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Private Sector power supply and development of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the South East region of Nigeria

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Abstract

Availability of dependable energy drives economic development, while sustainable economic development depends on a robust private sector. The south-east region of Nigeria, comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states, is well known for its technological and industrial capabilities, especially in the private sector. Considering the giant strides achieved in the Southeast in the manufacture of household goods, clothing, footwear, and other appliances, it becomes clear that the sector requires a stable energy supply to sustain the Southeast private sector's industrial explosion. This study is anchored on the Basic Human Needs theory of conflict. The study relied on *ex post facto* research design. The documentary method of data collection is employed, relying on secondary data from books, journals, and official documents. Content analysis is relied upon in the study. Findings are: Private enterprises in Aba and Onitsha remain at an infant stage; private enterprises in the South East are forced to continue adjusting to a harsh business environment while struggling to survive, thereby slowing growth rates. The study, therefore recommends; first, channels of energy supply in Nigeria should be decentralized with the control and administration of power generation companies (GENCOs), transmission companies (TCN), and distribution companies (DISCOs) made to operate independently for optimal performance in their different regions; second, companies like the Geometric Power Group in Aba, Abia State should be allowed to feed only their surrounding areas without transmitting energy to the national grid; third, dependable and effective energy supply should be prioritized for industrial and commercial hubs in the South East.

Keywords: Development, Power sector, Private sector, SMEs, South East Nigeria

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Introduction

Every civilization has its own trajectory through which it emerges to bring about societal change. The historical path which the Igbos of the southeast have taken extends far beyond the advent of the transatlantic slave trade. The slave trade only exposed the ingenuity of the people to the outside world, as even early American history records the contributions of Igbo slaves even in captivity. As a way of locating the southeast on the map, Ene (2005) notes that:

> The South-east zone shares common boundaries in the east with Akwa Ibom and Cross River States in the South-south geo-political zone. In the south it shares common boundaries with Rivers and Bayelsa States in the South-south geo-political zone. In the west it shares common boundaries with Delta and Edo States in the South-south geo-political zone. And, in the north it shares common boundaries with Benue and Kogi States in the North-central geo-political zone.

The southeast is well located in the rainforest zone in the country. Its soil is rich for agricultural production. As per the zone's location in the rainforest belt, Ene (2005) went further to state that the southeast is: "..located within the semi-tropical rain forest belt of the south. As it spreads toward the north-eastern direction, its physical features and vegetation change from the tropical rain forest belt to open woodland and then to Savannah land, as it approaches its northern boundary with Benue State and Kogi States in the North-central geo-political zone." The climate of the area inhabited by the Igbos is very ideal for farming, which explains why they are predominantly farmers, specializing in the cultivation of yams, cocoyams, seed crops, legumes, and other cash crops. Eneh (2005, p.7) notes that the area has "...temperature of 31^{o}C (87^{o}F) is recorded in the hottest periods from February to April. The rains are seasonal, with most falling between April and October. The annual rainfall ranges between 152 cm and 203 cm". For those who may wish to embark on year-round planting, it is practicable in areas that surround lakes, streams and rivers.

However, apart from these natural endowments, the Igbos are ardent business travellers who are rarely interested in mere tourism or sightseeing but are always out to expand their business horizons wherever they find themselves. The quest for expanded business interests did not start in the recent past; the Igbos have ever lived with and have always ventured to acquire advanced techniques in applications of bronze, copper and aluminium in artworks, even prior to the commencement of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Socio-cultural and economic development in the region has engendered studies by scholars. From the pre-colonial era, the level of industrial advancement continued to progress through the times Nigeria was under colonial rule. In fact, after encountering and embracing the white man's kind of education, the Igbos imbibed it and moved along with it in their collective quest for social and economic development. After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the parliamentary system of government enabled each region of the country to develop and advance at their own pace, and

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the southeasterners proved themselves capable in all areas of human endeavour. Underscoring the doggedness of the people of the region, Okonkwo et al (2019) note that:

> Since the advent of colonialism which marked the agglomeration of peoples in the region under the shared Igbo identity, social scientists have been astounded by the progress recorded by the people in the region. The emergence of Nnewi, Onitsha, Aba and Enugu as veritable industrial centres was the product of the capacity for innovation and adaptation.

