

IGWEBUIKE ECONOMICS: THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM FOR WEALTH CREATION

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Abstract

The fundamental place that the economic factor occupies in human life, expressed in the fact that economic need is man's fundamental need, and the need that structures and explains social life has attracted the application of Igwebuiké philosophy to economics. This study, therefore, aims at discovering the relationship between Igwebuiké philosophy and the socio-economic categories of Igbo reality, with particular reference to the Igbo apprenticeship system anchored on the Igbo social structure of reality, the Igbo think-home ideology and the Igbo spirit of resilience. Using the philosophical idea of Igwebuiké, this piece has established the centrality of Igwebuiké in the Igbo apprenticeship system that has created wealth over the years for the Igbo, making the Igbo the most successful business men and women in Africa. The beauty of it is its simplicity. It is a system that does not take equity or require raising huge capital. It is driven by a human-platform and it works based on the Igwebuiké philosophy that understands the other as a part of me, and thus making me responsible for the other. Beginning with the question of who the Igbo is, this paper has studied and unveiled the various dimensions of the Igbo apprenticeship system and the human platform or network that underlies its efficacy. For the purpose of this research, the Igwebuiké indigenous method of research is employed. While establishing that Igwebuiké philosophy is at the heart of the Igbo apprenticeship system of commerce, the paper argues that there is the need for the government to invest in this incubator system for the creation of wealth and for the tackling of the problem of unemployment.

Keywords: Igwebuiké economics, Igwebuiké, Incubation, Apprenticeship System, Ingratiation, Funding

Introduction

In a paper I presented in 2017 on *Igwebuiké economics: Towards An Inclusive Economy For Economic Development* at the National Conference on Peace and National Development organized by the Centre for Peace Development, Veritas

University, I emphasized the importance of economic factor in the construction of social life, for the reasons that economic need is man's fundamental need, and it is this fundamental need that structures and explains social life. There is, therefore, a nexus between the economic need of the human person and the social life of people. Thus, Kanu (2017) avers that:

Questions about the material assets and constraints of a society, how goods are produced to meet the needs of society, how the goods are distributed and the kind of relationship that emerges in the organization of production helps to understand the culture of society, its political institution and way of thinking (p.114).

The relevance of the economic need of man and its relationship with social life has attracted the attention of scholars of various levels and interest. Kanu (2017) observes that:

The level of economic growth has attracted the attention of scholars at various levels of discussions. These discussions have been centered on how to arrive at a prudent economic policy framework that would guide development agenda for many underdeveloped and developing economies. There is the need for every society, especially African nations, who are among the poorest in the world to revisit their economic policies and build economic institutions that would enhance the growth and welfare of its people (p. 115).

Beyond the study of general economic policies and strategies for economic prosperity, there has also been an increased interest in indigenous models or frameworks. It is this search for an indigenous economic policy for Africa's economic development led to the emergence of Igwebuikconomics, that is, the application of Igwebuik philosophy to economic development. This is a second paper on Igwebuikconomics with a particular focus on the Igbo Indigenous apprenticeship system for wealth creation. The historical and cultural background of the concept- Igwebuikconomics, makes a study of the Igbo historical-cultural background a better start up point.

Who are the Igbo?

Kanu (2012) avers that the Igbo people are a single people even though fragmented and scattered, inhabiting a geographical area stretching from Benin

to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as *Chukwu* or *Chineke*. Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, the 'Northern Centre Theory' which, according to Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbo migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermetic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the 'Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland'. Jones (cited by Isichei 1976) observes that the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westward, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis.

Socio-politically, unlike the other tribes in Nigeria, who evolved a molithic centralized system of government, the Igbo distinguish themselves with a complicated socio-political structure which has been qualified as *republican*. The Igbo ethnic group is divided into clans, each clan is made up of towns; and each town is comprised of villages. The village is the primary social unit constituted of families or kindred. The family is the nucleus of society. Politically, the lineage system is the matrix of the social units or organization and provides grounds for political and religious structures. The traditional concepts of political power and authority is structured and determined by their concept of *umunna* and the membership of the association based on elaborate title system. Economically, Aligwekwe (1991), avers that the traditional Igbo people were sedentary agriculturists. This delimitation of Igbo land as a culture area, helps to identify the cultural horizon for the study of the Igbo apprentice network.

