largest oil-producing countries in the world."¹⁶¹ "Paradoxically," the CIA wrote, "the civil war played a major role in stimulating new production" and increasing federal revenue. "With the known oil-producing areas of eastern Nigeria cut off, the oil companies intensified production in the mid-western region and offshore, and these areas currently are more important than the east." Production increased significantly, reaching an estimated 1.4 million barrels per day in January 1971.¹⁶²

The formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) led to sharp increases in oil prices. Prices dramatically increased by 130 per cent in 1979 with the formation of OPEC. The Arab-Israeli war in 1973 and the oil embargo on Western countries that supported Israel caused dramatic increases in oil prices. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 led to another oil shock, and prices rose by over 130 per cent. Similar occasional crises continued into the 1990s. These crises brought huge revenues to Nigeria. Oil prices rose from \$3.78 per barrel in October 1973 to \$14.69 per barrel by the beginning of 1974.¹⁶³ The export boom led to an increase of nearly 10 per cent in GDP annual growth during the 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁶⁴ Revenue went from \$411 million in 1970 to \$26.62 billion in 1980.¹⁶⁵

The dramatic rise in global oil prices coincided with the Second National Development Plan, 1970–74. Agriculture, mining, and manufacturing were projected to contribute 44.2 per cent, 13.4 per cent, and 12.4 per cent, respectively, to GDP. The actual contribution to GDP, however, was only 24.7 per cent for agriculture, 45.1 per cent for mining, and 4.8 per cent for manufacturing. Following the expansion in petroleum production, Nigeria's GDP grew at 6 to 8 per cent, while non-oil exports declined by about 60 per cent between 1964 and 1980. The importance of crude oil to the economy in this

Table 6.4. Production and resulting payments, 1965–70.

YEAR	PRODUCTION (MILLION BARRELS) ^a	PAYMENTS TO THE GOVERNMENT (IN MILLION US \$)
1965	99.4	36.0
1966	152.4	53.2
1967	116.5	75.6
1968	51.9	44.8
1969	197.2	78.4
1970	395.7	280.0
1971	620.5 ^b	600.0

a. Excluding production from the eastern states for the period April 1967–September 1968.

b. Estimated.

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, "Nigeria: The War's Economic Legacy," 10 May 1971.

Table 6.5. Nigerian federal government revenue from crude petroleum, 1970–80.

YEAR	OIL REVENUE	TOTAL CURRENT REVENUE	OIL REVENUE AS % OF TOTAL REVENUE
1970	166.4	633.2	26.3
1971	510.2	1,169.0	43.6
1972	764.3	1,404.8	54.4
1973	1,016.0	1,695.3	59.9
1974	3,726.7	4,537.0	82.1
1975	4,271.5	5,514.7	77.5
1976	5,365.2	6,765.9	79.3
1977	6,080.6	8,080.6	75.2
1978	4,654.1	7,371.1	63.1
1979	8,880.9	10,913.1	81.4
1980+	9,918.6	11,859.8	83.6

+ Nine-month period.

Source: Toyin Falola, *Economic Reforms and Modernization in Nigeria, 1945–1965* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2004), 222.

Table 6.6. Sectoral composition of Nigerian output for selected years, 1960–75 (in %).

SECTOR	1960	1963	1970	1975
Agriculture	64.1	55.4	45.8	28.1
Oil and Mining	1.2	4.8	12.2	14.2
Manufacturing	4.8	7.0	7.6	10.2
Building and Construction	4.0	5.2	6.4	11.3
Others	25.9	27.6	30.0	36.2
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: M. Watts and P. Lubeck, "The Popular Classes and the Oil Boom: A Political Economy of Rural and Urban Poverty," in *The Political Economy of Nigeria*, ed. I. W. Zartman (New York: Praeger, 1983), 110.

period is reflected in the significant rise in revenue from \$189 million in 1964 to \$25.5 billion in 1980 – that is, from 1.3 per cent of GDP to 24.4 per cent.¹⁶⁶

As government revenue increased, the state adjusted to the new conditions that emerged from the expanding oil sector. Indicative of the new power at the federal level was the allocation of a major part of revenue to the federal government. Allocations to the states also grew, from 323.8 million naira in 1974 to 2,534 million in 1979–80.¹⁶⁷ In general, the growth in the Nigerian economy was rapid, with an annual GNP growth of 7.4 per cent between 1970 and 1979. This period, however, was qualitatively different from the pre-1970s. The growth in the oil sector was accompanied by a significant sectoral transformation. These changes in sectoral composition reflected "not simply a growth in non-farm activities but a stagnant agrarian economy."¹⁶⁸ Investment in agriculture fell from 7 per cent of the budget in 1971 to 4 per cent in 1981.¹⁶⁹ While the tide had turned in favour of the state in the form of huge revenues from oil, the rural population was frustrated as the state turned its back on agriculture. Peasant production and dependency on agriculture went into serious decline.