These towns and cities have been turned into commercial and industrial centres in the heart of Igbo land, with achievements to attest to their evolution within a short time. The foregoing description could not be better exemplified by any event or occurrence than by the fast rate of recovery in Igbo land after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war from 1967 to 1970. Most, if not all, of the remarkable infrastructure built by the administration of Premier Michael Iheonukara Okpara between 1960 and 1966 was obliterated in the atrocious war. However, the Igbos, in their undying spirit, rose up from the defeat and within three decades rebuilt what remains of the southeast region. This is because new states were created from the region, and in a manner which smacked of deliberate and calculated efforts to balkanize the region, many Igbo-speaking areas were cut out and joined to contiguous areas where they remain minorities. As a result, Igbo-speaking natives are found in Rivers, Kogi, and Benue states. These are not the only adversities faced by the Igbos, Okonkwo et al (2019) note that:

> …the federal government, since the end of the civil war in 1970 has not been fair to the southeast in rebuilding its infrastructure and services destroyed during the war, which would have enabled the region to rebuild its economy and provide jobs for its army of young people. The government has consistently short-changed the region in the citing of major public works programme such as construction of power stations, expansion of road networks, water and irrigation projects and other social investments that would have contributed in turning the economy around.

The Igbos, having recognized their position in the Nigerian federation, have continually undertaken self-help projects to develop their cities and improve the quality of life for their people. One of the main challenges that confront the Igbos in their quest for industrial expansion is energy supply. Though energy shortages or a total lack of it is a major challenge in Nigeria as a state, it is even more so for a people who are naturally investors and industrialists and are well known for technological innovations. Added to these is the fact that Igbo land is the hub of MSMEs in Nigeria, owing to its traditional apprenticeship system/practice through which young people are mentored by leaders in trade, crafts, and other professions over an agreed period of time. After which, the new entrants into the particular specialized area are set up, supported and monitored to become captains in the same trade or profession, and the circle of mentoring continues through generations. Osuagwu and Ekeinde (2023) note that:

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> It is also pertinent to note that apprenticeship is not peculiar to the Igbo people of the South-East, it has a universal appeal but the Igbos have consciously practiced the system for as long as they have existed as a group. However, the practice became more pronounced immediately after the civil war which devastated the economy of the region and the people. Hence, the practice contributed immensely in absorbing millions of youths who were denied opportunities for formal education as a result of the Nigeria-Biafra war.

The industrial sector in Nigeria is characterized by large, medium, and small enterprises. The foregoing picture also captures what is obtainable in the southeast of Nigeria, where the majority of such enterprises could be seen in almost all the major towns and cities in the region, but the main concentration of such enterprises is in such cities as Aba in Abia state, Onitsha, Nnewi and Awka in Anambra state, Orlu in Imo state, and Abakaliki in Ebonyi state. A report of the Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN (United Nations System in Nigeria, 2001:60) shows the structure of the industrial sector in Nigeria by category of establishments as in

Table 1.0 below

Table 1.0: Structure of the Industrial Sector in Nigeria

S/No.	**Category**	**Percentage (%)**
1.	Micro-enterprises	65.5
2.	Medium-scale enterprises	32.0
3.	Large-scale	2.5

Source: Eneh (2005).

From the above table, there are up to 65.5 percent of micro enterprises in Nigeria, while medium-scale enterprises make up 32.0 percent, and finally, large-scale enterprises make up 2.5 percent of the sector. This indicates that micro and medium enterprises hold the key to economic development and the expansion of Nigeria's industrial sector. This partly explains why there has been a high level of industrial development in the southeast because the Igbo traditional apprenticeship system has, in conjunction with the people's natural flair for business, assisted in transforming the region into a strong industrial development zone in the country.

Stressing the critical position occupied by the private sector in the economic development of any nation, the International Finance Corporation (2011) notes that: "The private sector is a critical component in addressing the development challenges ***faced by different states by*** its contributions in many areas, including growth, jobs, poverty reduction, service delivery, food security, climate change mitigation, environmental sustainability, and contributions to taxes (Emphasis included)."

