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## **LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS**

1. Madubuike, Kenneth Okoro, Department of Economics, Evangel University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
2. Otega Okinono, Department of Sociology and Security Studies, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State Nigeria
3. Mbadiwe, Mayor Munachiso, Department of Economics, Evangel University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
4. Okpan, Samuel Okpanocha, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Evangel University, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
5. Nkiru Doris Onyemachi, Department of Languages, Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo, Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria
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8. Muhammad Auwal Kabir, PhD, Department of Accounting, Faculty of Management Sciences, Bauchi State University, Gadau, Bauchi, Nigeria
9. Mahmoud Ibrahim, PhD, Department of Accounting, Faculty of Management Sciences, Bauchi State University, Gadau, Bauchi, Nigeria
10. Akpogheli, Oghenekome Emmanuel, Department of Economics, Faculty of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences, Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo, Delta State, Nigeria.

11. Igbinosa, Eghosa Sylvester, Department of Economics, Faculty of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences, Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo, Delta State, Nigeria.

12. Oboro, Emmanuel David, Department of Economics, Faculty of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences, Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo, Delta State, Nigeria

13. Obaje, Folashade Olufunke, Department of Accounting, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

14. Ogirima, Abdulmumuni, Department of Accounting, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

15. Alaneme, Gloria C, University of Lagos, Distance Learning Institute (DLI)

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17. Ocheja Theophilus Attabor, Ph.D, Department of Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences, Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo-Delta State, Nigeria

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23. Amaechi Fidelis Nwador, Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

24. Franklins .A. Sanubi, Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

25. Esekumemu Victor Clark, Department of Political Science, Nigeria, Delta State University, Abraka

26. Adie, James Again ' Department of Business Administration, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

27. Chinedu Ojji Monday, Department of Business Administration, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

28. Jonathan Diseyei Kiapene, Department of Languages, Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo, Delta State, Nigeria



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**NIGERIAN STATE STRUCTURE; SOUTH-EAST DILEMMA:  
EXPLORING POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES**

by  
Madubuike Kenneth  
Department of Economic.  
Evangel University, Ebonyi State,

Otega Okinono  
Department of Sociology and Criminology,  
University of Delta, Agbor. Delta State.  
Email: otega.okinono@unidel.edu.ng,

Mbadiwe, Munachiso Mayor  
Department of Economics,  
Evangel University, Ebonyi State,  
&  
Okpan, Samuel Okpanocha  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
Evangel University, Ebonyi State.

**Abstract**

The existing state structure in Nigeria skewed to the advantage of certain geopolitical region has clearly negated the federal character principle, and undermined the notion of equality, and unity of the nation. Considering that States are used as a yardstick for resource allocation and platform for developmental projects. Consequently a region with fewer states is automatically deprived of equal development projects and representation. This is vividly visible in the unequal social, economic, political and developmental benefits amongst the regions in Nigeria, especially the South East region. This has in no small measure legitimised agitations for more states and secessionist movements rising from South East. This paper attempts to highlight the corresponding political and socioeconomic deficiencies associated with this undue inequality, and how it has affected the psychology and development of the South East region of Nigeria. The paper however recommends amongst

other things that additional state should be created in the South East region of Nigeria. More so, the region and its people should be included in rightful proportion in the political and socioeconomic structure of Nigeria in order to correct this injustice as well as facilitate equal share of political, socioeconomic and developmental stake in the Nigerian nation. The notion of “One Nigeria” must not only be a mantra, but in actualization.

**Keywords:** States' creation, Inequality, South East region, Historical, Socioeconomic, Political, Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

It is without doubt that the social economic process in any nation is hinged on its historical, political, economic, and social structural existence. In as much as, the social structure of a people, their institutional frameworks, processes may not be as a result of direct influence from politicking. However, the outcome of this political exercise greatly influence the pattern, sequence and consequence of achievable socio-economic status of the country and its people (Adewale, 2011). This is why in almost all countries around the globe, there are sub-governmental units such as regions, states and provinces with the primary aim of making governance realistic, effective and efficient. Other aims would be to ensure increased coverage of government policies and their benefits to every citizen. As Adetoye (2016) opined “this notion of states' creation is also predicated on the belief that states are instruments of resource allocation and development.” If the above assertion is to be taken as true, why then has Nigeria failed to create the same number of States in all its regions? The existing uneven number of States within the six geopolitical zones simply implies that the region with fewer States will no doubt attract fewer development programs and projects, especially in a nation like Nigeria that operates the centre-periphery relationship with the core or center allocating resources to the periphery. This aptly explains the existing inequity within South East

Nigeria as the only region with one State less of every other geopolitical zone in the country.