The Nigerian government's interest in agriculture flagged considerably, shifting to the more lucrative oil sector.¹⁷⁰ A number of scholars have linked the agricultural crisis in Nigeria to the emergence of petroleum as Nigeria's main export product. Sara Berry suggests that, by the 1970s, farmers in western Nigeria, for example, were too busy scrambling for a share of the oil



An abandoned oil palm mill at Owerrinta, Abia State. (Photo by author.)

wealth in Nigeria to have time or energy to invest in expanding or upgrading their cocoa farms.¹⁷¹ The neglect of agriculture and dependence on oil combined to expose the fragility of the Nigerian economy and heightened class contradictions.¹⁷² As Nicholas Shaxson has recently shown, the paradox of African oil is the enormous wealth it generates for a few, and the poverty and political and economic insecurity it brings for the majority in oil-exporting countries such as Nigeria.¹⁷³

As the government wavered between encouraging food production and importing food cheaply from abroad, massive importation of all kinds of foodstuffs, including those that could be produced locally, struck at the roots of the rural economy.¹⁷⁴ In 1961, for example, the value of food imports into Nigeria was about 45.44 million naira. By 1974, Nigeria's food import bill had tripled, and it increased still further to about 1.8 billion naira in 1981.¹⁷⁵ Toward the end of the 1980s, Nigeria's food import costs had increased from

Table 6.7. Share of food in total import value, 1971–85 (million naira).

YEAR	TOTAL IMPORTS	FOOD IMPORTS	% SHARE OF FOOD
1971	1,069.1	88.3	8.2
1972	990.0	95.8	9.7
1973	1,241.1	128.0	10.3
1974	1,737.3	154.8	8.9
1975	3,721.5	297.9	8.0
1976	5,148.5	440.9	8.0
1977	7,093.7	786.4	10.4
1978	8,217.1	1,020.7	12.4
1979	6,169.2	952.4	15.4
1980	6,217.1	1,049.0	12.8
1981	12,602.5	1,820.2	14.4
1982	10,100.2	1,642.2	16.0

Sources: Government of Nigeria, *Know Nigeria Series No. 1: Towards Self-Sufficiency in Food* (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1991), and Central Bank of Nigeria, *Economic and Financial Review* (various years).

509.79 million naira in 1964 to 9,658.10 million naira.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, between 1973 and 1980, there was an overall annual decline in agricultural production, while the GDP growth rate was more than halved.¹⁷⁷ Revenue slumped to \$13.1 billion between 1981 and 1982 and was reduced to approximately \$7 billion in 1988. While the country gained from the expanding oil wealth, rural people faced a crisis that permeated every facet of their existence. The change in the accumulative base of the state had a direct impact on rural production, and increasing pauperization emerged as the economic fortunes of the country changed.

The Igbo found themselves in a unique position because most of the oil fields were located in the southeastern region of Nigeria. They were able to deal with decreasing land and low productivity in rural agriculture by diversifying household incomes. But the emphasis on the non-agricultural sector continued at all levels of the economy, as governments and individuals made choices that intensified the agricultural crisis at the national level but also ameliorated its effect for some rural dwellers. In rural Igboland, the average holding declined considerably. The average farm size in most of Igboland in 1974 was under 0.10 hectare per household. Only 5 per cent had between

2 and 3.99 hectares, which represented the largest holdings.¹⁷⁸ However, the economic opportunities the non-agricultural sector offered to peasants brought them some relief.