While the private sector has tried to raise the level of industrial development to a certain level in the southeast of Nigeria, there is still much more to do in achieving all-around development. The main challenge facing higher-level industrialization in the region is an

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adequate, reliable energy supply. In the main centres of industry in the southeast, there are such industries as the Star Paper Mills, Ogbuawa Motorcycle Spare parts company, INNOSON Motor Vehicle Limited, Ekene Dili Chukwu Transport Company, Peace Mass Transit Company, God Is Good Motors (GIGM), among others, and also hundreds of Footwear makers of different kinds, clothing makers for all sexes, and household goods. Improved, reliable energy supply could turn Aba, Onitsha, and Nnewi into new Japan, China, and Germany in Nigeria. The rate of importation of sundry goods could drastically reduce and foreign exchange would flow in from abroad. The private sector in the southeast has shown great promise considering the contribution it has made in the transformation of the war-ravaged southeast economy. It has many sections, as enumerated by Eneh (2005), that the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in South-east Nigeria include the following:

1. Non-Metallic Minerals
2. Agriculture, Food, Beverages and Tobacco
3. Hospitality and Tourism
4. Chemicals and Pharmaceutical
5. Base Metals (including Iron and Steel)
6. Pulp, Paper and Paper Products, Printing and Publishing
7. Wood and Wood Products
8. Textile, Leather and Wearing Apparels
9. Electrical, Electronics and Information Technology (Hi-Tech)
10. Plastic and Rubber, and
11. Transportation.

Igbo entrepreneurs are very astute at prospecting for profitable business ventures wherever they may be. Many of them have situated their businesses outside Igbo land, in the Southwest, and in the North. Hence, the objective of this study is to examine the nexus between power supply to private enterprises and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in the southeast region of Nigeria.

Methodology: Research Design

In *ex-post facto* research design, researchers can only report what has happened or what is happening by trying to hold factors constant by careful attention to the sampling. Independent variables cannot be manipulated as in a true experiment, as they have already happened. Hence, the researcher is in the realm of probabilistic causation, tentatively inferring causes rather than demonstrating causality unequivocally. Despite its shortcomings, we considered it more useful in this study because of its ability to yield useful information concerning the nature of the phenomenon and for the fact that it can be used in conjunction with descriptive survey and aggregate data. To empirically interrogate and test our hypotheses, we adopted time series version of *ex-post facto* research design, which, according to Leege and Francis (1974), involves a series of repeated pre-measurement and post-

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measurement or before and after observation, required for establishing causal relationships or cause-effect relationships between the independent and dependent variables. It is represented thus:

O	=	Observation
R	=	Random assignment of subjects to experimental groups and random assignments of experimental treatments to experimental groups
X	=	Independent experimental variable which is experimentally manipulated.
Y	=	Dependent Variable
B	=	Before observation
A	=	After observation

Asika (1991:29)

The ex-post facto time series for testing the structural causality between the independent variable (X) and the dependent variable (Y) is based on concomitant variation. Hence, this demonstrates that when X occurs, there is likelihood that (Y) will follow at the same point in time. Selltiz *et al* (1976) summarized the criteria for inferring causality as follows: (i) Co-variation between the presumed cause and the presumed effect, (ii) Proper time order with the cause preceding the effect, and (iii) Elimination of plausible alternative explanations for the observed relationship. With the measurements that are calculated in the study, the correlation between the (X) and (Y) variables is identified and recorded.

Methods of Data Collection

This study is based on the documentary method of data collection, wherein secondary data are sourced from different kinds of documents, including books, book chapters, journal articles, official materials, online materials, and other sources.

Methods of Data Analysis

This study depended on the descriptive method of analysis, which entailed the application of content analysis and reliance on systematic logical deductions. The main advantage of this method is that it simply exposes, interprets and summarizes relationships in a given data by unraveling particular phenomenon in order to make meaning therefrom.