The Fundamental Principles of Igbo Apprenticeship System

There are three fundamental principles that shape the Igbo apprenticeship system. These principles include the Igbo social construction of reality, the Igbo philosophy of resilience and the Igbo think-Home ideology.

a. Igbo Social Construction of Reality

A social construction of reality, according to Kuhn (1970), “is the entire constellation of belief, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a give community” (p. 175). In the contention of Grenz (1966), “It is a belief system that prevails in a given scientific community at a given time in history” (pp. 54-55). The idea of Igbo social construction akin *mutatis mutandis* to Igbo worldview. Taking from Kalu (1978), it may be described as “a unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of the individual and communities in them” (p. 39). It is, therefore, not surprising that Oguejiofor (2010), in his understanding of worldview, include ideas about both material and spiritual realities and their relative importance, the origin and destiny of humanity, the end of life and what is conducive to this end.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the life of a human person is circumscribed within the *uwa* (the world), which is composed of the physical and the spiritual, the abode of humans and spirits. In the contention of Oguejiofor (2010), these dimensions of the world are not separated or divided by chasm, but rather “there is interconnectedness between the two enabling contact between the deities and spirits, and human beings. This unitary conception of reality pervades the Igbo world in a remarkable way” (p. 21). The Igbo, therefore, does not see himself or herself as an individual without noticing immediately the need for the other. No wonder he often warns the other: *onye aghana nwanne ya* (No one should leave his brother/sister behind). This he expresses in proverbs such as:

1. A person is a person because of other people
2. Sticks in a bundle cannot be broken
3. When spiders unite they can tie up a lion
4. If one finger tries to pick up something from the ground, it cannot
5. Behind an able man there are always other able men
6. It takes a village to raise a child
7. If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together
8. I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am
9. If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught
10. A tree does not make a forest

11. If two or more people urinate in the same place at the same time, it would produce more foam
12. When a bird builds its nest it uses the feathers of other birds
13. One person is not the whole world
14. It is by taking a goat around that you are able to sell it

b. Igbo Philosophy of Resilience

The Igbo world is not a bird of roses. It is a world of struggles that begins from birth, noticeable in the cry of a little child as soon as it is born. Circumscribed to the *uwa* (world), the human person is faced by difficulties and frustrations. Diseases like small pox, aids, leprosy, malaria, etc., are present vying for a central place in the human person. This makes survival in a tolerable way a major concern for the Igbo, and for Oguejiofor (2010), it to a large extent determines the Igbo attitude to life. Nwala (1998) avows that the desire for *ndu* life and its preservation in Igbo ontology is the *summum bonum* (the supreme good), and every other thing is expected to serve its realization. According to Kanu (2012) the prominent appearance of *ndu* in Igbo proverbs, parables and personal names projects the height of the value the Igbo race places on life and the need to make every effort for its preservation.

If the Igbo must qualify to live in the world of the ancestors, he needs to achieve personal success, which is economic, social, moral and biological (long life). Failure in any of these implies exclusion from the community of life, both earthly and otherworldly. This explains why the Igbo adapt themselves to any condition no matter how difficult to achieve their aim. Thus, the Igbo person sees life as a struggle in which he must put all he has in order to live a successful life. If the Igbo is seen working hard, competing and admire personal achievement, it is because these have great weight on his eschatological destiny. It is in this regard that Tempels (1952) writes:

No live code of behaviour is possible unless the meaning of life is sensed. There can be no will to determine life unless the ends of life are conceived. No one can pursue the way to redemption who has no philosophy of salvation (p. 10).