The increase in revenue from oil led to massive infrastructural development, an extensive growth in the urban population, and the rapid growth of an industrial labour force. It was followed by the commoditization of urban social relations, a sharp upturn in the size of a disenfranchised and militant “floating population,” and new waves of migrants from rural to urban areas.¹⁷⁹ At the same time, the expanding urban sector demanded semi-skilled labour for the construction industry and other service jobs. This development was important in two ways to the Igbo countryside, which experienced a population growth rate of over 3.0 per cent but produced few jobs. It created a favourable environment for rural urban drift and the loss of potential agricultural labour. From the 1980s, rural peoples sought new opportunities as the oil boom fuelled the explosion in infrastructural development. In most parts of Igboland, the rate of movement into the major cities in Nigeria and beyond was enormous. People migrated out of rural Igboland in large numbers. Lagos, Port Harcourt, Aba, and Enugu, as well as many cities in other parts of the country, became important destinations for many migrants from southeastern Nigeria. Lagos, for example, with a population of 665,000 in 1960, grew to 1,153,000 in 1985. Port Harcourt, which attracted a large number of Igbo migrants, had a population of 315,000 people in 1985, rising from a population of 180,000 in 1960.¹⁸⁰

The contradictions of an urban-biased development policy and industrialization and their effects on local agricultural sustainability left the rural population few choices. Many sought other sources of income. The most important development in this transformation was the high level of small-scale and large-scale trading activities that became the hallmark of the Igbo economy – a new economy that became dominated by rural women. Many people responded to the circumstances of the oil boom era and the various constraints in other innovative ways. The lure of the city remained strong. Even with few skills, some found it easiest to migrate to the booming towns to find various forms of employment. Many moved to the cities without the promise of a job. Alban Eluwa, who left his village in 1974 for Lagos, recalls: “You know in those days, if you did not have the money to attend a secondary

school, your next options were to become an apprentice of some sort or move to the city sometimes with no specific aim. You have to leave when your mates have all left the village.”¹⁸¹

Others tried to improve their conditions within the rural areas by producing foodstuffs to feed the expanding urban population. Others found employment in the expanding service-oriented society that emerged with the increased importance of petroleum to the national economy and the huge expenditure on infrastructure in the urban centres. Onyegbule Korieh, a former migrant, noted, “When I arrived at Obigbo in 1973, I found that there was money to be made from selling garri and part-time farming. I could make enough money out there to feed my family well and send my son to a secondary school in 1973.”¹⁸² For Onyegbule, like many others, survival in the rural areas was becoming outdated for many by the mid-1970s.

Nigeria emerged in the 1980s as a robust semi-industrial economy from its prewar mercantile basis and dependence on the export of agricultural commodities.¹⁸³ As the petro-economy expanded, a new entrepreneurial class of “contractors” emerged more clearly than before the 1980s. They engaged in the booming supply business and used their profits to invest in trading. Others used their salaries to invest in agriculture. In Imo State, they leased land and hired labour to produce cassava in areas such as Ohaji and Egbema.¹⁸⁴ Yet the condition of many peasants remained precarious because they lacked the land, labour, and cash to invest in agriculture. The general outlook was one of decreasing food and agricultural productivity. For the overnight petro-contractors, their livelihood became very unstable as the oil revenue declined and the construction boom dried up from the 1980s onward.

Concomitant with the increase in oil revenue was the expansion of social services such as education. By the end of 1959, the enrolment figure in the Eastern Region was 1.4 million¹⁸⁵ out of an estimated total population of 8.1 million.¹⁸⁶ By the 1970s, school enrolment in southeastern Nigeria was above the national average. This trend continued in the oil boom era. The high enrolment figures meant a significant reduction of available household agricultural labour and an increase in the tasks of women, who had to take on farm tasks previously performed by children. Although school attendance was encouraged for two main reasons – social and economic mobility and status enhancement and the introduction of universal free primary educa-

tion – the result was a labour crisis, since most educated household members never returned to farming. But young people who got good jobs elsewhere earned more money than they could have earned on the farm.

The ruinous inflation that accompanied the oil wealth was reflected in the inability of farmers to survive on what they produced. As subsistence production became radically undermined by the petroleum economy, they and a large segment of the overall population suffered dire consequences. Andrew Ibekwe, a retired bank employee who now farms in his village, attributed rural poverty to the fundamental changes in the economy that have taken place in recent times. He states, “The village landscape has changed to the extent that farming has become very insignificant in rural livelihood.”¹⁸⁷ Onyegbule Korieh attributed the difficulty of rural life to the cost of living, which had gone beyond the reach of many rural dwellers. He says, “Things are tough presently because of overpopulation, scarcity of farmland, and very high inflation. But our sources of earning a living have not changed at all.”¹⁸⁸ Despite the boom, the rural and agricultural landscape and its associated problems remain relatively unchanged.¹⁸⁹ As Michael Watts notes, some classes benefited materially from the commodity boom, as measured by the consumption of purchased imports, “but the majority of the urban and rural poor found any hard-won gains rapidly eroded by inflation.”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, the post-1970s developments weakened the essentially agriculture-based economy. The petroleum boom brought new opportunities, and the wealth created by the oil industry made the state and some people wealthy. It was also a period of ambivalence. The inequality and inflation that it generated in the 1980s led to the devastation of the economy and to rural and urban poverty.