Literature Review

Power supply, private power supply and development of SMEs in the South East

The power sector of a country or state refers to the whole machinery of generation, distribution, and transmission of electric power, which powers the different sectors of its

economy. Power is generated for industrial, commercial, residential, and other needs of the populace. However, in its literal meaning, power refers to the measure of work rate or transformation of energy, the unit of which is expressed in watts or horsepower (Igwe, 2021). Industrialization in most advanced economies of the world started from, and has a strong and dependable power sector as its backbone. Igwe (2021) notes that power is "the measure of generated electricity made available for use. Power generation is the process of generating electric power from primary energy sources. The generated electricity can afterwards be transmitted and distributed to end-users." The use of electricity involves many stages of transformation before it can be distributed to the end users as electric power. First, there is the production stage, then the transmission stage, and the distribution stage. As for how electricity is produced and transmitted, Igwe (2021) states that "Electricity is generated in power stations (power plants) by some electro-mechanical generators. These generators could be driven by heat engines fueled by combustion or nuclear fission, or by some other means such as the kinetic energy of flowing water and wind." There are many ways to generate electricity, so many countries around the world adopt different channels for distributing power. The most popular means of generation remains hydroelectric power. However, there are others like the thermal stations, the gas-powered stations, and, more recently, the solar-powered stations. Nigeria's electric power architecture is captured by NERC (2012) as cited in Igwe (2021), thus:

> Power generating stations in Nigeria presently includes twenty-three (23) grid-connected generating plants in operation. These plants have a total installed capacity of 10,396 MW with an available capacity of 6,056 MW. Out of this total installed capacity, thermal-based generation contributes an installed capacity of 8,457.6 MW with an available capacity of 4,996 MW, and hydro-power having 1,938.4 MW of total installed capacity with an available capacity of 1,060 MW.

The following power installations make up the Nigerian power setup: the national integrated power project (NIPP), which includes power-generating facilities, and independent power producers (IPPs). Meanwhile, the IPPs are basically private power stations managed individually. Some examples of these types are NESCO, Ibom Power, the Okpai station operated by Agip, AES Barges, and the Afam VI station.

The southeast of Nigeria, in particular, is majorly powered by the Alaoji Power Station in Abia state (NIPP). This power plant is a four-unit open-cycle gas turbine (OCGT) plant. The power plant was commissioned in 2015 with a designed capacity of 504 MW (Global Energy Observatory, 2017). And the Egbema Station in Orashi, Imo State. The power plant is also an open-cycle gas turbine (OCGT) with three units, with an installed capacity of 338 MW, commissioned in 2011 (Global Energy Observatory, 2011). However, recently the Geometric Power group commissioned the Gas-powered power station in Aba in order to contribute to the transmission of power to individuals and businesses in Southeast Nigeria.

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The private sector is literally the main engine room of a state's or country's social and economic development. The private sector represents the part of the economy run by individuals and companies for profit and is not state-controlled. Considering the size and scope of the sector, it is said to encompass all forms of business aimed at profit maximization and not owned or operated by the government. In any economy where the private sector plays pivotal roles, that economy grows and provides jobs for the people. Even the government benefits more by way of taxes when the private sector is supported and encouraged. The UNDP (2017) defines the private sector as a "basic organizing principle of economic activity in a market-based economy where private ownership is an important factor, where markets and competition drive production, and private initiative and risk-taking set activities in motion." Most major Western economies like those of Britain, Germany, France, Holland and others, are predominated by the private sector. Such private enterprises that have thrived and turned into large companies, like the footwear giants Bruno Magli and the clothing and general goods merchants Yves Saint Laurent, Balenciaga, Luis Vuitton, and Chanel, are all privately owned businesses that have contributed immensely to the development of the economies of their home countries. It went on to note that "the private sector includes a wide range of market actors that may operate either in the informal or formal economy" (p. 1). Such huge improvements could be achieved in the southeast of Nigeria if and when a dependable, consistent energy supply is in place. In the case of Nigeria, there are many businesses in the private sector, these include: multinational corporations such as IOCs (International Oil Companies); Large domestic companies such as Dangote Cement Company, Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing Company; Micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs); and some state-owned enterprises, and social enterprises too.

The importance of the private sector in any economy cannot be overemphasized. Successful private companies are the engine of growth and a reliable long-term source of jobs and income, which is vital to the well-being of society (DFID, 2022). Successful private concerns contribute significantly to economic development; for example, they provide needed goods and services, generate income from which they pay necessary taxes, and pay salaries to the majority of the people in a state.