Given that this achievement must be personal, not based on those of your father or brothers, the Igbo develops a social and political ethos that is distinguished by egalitarianism and competitiveness. The spirit of the Igbo person was captured

by Basden (1966) when he described Igbo immigrants to the west of the 1920s, "Whatever the condition, the Igbo immigrants adapt themselves to meet them, and it is not long before they make their presence felt in the localities where they settle" (p. ix).

It is this spirit that makes the Igbo to understand suffering, not only in a negative sense, but also as any kind of painful or difficult experience resulting from situations or painstaking efforts to achieve difficult objectives. It is in this regard that suffering is understood in terms of *opipia*, that is, penance, usually done to achieve spiritual heights, or *olu ike* or *olu siri ike*, that is, hard work, as in the case of a man who works at a cement industry, daily carrying about 500 bags of cement from one point to another, it is considered *ahuhu*, but for the purpose of raising money to take care of his family. In this case it also refers to *igba mbo* (making serious effort). This kind of suffering brings hope and does not lead to despair or destruction. The Igbo would say: *mmiri mmadu kwosara onwe ya adighi atu ya oyi* (the water a person pours upon himself does not bring him or her cold). Hard work is at the centre of the Igbo spirit. Thus the Igbo would say: *onye obula choro ihe mara mma ga adi nkwadobe ikuchara ya okpofu n'ihina o dighi ije oma na-ada ne'lu* (one who desires great things must be ready to work hard for them), in another proverb, the Igbo would say: *o bu naani ukwu gbara apiti na eri ihe guru ya* (It is only the leg that is soiled with mud that enjoys whatever it likes). This kind of suffering is not a curse but attracts blessings from the gods. Greatness is achieved through hard work.

c. The Igbo Think-Home Philosophy

The Igbo, even before the Nigerian Civil War has never forgotten home. There is an Igbo saying that goes this way: *aku ruo uno* (which means the wealth must reach home). If a person is known all over the world but not known in his home town then he is not known at all. If a person does not make an effort to return home, he or she is referred to as an *efuru efu* (which means the lost one). However, with the Nigerian Civil War, after which the property and wealth of the Igbo were seized by the Nigerian government, the Igbo were stranded and couldn't access anything and had to begin all over again, the philosophy of *CHERUO UNO*, which means "think home" became more popular among the Igbo.

Unlike other tribes that go to a town or state outside of their state of origin and claim citizenship of the state, the Igbo does not claim citizenship of any state except his home town. No matter where he travels to and no matter the number of houses he builds elsewhere, he ensures that he has a home in his village, even when there is no one to live

there in his absence. Home is home for them and so they are at home for the celebration of festivals like Christmas, New Year, Easter, New Yam Festival. More interesting is that many who are not able to travel during these seasons have one Igbo association or the other to which they belong in the various cities where they live. Home is so important that, although the Igbo can be born in Lagos, Abuja, Sokoto, Katsina, Benue, Benin, etc., but when he or she dies, the corpse must be taken home. The corpse needs to get home to rest well.

The Igbo Indigenous Apprenticeship System

The Igbo apprenticeship system popularly known as 'Imu-Olu' (which means learning work) or 'Imu-Ahia' (which means learning trade) or 'Igba boy' (which means to serve) is a major factor in any discussion about the Igbo wealth creation or commerce. Maleke (2018) describes it as an "apprenticeship system that purports a responsibility established businessmen [the nurturer] in a town, street or locale to pick up teenagers-young adults [the apprentice] from their homes and give them an informally formal, but raw and practical, cutthroat business education" (n.p). This teenager might be a relative, sibling or non-relative from same region. He writes further that "The idea centres around taking them off the streets and the perilous tendencies of a idle mind to give them a purpose, worthy of emulation, so they can also continue the trend when they are established" (n.p). In the words of Crescent (2019):

The Igbo Apprenticeship System is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that lets people learn business from a master for a certain number of year (5-8) depending and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, gets cash infusion and support to start their own business. There is no salary paid during the time of the apprenticeship tenure but meals, clothing and t-fare are provided for by the master. When the years of learning are over, the boy is as good as his master.