Raheem et al (2014) in their study stated that the uneven distribution of natural endowments, differences in climate and physical condition and lopsided and most times dysfunctional institutional policies all translate to non-uniformity of economic opportunities available to populations residing in different regions. This issues accounts to the clustering of several manufacturing industries, transport terminal, government, and several other developments oriented programmes. Again, the past and present processes of administration support evidence of social inequality against the particular area. It is also most instructive to note that the differences within the regions are apparent in the area of employment opportunities especially in federal agencies, per capital incomes, physical quality of life, human and capital development, access to education, acquisition of property etc. In addition, the differences in the operation and processes of political, economic development and social processes of colonial administration seem to have created the social inequalities and imbalances within the regions (Nnoli, 1978).

### **The Nigerian State**

Nigeria is a country within the West African region located on a 923, 773 km<sup>2</sup> land mass, lying between latitude 40° and 140° north of the equator and longitudes 30° and 140° east of the Greenwich Meridian. The country is domiciled within the tropical zone. Nigeria was controversially formed into a single geographical sphere in 1914 when the colonialist led by Lord Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates (Onimisi, 2014). Nigeria is the most populated nation in Africa with an estimated population of 140 million (Nigerian Bureau of Statistics NBS, 2006) which is projected to be over 200 million (NBS, 2021) and also touted as the most populous black nation. In addition, Bouchat (2013) asserted that Nigeria represents the best

and worst of what African countries can offer the world. It is a mosaic of over 250 different ethnic groups and languages enriched as a crossroads between various forms of Christianity, Islam, indigenous (traditional) beliefs, and Western, Arab, and native influences. Its vast region is home to fertile agricultural land and vast quantities of natural gas and crude oil, which rank as the 10th and 8th largest reserves in the world, respectively.

Since its inception as a nation-state Nigeria has grappled with diverse forms of a challenge especially social inequality and injustice, this has given rise to agitations across the nation majorly from the South East who are worst of the situation. The quest to end social injustice is not particular to Nigerian South Easterners as social movements against inequality, social inclusiveness and end to lopsided resource allocation have gained a global appeal with rising social movements dotting the global map from Hong Kong to Chile; from South Sudan to Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico. Presently, due to the inequality in terms of State creation leading to uneven distribution of developmental derivatives mentioned earlier, Nigeria could be said to be on a boiling pot and at the precipice of disintegration with emerging social movements all over the country especially some from the South Eastern region, a home to the Igbo speaking group who have fewer States than other regions. For instance, within the South East organizations such as the Movement for Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous Peoples of Biafra(IPOB) aimed at secession and other sub-regional subtle political movements represented by Ohanaeze – Ndi Igbo who thrive at representing the interest of the Igbos within the framework of Nigerian human and infrastructural development. It is, therefore, germane to analyze underlining issues within the South East region considering the persistent clash between IPOB members and the Nigerian military typified during the first operation python dance in 2017 whereby State authorities unleashed brute

force to dismantle unarmed protesters with many young men falling as casualties. Sadly, the State failed to realize that a nation can survive unbelief but no nation can survive social injustice. As such brute force is never enough to address social injustice. This is why in recent times the military had to clash again with the youths who have formed a kind of militia group known as Eastern Security Network (ESN). In addition, the recent attacks on police establishments, their infrastructure and personnel undermining and delegitimizing Nigerian Federal Government authorities.

### **Existential Social Inequality in Nigeria**

The creation of states in Nigeria started in the year 1967 with the Nigerian former military head of state. It is estimated that currently Nigeria has approximately three hundred and seventy-one tribes, and is a country made up of thirty-six (36) states (Sowunmi, 2017). It is, therefore, pertinent to note that these thirty-six states were not created simultaneously. In fact, from 1960 to 1966, there was no State Structure in Nigeria. What was in existence then were regions comprising of the Northern region, Western region, Eastern region, and Mid-Western region. The creation of States began in 1967 during the administration of General Yakubu Gowon after the Civil War (Offodili, 2016). That administration dissolved the regions and created twelve (12) States which are Benue-Plateau, East-Central, Kano, Lagos, Mid-West, North Central, North East, North West, Rivers, South-East, Western and West Central which were all carved out from the pre-existing regions.