It has been identified that the private sector, in its role as the engine room of any economy, the private sector absorbs excess employable youths who are accommodated in the public sector. Hence, they become the primary source of future employment opportunities and a legitimate route out of poverty, especially for many poor men and women who find it difficult to get jobs. Given the size and rate of population growth in the southeast of Nigeria (see tables 2.0 and 3.0), it's very improbable that the public sector in the region could accommodate the surplus employable labor. Though the public sector is the provider of formal employment in any economy. But in the scenario described above, the private sector serves as an absorber, thereby resolving many problems that could have arisen from youth restiveness.

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Figure 1.0 below shows the benefits or importance of the private sector in any economy. First, the private sector offers more and better jobs, higher incomes, and it empowers citizens financially while granting them economic freedom and the liberty to pursue other activities they may wish to.

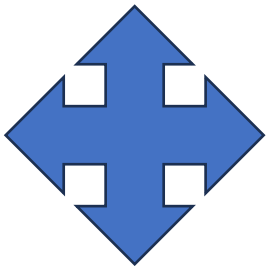
Second, the private sector also grants the people opportunities for innovation; they could also apply new approaches to their business operations, unlike bureaucratic bottlenecks in the public sector.

Figure 1.0:

Benefits of the Private Sector

More and better jobs
Higher incomes
Empowerment and economic freedom

Innovation, new approaches, higher productivity, technology diffusion



Higher tax revenues that finance services

Better goods and services
Real choices for the poor
Increased capabilities for government

Source: DFID, 2022.

The private sector yields higher productivity because there is flexibility in the timing of operations and technological application as preferred by the entrepreneur.

Third, the private sector produces better goods and renders more satisfactory services to their customers; people who are not privileged in society could leverage on private enterprise to start up, no matter the scale.

Thus, the private sector pays higher taxes to the government, and they also utilize revenues productively for the financing of services, unlike in the public sector, where funds are mismanaged and embezzled. Political economists measure development by some parameters, one of the reliable ones being the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country. Though there are some new parameters that have been identified by which development could be measured, these include: life expectancy of people in a particular country, literacy rates among citizens of a state, infant mortality rates, HDI index, and birth and death rates. However, there is the latest

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view that the GDP is not a very accurate means of measuring development because it concentrates on a state's productivity, while at the same time the gross national product (GNP) per capita is more useful in measuring development because it concentrates on the welfare of the people. For a better understanding of the concept, it is instructive to realize that development could also be viewed from the standpoint of modernization, which in itself is a major structural change required or implied by long-term economic growth, including industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and the transformation or relations of production (Gasper, 2004). One of the main approaches to viewing economic development is the traditional approach, which sees development primarily in economic terms, more than any other parameter. It sees economic development as implying sustained annual increase in Gross National Product (GNP) at rates varying from 5 to 7 percent or more, together with such an alteration in the structure of production and employment that decreases the shares of agriculture in production and employment and increases those of manufacturing and services sectors (Misra and Puri, 2003).

The main aim of any quest for development should be to ensure and achieve the reduction or elimination of diseases, squalor, malnutrition, unemployment, illiteracy, and other forms of inequalities. If development, as assumed in any state, does not address the challenge of poverty amongst the people, then such a measure cannot be seen as development (Mahbubul, 1971). For an example of a comprehensive study on development, the 2016 development report of the Africa Infrastructure Development Index (AIDI) produced by the African Development Bank notes that:

> Development was recorded in many African countries in the areas of ICT, transport and energy. The top ten ranking countries include Egypt, Libya, South Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Mauritius, Cabe Verde and Botswana. On the other hand, ten others were low in ranking. They include Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Madagascar. These three areas, ICT, transport and power, are responsible primarily for the wide differentiation between the most advanced countries versus the less developed countries of Africa.

The above report indicates that what some may regard as development may not really have tangible contribution to make to the economic livelihood of the people. In essence, if the standard of living of the people in a particular polity is not directly improved, then that cannot represent development in the real sense.