It is a system of commerce that was with the Igbo before the Nigerian Civil War, with which they created wealth across the Nigerian nation. And even after the Civil War, when the Igbo world was crumbled following the terrible legacy of the war, marked by great poverty, halting of livelihood, scarcity of funds and human capital and hopelessness, it was the Igbo apprenticeship system that pulled majority of Igbo families out of poverty within two years after the Civil War, thus, turning their troubles into a model of financial prosperity worthy of study and adoption. Through the 'Imu-Ahia' system, many Igbo families took their

financial destinies into their hands, and in spite of the 20 pounds policy of the of the Nigerian Government proposed by Obafemi Awolowo, which said that only £20 be given to every Igbo person to survive on regardless of what they had in the bank before the war. The rest of the money was taken by the Nigerian government. In spite of this unfavorable condition, the Igbo created wealth through her apprentice network that has continued to be a matter of intrigue speculation and wonderment for many.

This apprenticeship system of commerce is unique to the Igbo, and is anchored on her social structure and spirit of resilience. This is not to say that other cultural groups in Nigeria do not have their apprentice systems, but it is only to say that there is something unique about the *Imu-Olu* system of apprenticeship. For instance, among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, at the end of the apprenticeship of a candidate, which usually lasts between two to three years, he or she pays the master a 'freedom fee', and purchases drinks and throws a party according to celebrate the end of his or her apprenticeship. This is an important part of the apprenticeship which has to be done before the candidate can begin to trade officially. After this party, the candidate is presented with a certificate to show that he or she has graduated. During these two or three years, the apprentice does not necessarily live with the master, and so the master does not necessarily have responsibility for the feeding, clothing and housing of the apprentice.

This is very different from the Igbo apprentice system. The apprentice is the son or daughter of the master. The apprentice therefore leaves his parents and comes to live under the care and supervision of an established business Igbo person who becomes his master and he the servant. He takes care of his master for the agreed number of years, and does every chore that the master assigns him. He serves his master not only in the shop or in relation to the business but at home as well, like washing of cars, cleaning the home, washing and ironing his master's cloth, etc. He has no right to travel home without the consent of the master, even if the parents live in the same city with the master. He must work hard to win the trust and favour of his master, as it is the master who would make an appraisal of his service in the growing of the business venture and in non-business related areas. At the end of the apprenticeship, the master gives the apprentice a take-off fund for the hiring or purchase of a shop, goods, equipment, where necessary and in some cases, accommodation for a given period of time. This take-off fund does not in any way mean that he ceases to collaborate with the master, the master still assists him or her with goods

procurement to reduce overhead importation cost, knowing fully well that the apprentice has a weak purchasing power.

Through the different responsibilities that the master place son the apprentice, the master prepares him for the future. In what seems likes a tough time, the master exposes the apprentice to a future reality that is tough and only overcome through hard work. It is not in all cases that the master stays with the apprentice in the same shop or business premises, having gathered some experience, the master can decide to open a shop elsewhere, different from the location where he might be. In this case, the apprentice manages the business branch for the master, representing him at business negotiations and importation with foreign trade partners. This seeming independence of the apprentice in management does not only help the master expand his business and thus make more profit, it also helps the apprentice with an ownership mindset that gives room f or trust, building of his confidence and exposure, which is necessary for the apprentice if he must succeed in the future.

Once an apprentice graduates and is settled, he has a responsibility of doing for others back at home what his master has done for him. He, therefore, goes to the village and picks another apprentice who would serve him. Meanwhile, before his graduation, his master must have gone home and picked another apprentice who would learn the trade before his final graduation. It is thus a model that keeps engaging the young. The Igbo has a culture that frowns at the young roaming the streets in idleness. The apprentice system of the Igbo ensures that if a child is unable to go to school, instead of staying back at home, he learns a trade- usually the type of trade that his family people have been involved in. The two basic principles, according to Crescent (2019) that drives the Igbo apprentice system are:

1. Get every Igbo child busy with something and discourage laziness
2. Give helping hands to someone running a business and in turn transfer the knowledge to ward.