The development of the petroleum industry and its emergence as a major revenue earner for Nigeria was perhaps the most profound structural change that shaped the countryside from the 1970s onward. As petroleum became a major source of state revenue, the agricultural orientation of both the government and rural communities was faced with powerful trends that drew both the population and the state away from agriculture. The intermittent attempts to reverse these trends have not been successful.

THE STATE ATTEMPT TO COME TO THE RESCUE

Given the declining contribution of agriculture to the national economy at the end of the Second National Development Plan period, the Yakubu Gowon administration (1966–75) recognized that dependence on oil led to economic vulnerability. For this reason, agriculture received high priority during the Third National Development Plan period, 1975–80.¹⁹¹ About 57 per cent of the allocation to agriculture remained unspent in the previous development plan, and the Gowon administration interpreted this as indicative of a fundamental defect in the design and implementation of agricultural programs. The gross under-spending of the allocation to primary production revealed fundamental problems in the implementation of agricultural programs at the federal level.

A substantial part of the remaining money was allocated to government projects such as farm settlements, irrigation schemes, and plantation projects for cash crop production. The new plan also recognized the need to check rural-urban migration through a balanced development agenda for both the rural and the urban sectors, but the continued expansion of the oil sector and the opportunities it provided for employment and trade continued to undermine the agricultural sector. No direct support was provided for peasant farmers, who contributed over 95 per cent of both the export and domestic productions. The government's support for farmers in the form of credits went to a few commercial farmers and bureaucrats disguised as farmers. Under these conditions, many peasants abandoned their farms to seek other forms of employment.

The major intervention to deal with the agricultural crisis in the country came in 1976, when the Olusegun Obasanjo administration launched the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) program. The objectives of the OFN program included the mobilization of the nation toward self-sufficiency and self-reliance in food production. However, these objectives were not achieved. The program collapsed for various administrative and logistical reasons. Political expediency inhibited its successful implementation. As a program designed to make fertilizers, in particular, available to farmers through the various state ministries of agriculture, the scheme faced many logistical problems. Fertilizers often arrived so late in some areas that they could not be applied to

crops. Storage facilities provided under the program were grossly inadequate. In many cases, bureaucrats hijacked the fertilizers and tried to resell them to peasant farmers at prices that many could not afford.¹⁹² Unfortunately, the OFN did not target the peasants who had been the backbone of the country's agricultural production. The political elite usurped the gains that could have been made. Because the government did not deal directly with peasants, the peasants did not comply with the wishes of the government. All this needs to be seen against the massive importation of food by the end of the OFN program in 1979.¹⁹³

The government also intervened in the customary land tenure systems in Nigeria through the implementation of the Land Use Decree in 1978.¹⁹⁴ The decree sought to eliminate the problems associated with traditional land tenure systems.¹⁹⁵ It also aimed to create a uniform tenure system and to eliminate any tenure arrangements that inhibited large-scale agricultural development.¹⁹⁶ Farming became the favourite part-time occupation for the military elite. The decree created opportunities for the military and bureaucratic elite to take land from peasants. It vested authority over land in the governor of each state. Although most rural areas remained relatively unaffected by the decree, communities located on the periphery of urban centres lost their land to urban development, with peasants continuing to be squeezed off their land as the cities expanded their housing and industrial projects.

The creation of new states in 1976 was accompanied by more reforms at the state level. Like their predecessors, the new states continued to attach a great deal of importance to agriculture. At the top of the policy-making apparatus was the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. One of the most important projects for agricultural development in Nigeria was the setting up of agricultural development programs (ADPs). The ADPs, which started in 1974, were federal programs implemented at the state level. These corporations were charged with the production and processing of agricultural products.¹⁹⁷ In Imo State, for example, the ADP produced maize, cassava, and horticultural crops, including citrus and pineapple, all of which had become highly commercialized.¹⁹⁸ The ADP also engaged in export crop production. The responsibility of the ADP was to cater to the needs of the small-scale farmers. However, Gavin Williams has noted that the benefits "accrued to the rich rather than the poor," and that "some projects have excluded the

poor from access to productive resources and redistributed the assets and incomes to the rich.¹⁹⁹ These projects included oil palm projects at Ohaji, Ozuitem, Nkporo, and Ulonna North and South, and rubber plantations at Obitti, Emeabiam, Ameke Abam, and Ndioji Abam.