The southeast region of Nigeria is more than ripe for what may be referred to as 'a massive energy revolution' since there is no lack of innovation or the will to venture for improved technological applications to tasks. Rather, what has been in very short and epileptic supply has been energy to drive the innovations. Also, in the midst of all these, the population of the region continues to increase, with most of the youth inclined towards businesses and entrepreneurship more than they are to paid jobs. Trading and entrepreneurship, for which

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they acquire training through the traditional Igbo apprenticeship system, has been a hallmark of the lives of Igbo youths.

Turning to private enterprise and private power supply companies, it becomes pertinent to state that Aba in Abia State has been the heartbeat of innovative industrial breakthroughs in the Southeast of Nigeria. As such, one would have thought that the government at the centre would invest futuristically in Aba with the view to consolidating and expanding entrepreneurial development amongst Nigerians of all tribes and tongues, and also engender the development of SMEs. But the reality is that such dreams have never been considered for implementation, hence lofty ideas and technological innovations of both the past and the present are left to rot away, especially when there is lack of electrical energy to power such innovations and graduate them from prototype to reality and physical utilization.

From the 1970s through the 1980s to the turn of the century, industrialists and investors in the Southeast have been yearning for constant and dependable power supply to assist in the actualization of numerous prototypes, which are mostly in their early stages of formation. Small and medium-sized enterprises in areas such as footwear production, beverages production, clothes production, and other household products and general goods, have remained underdeveloped for many years after they were established.

Highlighting further on the inadequacy of power supply in the southeast, Ihendinihu, Kufre, & Okpura (2021), using that of Aba as an illustration, note that: "It is expected that the installed electric power distribution system will make provision for the immediate load demand and the projected load demand. However, in many electric power distribution systems across Nigeria, the load demand is rarely satisfied." This situation has the immediate consequence of slowing down economic activities such as industrial and commercial activities in the country. Also, investment in the private sector is hampered, and when this happens, it results in increased unemployment in the polity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the Basic Human Needs theory of conflict. This theory of conflict, put forward by John Burton (1979) and adapted in the work of Havv (2007), asserts that the needs that are important to be considered in the understanding of social conflicts that are destructive in any society, were those of identity, recognition, security, and personal development and not just food, water and shelter. They also include both physical and non-physical elements required for human growth and development, as well as all other things that humans are inherently driven to attain. These needs, however, are simultaneously sought in an intense and ceaseless manner. Ultimately, human needs serve as a powerful source or means of explaining the behaviour and social interaction of all human beings.

To satisfy these needs of individuals in society, they use the system, act as outlaws, or reform it. According to Sandole (2001), if the needs of an actor are not met in one way, an attempt or attempts would be made to secure such needs in another way. Such other ways

sought to meet these needs would be parallel to the norms of society or outside the ambit of the laws. That is, if they cannot meet their needs within the existing "status-quo" system, they may devise parallel, revolutionary methods of achieving them. These needs would even be seen to be more important than food and shelter. To achieve these needs, therefore, individuals are prepared or ready to go extreme lengths or the extra mile by defying systems in order to meet their deeply desired needs, even through suicide bombing. Sandole (2001) further maintains that trying to constrain individuals from being secure from wicked and ill-treatment dished out to them solely because of their membership in certain ethnic, religious, racial, and other groups, may turn out to be a serious problem for all in the long run.

Consequently, social systems must respond to individuals' needs or face instability and forced or induced change brought about by violence or conflict. Havv (2007) points out that one of the primary causes of protracted conflict is people's unyielding or continuous drive to meet their unmet needs on the individual, group, and societal levels. Insofar as humans continue to strive to get their needs, there is a tendency that conflict would arise owing to interaction with others who may also desire the same thing. Havv further asserts that living and attaining well-being and or good standard of living requires that humans need certain essentials of life called Human Needs or Basic Human Needs.