**Table 1: States and Local Government Area Distribution in Nigeria**

S/N	ZONE	NO. OF STATES	NO. OF LGAS (LOCAL COUNCILS)
1	North Central	6 (16.67%)	116 (15.19%)
2	North East	6 (16.67%)	110 (14.36%)
3	North West	7 (19.44%)	181 (23.69%)
4	South East	5 (13.89%)	94(12.27%)
5	South South	6 (16.67%)	127 (16.58%)
6	South West	6 (16.67%)	138 (18.01%)
	Total	36	774

Source: Ohaneze (2002).

As was stated earlier, undoubtedly over the years, the ever-rising claims of regional inequalities and marginalization have increased tremendously. This study however does not neglect the benefits of states' creation in Nigeria. As Suberu cited in Adetoye (2016) opined that state creation process was, and continues to be an important instrument in the intra-elite struggles for bureaucratic placement, advancement and enrichment. ... establishment of a civil service, the distribution of contracts for the construction of a new secretariat with its roads and a new hospital, staff school and houses, possibly a university ... establishment of parastatals, of a television station and a newspaper. With no doubt of prejudice to these acclaimed benefits, it is fair enough to say that these benefits were not equitably distributed. Inequality in Nigeria persists beyond State creation, it also persists in areas such as population census and appointments. It is not short in other areas such as income, education, social amenities, nutrition, shelter, and so on (World Bank, 1995). Between the start of this recent dispensation of democracy and now,



there have existed glaring incidents of inequalities, placing the country among those with the highest inequality levels in the world. The problem of poverty in Nigeria is viewed partly as a feature of very high levels of inequality which is seen in the highly unequal income distribution and differential access to basic infrastructure, education, training and job opportunities (Eze et al, 2014). This sustained high inequality reflects on a widening income gap and access to economic and social opportunities which has sustained unending restiveness. Besides, as a nation, Nigeria is enshrined with multiple layers of inequality according to the Oxfam Report (2017) major drivers of Nigerian inequality identified include a retrogressive taxation system. In Nigeria the rich access tax waivers, and tax holidays and exploit loopholes for tax avoidance. In recent times some states within the South have courageously challenged the lopsided tax and revenue allocation that glaringly favours the North as they receive as allocation the same amount their tax generates while the South receives less from the federal allocation despite contributing more from taxation while the entire nation awaits the outcome of the judicial process which has stretched to the supreme court as the states had won in lower courts. It must be stated that such inequality is anti-national growth and unity.

### **Theoretical Anchoring**

The paper draws insight from two major sociological theories to adumbrate the discussion on inequality. The paper incorporates strands of the functionalist and conflict theories. First, is the functionalist theory; basically, the functionalist view of inequality asserts that inequality is inevitable and desirable and plays an important function in society. However, it's a highly contentious convincing the majority of citizens who are deprived of basic livelihood, especially in a nation such as Nigeria with enormous natural resources that are only appropriated to a few, on the functional utility of inequality as an integral and essential part of social existence. The contending

critics against the functionalist assumption gave rise to the second theoretical underpinning. The conflict theorists, which believe that social and economic institutions are tools of a struggle between groups or classes, used to maintain inequality and dominance of the ruling class. Inequalities within a society exist mainly due to unequal opportunities and benefits for different groups within the society (Crossman, 2021). Again, over the years, there seemed to have been different rates of operation of colonial administrative, political, and economic development processes which tend to have created the regional inequalities and imbalances in Nigeria (Raheem et al, 2014). This inequality bears a structured and recurrent pattern of unequal distributions of goods and services, national wealth (resources), opportunities and disadvantages, as well as rewards and punishments. In line with the conflict assumption, the Nigerian society presents a glaring situation of structural imbalance creating deprivation.

For many years now, a glaring inequality amongst the states and ethnic groups has remained remarkably persistent in diverse ways, for instance, in education and access to certain public services in Nigeria (Archibong, 2018). It remains irreconcilable to understand the cut-off mark structure into unity schools in Nigeria in a situation whereby a candidate from Enugu is required to score (134), Anambra (139) while candidates from Zamfara is expected to score (4) and Taraba (3) in the same exam is gross inequality (Sahara Reporters, 2021). While there has been some improvement in provision of certain social amenities; admittedly however, there are still huge differences in terms of access to economic and political desirables, federally administered services such as political appointments have not received the same attention as almost all military positions are headed by Northerners.