In spite of the absence of clearly written laws to guide the relationship between the master and the apprentice, this system has succeeded over the years. This success is based on a college of factors. The first reason why it succeeds is that the apprentice treads with caution, knowing fully well that if he fails or ruins his masters business, his own future would be ruined. He treads carefully in managing the affairs of his master and tries to prosper the master's business

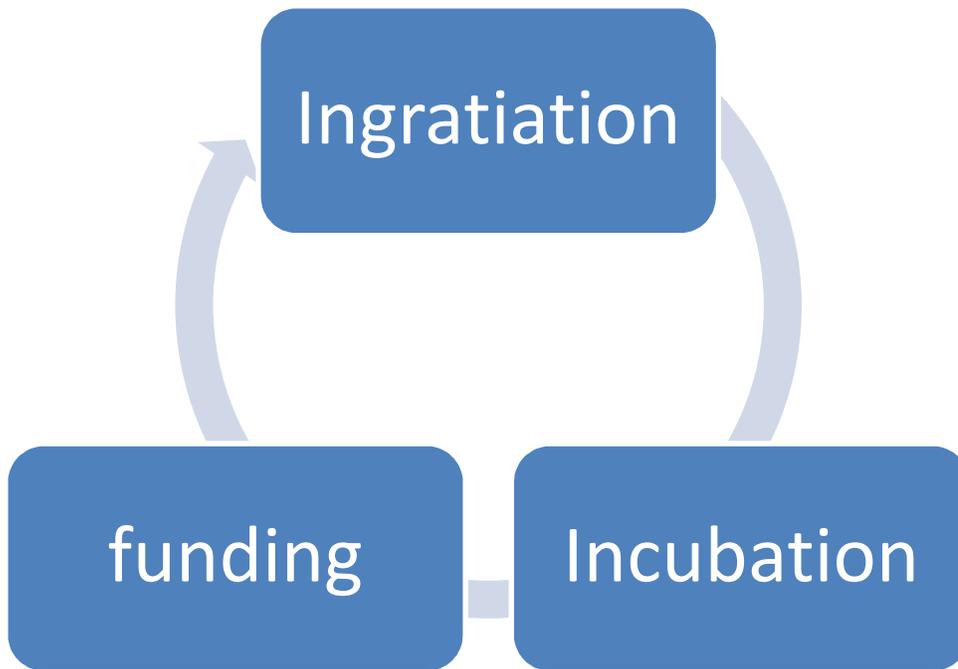
because he knows that his destiny is tied to the economic destiny of his master. This fear, according to Okoro (2018) engenders honesty during the years of apprenticeship as every established acts of theft, diversion of fund and flamboyant use and wastage of business finances terminates the arrangement. Second, while the apprentice does his best to avoid the termination of the apprentice arrangement, the master is also careful to avoid a bad labeling from his community where he has picked the son of a brother or relation. To dismiss the apprentice on grounds that are not substantiated or failing to keep to the terms of apprenticeship after the agreed number of years of service can incur the wrath of the community back at home.

Thus, the Igbo apprenticeship system is not just an arrangement between the master and the apprentice, it is a community or family affair. Masters who are notorious for not settling their apprentice hardly get apprentice to work with them as the story is told of every master's treatment of his apprentice. And these stories, good or bad, last for generations among the members of the community or family. No wonder some masters have more applications for apprenticeship than others. According to Okoro (2018), insincere masters run the risk of having their businesses or fortune ruined by the apprentice's personal deity, known as the *Chi*. This is why every master does his best to give a take-off package to the apprentice after the fulfillment of the agreed years of service. At this point of settlement the blessing of the master is indispensable. The blessing of the master is more important than the financial package, because the financial package without his blessing ends in ruin. At this point, therefore, the Igbo apprentice system takes up a spiritual dimension.