In applying the tenets of the Human Needs Theory to this study, it becomes pertinent to understand that any aspects of human needs which are destroyed by conflicts such as identity, security, recognition, and personal development, must be compensated for in one way or another. This is done either through the approved systemic process or through other means that may fall outside the dictates of the law (Havv, 2007). Hence, when the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, the anti-Igbo policies that came with it meant the youths of the South East region of Nigeria had to meet their needs, including their business interests, by any means they deemed possible. Also, the Basic human needs of individuals and groups do dictate and regulate social interactions between humans. Hence, the appreciation of responses from other regions of Nigeria in many ways influenced the way that Igbo youths earnestly strove to achieve their individual and group needs within the Nigerian state. Leveraging on the assumptions of Sandole (2001) that attempts to constrain the people, either because of their tribe, ethnicity, or race, most likely result in more problems for the society as a whole. Major Federal Government projects in the South East of Nigeria have suffered neglect and indifference from the government at the center. These have made the people of the region look beyond the Federal government in their efforts to surmount most challenges. It also reflects on the efforts to ensure power supply to SMEs in the different commercial and industrial centres in the South East.

Data presentation and analysis

The southeast region of Nigeria is more than ripe for what may be referred to as 'massive energy revolution' since there is no lack of innovation or the will to venture for

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improved technological applications to tasks. Rather, what has been in very short and epileptic supply has been energy to drive the innovations. Also, in the midst of all these, the population of the region continues to increase, with most of the youth inclined towards businesses and entrepreneurship more than they are to paid jobs. Trading and entrepreneurship, for which they acquire training through the traditional Igbo apprenticeship system, has been a hallmark of the lives of Igbo youths (Osuagwu & Ekeinde, 2023).

Many of these youths have engaged in entrepreneurship and general business transactions while showing disinterest in white-collar jobs and further education beyond the secondary school level. Since the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, there has been rapid increase in the population of the South East region of Nigeria.

Table 2.0:

Southeast states and population (2005)

S/N	STATE	YEAR CREATED	POPULATION (million)
1	Abia	1991	3,006,191
2	Anambra	1976	3,594,947
3	Ebonyi	1996	n.a
4	Enugu	1991	4,055,043
5	Imo	1976	3,195,353
Total			**13,851,534**

Source: Eneh (2005)

Table 2.0 above shows the population of the different states of the southeast in 2005. A striking feature in their population in 2023, as displayed in Table 3.0 below, is that the population more than doubled over a period of eighteen (18) years. Most of these youths have engaged themselves in entrepreneurship and general business transactions while showing disinterest in white-collar jobs, as previously stated. A substantial number of them have also found new areas of interest in the application of information technology in business transactions, and other applications.

Table 3.0:

Southeast states and population (2023)

S/N	STATE	YEAR CREATED	POPULATION (million)
1	Abia	1991	4,841,943
2	Anambra	1976	7,299,910
3	Ebonyi	1996	4,007,155
4	Enugu	1991	5,396,098
5	Imo	1976	6,067,722
Total			**27,612,828**

Source: NBS, 2023.

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In Table 3.0, the indication is that the population of the five southeast states put together has increased from 13,851,534m (Thirteen million, eight hundred and fifty-one thousand, five hundred and thirty-four) in 2005 to 27,612,828m (Twenty-seven million, six hundred and twelve thousand, eight hundred and twenty-eight) in 2023. The majority of the young men and women who make up the number are the operators of MSMEs that are scattered in major towns and cities in the South East, and even outside the zone in places such as Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Makurdi, Jos, Abuja and other places. Thousands of them go through the traditional Igbo apprenticeship system to achieve their dream of a successful private enterprise, while others take the private start-up route to the same end. In every way one may look at it, the Igbo apprenticeship system has contributed immensely to cushioning the once anticipated social crises in the region at the end of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Stressing further on the need for reliable energy/power supply in the South East, especially Aba in Abia State, Ihendinihu et al (2021) state that: The energy demand and actual delivered energy datasets for the injection substations in the Aba District Electricity Distribution Network are studied….. In all, the results show that by the year 2023, the energy deficit for the power distribution network would have increased to about 183.4% of the base year (2016) energy deficit.

With the above energy situation in Aba, which is definitely what is obtainable in the entire southeast Nigeria, it becomes difficult to achieve the full potential of economic development projections in the region. When this state of affair persists, thousands of SMEs in the region that are capable of absorbing millions of youths are not developed and enhanced. High rate of unemployment becomes a reality in the region with its immediate consequence of increased crime rate. However, in 2022, Prof. Barth Nnaji of the Geometric Power Group built a 141 MW thermal power plant in Abia State to help power private enterprises in Aba and its environs. *Thisday newspapers* reports that "the $800 million integrated power project (IPP) in Aba… with four turbines from General Electric in 2014 and completed the 12-inch 27 km gas pipeline from Owaza in Ukwa West local government" would power Osisioma Industrial Layout and the thousands of operators of MSMEs in Ariaria international market and its environs.