The corporation's projects did not revolutionize agriculture in the region. The commission of inquiry set up to review the activities of the ADP in 1980 found that the cashew plantation at Mbala was unprofitable as an economic venture.²⁰⁰ Only 10 per cent of 4,092 hectares of mature rubber were being tapped in 1980. The oil palm development projects did not increase overall production from the region. The Pioneer Oil Mills (POM), located in Imo State, for example, could not break even. The commission of inquiry set up to examine the activities of the project observed that "the project cannot be a viable venture because of its structural rigidity, paucity of palm fruit supply and the salary/wage bill that has been too heavy for the small volume of business the POM handles."²⁰¹ The food crop project, which was fully funded by the state, did not fare better than earlier projects. The establishment of the rice project at Ugwueke, the Commission of Inquiry argued, did not lead to profits because it appeared to be "politically motivated."²⁰²

The Fourth National Development Plan, 1981–85, sought to expand local food production and the production of basic raw materials for industries under President Shehu Shagari's Green Revolution program launched in May 1980. The Green Revolution program called for an accelerated increase in agricultural production through the removal of the constraints to increased production and the provision of agricultural input and extension services to farmers.²⁰³ The government established eleven river basin development authorities and nine integrated agricultural development projects. The projects were attempts to increase the production of rice, sugarcane, millet, sorghum, maize, wheat, cassava, and yams. The irrigation policy aimed to develop a system of multiple cropping in the northern arid zones of minimal annual rainfall. While the government allocated the substantial amount of 8.828 billion naira to agriculture in this plan period, the legacy of incompetent management, corruption, nepotism, and lack of adequate feasibility studies hampered the chances of success.²⁰⁴ Like the OFN, the Green Revolution program ignored rural farmers and the program achieved very little due to weak and corrupt leadership.²⁰⁵ The government's "quick fix" attitude

toward agriculture did not reflect its overall development ideology of rural development. The inherent contradiction in the state-peasant relationship was reflected in the failure to provide farmers with adequate incentives and support to permit the widespread adoption of improved techniques.²⁰⁶

Huge agricultural projects and schemes generally did not succeed, and irrigation projects in particular did not revolutionize agriculture or increase food production. Government incentives benefited only commercial farmers, who often diverted agricultural credits to other uses.²⁰⁷ In addition, the location of agricultural projects was often politically motivated. For example, the building of irrigation projects in parts of northern Nigeria was motivated by the need to distribute the benefits of the oil boom of the late 1970s.²⁰⁸

Overall, the decades after the civil war were landmark years for many rural dwellers. The peasant class largely disappeared from the southeastern Nigerian agrarian scene during the period after the end of the war. Despite the increased involvement of the state in agriculture, rural peasants did not respond favourably. In Imo State, for example, the total area under cultivation fell from 203,000 hectares in 1976 to 52,000 in 1981, representing an annual decline of 32 per cent. The output of yams in 1981 was 22,000 tons, representing a 39 per cent decrease from the 1976 output. Likewise, the output of cassava fell by 78 per cent between 1976 and 1981.²⁰⁹ On the individual level, it was difficult to rebuild decimated Igbo villages and the rural economy after the civil war. Poverty struck all parts of Igboland, but it was worse in central Igboland with its high population and land scarcity.

The 1960s were years of optimism for many African societies in both political and economic terms. This certainly was the case for Igbo society. However, by the 1970s, the euphoria of the early years of independence had turned to frustration. The agricultural revolution of the Okpara government had not borne much fruit before the Nigeria civil war broke out in 1967. The war changed Igboland and its economy irrevocably. Furthermore, the expansion of the petroleum industry changed the economic landscape fundamentally. The massive infrastructural development in the urban sectors with no corresponding development in the rural areas exacerbated the crisis already faced by rural dwellers. The government's reforms in agriculture were a brutal failure as the problem of agrarian opportunities that they tried to address was exacerbated as inequality grew. The structural changes that emerged because

of the war undermined the institutions and practices that governed the local community, including agricultural practices and labour arrangements, and eroded rural identity. While the demand for palm oil continued within the domestic economy, the returns from sales have not kept up with the massive rise in the cost of living. This has left the rural population poorer, despite the rise in real income since the 1980s. As before, the greatest asset of the rural population has been their resilience in the face of major crises in the rural economy. The final chapter in this book sorts through the spirited attempts to deal with the crisis that seemed to engulf the rural population in the 1970s and 1980s, putting the events of these years in historical perspective.