At the picking up point and settlement point, there are no written documents or court papers to sign. It is done in trust. According to Neuwirth (2018)"

The interesting thing is that nothing is in writing, it's all done on trust and credibility. The boy's family would usually come together and meet with the master at the commencement of the arrangement. And at the end of the apprentice period, the master will also bring the boy home and settle him in the presence of his family. Government cannot replicate that. They can only complicate it. (Ted, November 2018)

Diagram 1: Showing the Circle of the Igbo Model



It all begins with Ingratiation, which involves the processes of the master going to the village, picking a relation and introducing him to the system, their duties, roles and overall workings of the system. It is a period of orientation. This is followed by the period of incubation, which offers the apprentice the business spaces of learning to mature in the business, in co-creation, trainings and cultivation of business models. The incubation platform is full of risks and practical in nature. It is during this period that the apprentice is trained and nurtured. **During this period**, honesty, accountability and work ethic are core principles. The final stage is funding. This is when the master settles the apprentice to begin his own business. This is dependent on the financial capability of the master and the commitment of the apprentice to the success of the business during the incubation period.

As the Igbo continue to create wealth in different parts of Nigeria, the apprenticeship system is at its base. Neuwirth (2018) visited the Alaba International Market in Lagos dominated by the Igbo and observed that:

This mutual aid economy still exists, and we can find examples of it in the strangest places. So, this is Alaba International Market. It's the largest electronics market in West Africa. It's 10,000 merchants, they do about four billion dollars of turnover every year. And they say they are ardent apostles of Adam Smith: competition is great, we're all in it individually, government doesn't help us. But the interesting reality is that when I asked further, that's not what grew the market at all. There's a behind-the-scenes principle that enables this market to grow. And they do claim – you know, this is an interesting juxtaposition of the King James Bible and "How To Sell Yourself." That's what they say is their message. But in reality, this market is governed by a sharing principle. Every merchant, when you ask them, "How did you get started in global trade?" they say, "Well, when my master settled me." And when I finally got it into my head to ask, "What is this 'settling?'" it turns out that when you've done your apprenticeship with someone you work for, they are required – required – to set you up in business. That means paying your rent for two or three years and giving you a cash infusion so you can go out in the world and start trading. That's locally generated venture capital. Right? And I can say with almost certainty that the Igbo apprenticeship system that governs Alaba International Market is the largest business incubator platform in the world. (Ted, November 2018)

The Igbo apprenticeship system has produced more millionaires and billionaires than the entire Nigerian University economic system has produced. Neuwirth (2018) observes that the Igbo multi-billionaires were the products of this business incubator platform:

Innoson, Cocharis, Ibeto, Chikason, Ekenedilichukwu, are all from our great city of Nnewi. None of these may ventured anywhere near the gates of a secondary school, some didn't even finish primary school, but control multi-billion dollar empires. It starts with an apprentice system where a master takes a young boy of about 10 years, the boy serves his master for about 7 years. At the end of the 7 years, the master settles the boy with

some capital. Most times depending on their relationship, the boy remains in the master's house even though he is now free, eats there and sleeps there for the next 2 years or so, to save money. In addition to the capital, the master also extends credit facilities to the boy and gives him goods on credit to sell. (Ted, November 2018).

These millionaires: Innoson, Cocharis, Ibeto, Chikason, Ekenedilichukwu are not just millionaires for themselves, they make millionaires every year through the apprentice incubator platform. The system is such that there is always a millionaire waiting to be born. It is a beautiful circle, with each circle preparing for the birth of a millionaire- who is either being ingratiated or incubated or funded.

Conclusion

This study is another effort at discovering the relationship between Igwebuiké philosophy and the socio-economic categories of reality. Using the philosophical idea of Igwebuiké, it has tried to establish its centrality in the Igbo apprenticeship system that has created wealth over the years for the Igbo, making the Igbo the most successful business men and women in Africa. The beauty of it is its simplicity. It is a system that does not take equity or require raising huge capital. It is driven by human-platform and it works based on the Igwebuiké philosophy that sees the other as a part of me, and thus making me responsible for the other. It is a human network that the Nigeria government can deepen through the provision of capital for Igbo business men and women. If government can deepen these human-platforms, she can comfortably fix the unemployment problem that is affecting the young and the economy of the country.

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