Research Findings

Findings in this study indicate that the supply of energy or electric power to the southeast region has remained epileptic and insufficient for a long time. As a result, private enterprises that are the mainstay of businesses in Aba and Onitsha commercial hubs in southeast Nigeria have remained at infancy stage. Operating a profit-driven private enterprise with self-generated sources of power makes it excessively expensive, thereby adversely affecting the profit margin. Ihendinihu et al. (2021) note that the expected power generation needed to drive industrial development in the region had not been met. This slows down or hinders growth and futuristic planning for the development of such enterprises. Also,

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thousands of jobs that could have been created by MSMEs as an engine of growth in the southeast have not materialized.

There are also some former medium-scale enterprises that have grown into large-scale ones in the zone, such as the spare parts manufacturers cluster in Nnewi, Star Paper Mills in Aba and the like. These enterprises are designed to continue adapting to the harsh business environment while struggling to survive. By so doing, their growth rates are slowed down and the government loses the taxes that would have accrued to it from the businesses.

Conclusion

After considering the findings, this study concludes that the inadequate supply of power to the industrial and commercial hub in the southeast of Nigeria has not helped the region's quest for social and economic development. Inasmuch as thousands of MSMEs need electricity to develop and expand, these enterprises have not reached their full potential. Most of them operate only when there is a power supply from the national grid. But some of them operate by providing their own power through generators. The resources that they spend on fueling and maintaining the generators cut into the incomes that they make. The number of man-hours lost annually by the private enterprises as a result of the disruption of the power supply would amount to a substantial loss of funds to the businesses. Again, the private sector in the southeast of Nigeria, if properly energized, is capable of providing employment to thousands of youths and older adults who are not covered by the public sector.

Recommendations

This study has identified that the shortage/epileptic nature of energy supply in the southeast of Nigeria is responsible for the underdevelopment of the private industrial and commercial sector in the region. Also, the technical know-how abilities for which people of the southeast are renowned has remained generally undeveloped denying the teeming young population of millions of opportunities to move the MSMEs to larger private conglomerates in the mold of such companies as Louis Vuitton, Balencciaga (wears and accessories), Yves Saint Laurent (wears and accessories), Bruno Maggli (footwears), Bennetton (clothes for all ages), Rolex (quality time pieces). These are all small and medium enterprises that were grown into global brands and later, through foreign commerce/worldwide advertising, internationally promoted and popularized. However, the irony of the lack of capacity and development is that most goods people purchase in various Nigerian towns labeled 'Made in China' or 'Made in Malaysia' are actually produced in Aba and Onitsha, southeast Nigeria. Already, Aba footwear producers are making rugged jungle boots for some military and paramilitary organizations in Nigeria, and also command high patronage from foreign countries like Cameroon, the Benin Republic, and Ghana. Hence, this study hereby recommends as follows:

First, the energy supply channel in Nigeria should be decentralized, with the control and administration of the power generation companies (GENCOs), the transmission company

(TCN), and the distribution companies (DISCOs) structured to operate independently in their respective regions for optimal performance.

Second, power supply companies like the Geometric Power Group in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, should be allowed and empowered to feed only their surrounding area where they can energize adequately without any obligation to transmit energy to the national grid. This would make for an effective and efficient supply of power to their customers. Almost every region in Nigeria has the capability to generate its own energy. With this pricing, the energy supplied would be competitive and not uniform and outrageously exorbitant as it is at the moment.

Finally, a dependable and effective energy supply should be made a priority for industrial and commercial hubs across the country, such as Aba, Onitsha, Awka, Orlu, and others. This is because there lie opportunities to absorb millions of youths churned out of universities and other institutions of higher learning. Also, there are those who may not have gone through formal education, but have been mentored through the apprenticeship system, which has greatly benefitted the Igbo people of the southeast of Nigeria.

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