More so, some studies have shown that negative relationships between ethnic

groups, income distribution and public provisions and services (Alesina, Michalopoulos, & Papaioannou, 2016) inequalities persist in Nigeria. Unfortunately, this heart-breaking inequality has been in existence since the independence of Nigeria in 1960, though mildly. However, recently, there has been a very loud cry of manifest inequalities in every sphere of the Nigerian state. These inequalities have been observed particularly during the present administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. Speculations are rife that following the sharing of Nigeria into three regions, it may have kick-started the beginning of all political, historical and socioeconomic inequalities.

This was partly due to the lack of identity given to minorities both in Northern and Southern Nigeria as at that period. It is of interest to recall that by 1953, the minorities had become united, determined and vociferous in their demands for separate states (Ojo, 2009). This then led to the formation of the Minorities Commission under the chairmanship of Sir Henry Willink in 1957. As Akinyele (1996) asserted, the states' creation in Nigeria was originally conceived as a solution to the problems of ethnic minority groups. Unfortunately, the commission did not find it necessary to create any state, instead constitutional safeguards were recommended for independence constitution (Mackintosh, 1966). It was however not until 1963 that the mid-western region was created out of the western region (David, et al 1999). This will be followed by a further liberation of the minorities in the northern part of Nigeria in 1976, with the creation of the now recognized North Central geopolitical zone. Be it as it may, it should be clearly understood that this study advocates that for no reasons or purposes given should any region or ethnic group be marginalized or unjustly disenfranchised, it maintains that the Igbos who occupy the South Eastern part of the Nigeria entity cannot be said to be a minority tribe or region. Thus, the injustice which has been meted out in the South East only points to treatments given to minority groups. As Stavenhagen

(1983) pointed out that there exists an exploitative relationship, which often characterizes the interaction between the minority and the dominant group and can take the form of “unequal regional development (when ethnic groups are geographically localized) or of differential access to positions of privilege or power, or different forms of segregation and discrimination in social, economic and political life.” The inferior status imputed to ethnic minority groups explains the conflict potential in minority/dominant relationships. This seems to be the case for people of the South East.

Another shade of inequality is seen in other vital indices such as income levels, nutrition, education, social amenities, healthcare, shelter, and so on (World Bank Report, 1995). As posited by Eze et al (2014), “The poverty problem in the country is viewed as partly a feature of high levels of inequality which manifests in highly unequal income distribution and differential access to basic infrastructure, education, training and job opportunities.” They went further to illustrate that these inequalities have negatively shaped the economy of Nigeria. These diverse unpleasant effects include but are not limited to a sustained high overall inequality reflecting a widening income gap and access to economic and social opportunities between gender, growing inequalities between and within rural and urban populations, and widening gaps between the federating units' economies. The 2006 census in Nigeria is an apt description of how inequality in Nigeria has taken shape. Due to an alleged 'higher' population of the North over the South, various socioeconomic and developmental projects have been allocated more to the North than to the South.

Furthermore, education assessment and development seem to have double standards. Different score grades are available for the different zones and regions. Ditto can be said for scholarship opportunities and other benefits such

as research grants and tuition fees. The majority of the roads in Northern Nigeria are better off due to well-structured roads by good road contractors while most roads in Southern Nigeria are bad and poorly constructed, using inexperienced contractors. The government pays more attention in the supervision of roads in the North than in the South (Sowunmi, 2017).

Going further, it has been seen that there are yet other forms of inequalities inherent in Nigeria. Unfortunately, one of the most destabilizing inequalities has taken the form of administrative inequalities seen mostly in glaring inequalities in federal appointments and allocations of federal projects, especially against southern Nigeria and particularly the Southeastern people of Nigeria, also known as the Igbos. This pattern of ethnic inequality in access to federal administration and services is hinged majorly on the heterogeneous federal government policy towards certain ethnic groups in Nigeria (Archibong, 2018). While it may seem unbelievable, there has been a consistent drive in ascertaining that the South Eastern zone of Nigeria is left behind or out entirely in issues that are of utmost importance. Recent positions especially in the security apparatus of Nigeria have no member from the South East region, particularly under the incumbent President, Muhammadu Buhari. On assumption of office in 2015, Buhari had on 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2015 appointed service chiefs in Nigeria (Service chiefs are those in command of the various armed forces and top-notch security outfits). Amongst those appointments, no member of any of the armed forces from the South East was appointed to these positions. This simply means that when security issues and vital information regarding safeguarding the territories of Nigeria are taken, the South East region will be mostly in the dark. Below were the appointments of the President at that time:

1. Major-General Abayomi Gabriel Olonishakin – Chief of Defence Staff

2. Major-General Tukur Y. Buratai – Chief of Army Staff
3. Rear Admiral Ibok-Ete EkweIbas – Chief of Naval Staff
4. Air Vice Marshal Sadique Abubakar – Chief of Air Staff
5. Air Vice Marshal Monday Riku Morgan – Chief of Defence Intelligence
6. Major-General Babagana Monguno (rtd.) – National Security Adviser (Guardian Newspapers, 2015)

None of these appointments came from the South East. Subsequently, last year, under his present second tenure in office, President Buhari again appointed new service chiefs for the second time in his administration on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021. To the gross dismay of many Nigerians and South Easterners, there was no appointee from the South East region that made the list. The new service chiefs are:

1. Major General Lucky E.O Irabor – Chief of Defence Staff
2. Major General Ibrahim Attahiru – Chief of Army Staff
3. Air Vice Marshal Ishiaka O. Alao – Chief of Air Staff
4. Rear Admiral Awwal Z. Gambo – Chief of Naval Staff (bbc.com, 2021)

### **Empirical Literature**

Quite a number of works have been written pertaining to the various inequalities existing in Nigeria. Most of these works have dealt with socioeconomic inequalities between states and regions in Nigeria, gender inequalities, and political and administrative inequalities founded on ethnic bias and victimization. Unfortunately, most of these inequalities exist in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, with special regard to political, social and economic inequalities.

Alumona et al (2019) in their work argued that certain actions, inactions and policies of the Nigerian government, which are perceived to be targeted against the Igbo, have created feelings of collective victimization among the people

which sustains and reinforces their separatist agitations. Ibeanu et al (2016) critically analyzed that there still exists the feeling of collective victimization which ties all separatist movements together and hence cannot be abandoned in any genuine effort to understand the resurgence of separatist agitation in the Southeast. Archibong (2018) explored explanations for the patterns observed and concluded that persistent ethnic inequality in access to federally administered service was partially driven by historical heterogeneous federal government policies towards different groups in Nigeria. Eze et al (2014) opined in their study that majorly amongst the causes of inequality in human development among the zones were attributed to other variables such as religion, ethnicity and culture rather than income or access to infrastructural facilities in Nigeria. Jelili et al (2008) in their work observed that though different attempts have been made by the categorization of cities, and creation of regions and administrative units, regional planning has not been embraced and justified.

These above submissions attest that primarily there is an existence of injustice and lopsidedness of socioeconomic and political benefits in Nigeria. But the emphasis of this study remained that the South Eastern states have been the most victimized, maybe even from colonial times. The state's structure in Nigeria has been and is still a major means via which this injustice and unscrupulous diversions and neglect rear its ugly head. Slowly but affirmatively, this injustice and uneven allocation of socioeconomic developments and appointments leave disturbing (and maybe traumatic) psyches on people of the South East. They have been gallantly relegated to the back of almost all social, political and economic activities over the past six (6) years. The people of the South East region of Nigeria popularly known as the Igbos have consistently felt disgruntled and disenfranchised probably since the independence of Nigeria in 1960. It is also worthy to state that this feeling of

disenfranchisement took its root in the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war which lasted from July 1967 until January 1970. Visible bias in sensitive sectors and positions of the economy has highlighted these inequalities as earlier indicated in this work. For instance, only the Southeast region of Nigeria has five States compared to the other regions with six States (Aribisala, 2015). Again, there is a perception that the seaports the Southeast are deliberately underutilized forcing businessmen from the region to use ports outside their region (Nsoedo, 2019),

## **Conclusion**

Social inequality is highly divisive, creating tension that threatens continuous national existence. It is pertinent to change the current orthodox and primordial rationality that inequality is acceptable to strengthen the fabric of social existence. Evidence from continuous agitation in Nigeria supports the theoretical view of inequality as destructive. For there to be peace and unity in Nigeria, social justice must be entrenched in all strata of leadership, especially the Federal government. Essentially reversing all forms of discrimination in the form of political, and social economic conditions of the South Easterners. This development will reduce the tension within the region. If an Igbo man becomes the president of Nigeria it is not a crime especially considering that the region has never produced a democratically elected president since after the first republic president late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe.

## **Recommendation**

- The Nigerian political class must consider it necessary to practice politics of inclusivity through policy of zoning and adherence to effective implementation of the policy.
- The nation must also endeavor to spread socio-economic development across the federating units.



- The government as a matter of urgency needs to consider creating additional state within the South east to balance six state structure within other regions.
- The government should make conscious deliberate policies to create ease of access to credit more entrepreneurs and enterprises which has strong potential for reducing inequalities.

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