

Time for a Paradigm Shift in Ibibio Agriculture!

The absence of purposeful leadership in Ibibio land since the proscription of Ibibio Union by the Nigerian Military in 1966 was cited as the reason for the re-emergence of present day IPU during its first annual Congress in 2011. A year later, in pursuit of the desire to see Ibibio unite in progress, prosperity and safety, IPU is beginning to offer suggestions, as a first step, on the priorities and ways forward on the issues facing Ibibio people today.

Visit the villages in Ibibio land and you will see real hunger and despair on the faces of the people. The obvious question is why the hunger and despair? One does not need rocket science to realize that the major issues facing Ibibio people, issues like political ineptness, lack of long term plans/goals, lack of reliable power supply, food insecurity, absence of emergency preparedness plans, justice to the highest bidder and general insecurity of life, are factors that contribute to this malaise. The next thing to do is to prioritize these and decide on which to tackle first.

If one visits Akwa Ibom during the different seasons of the year and observes the food items in the markets, one quickly discovers that (a) the staple foods sold year round are all imported products, (b) the seasonal food items are locally produced and are unavailable during the off season. No people can be secure who import most of what they eat and wear. What if for any reason or no reason your suppliers refuse to sell to you? As it stands now we recently found out that even other third world countries like Thailand ship rice that is 10 years old from their reserves to Nigeria. Do we have a month's reserve of cassava anywhere in Akwa Ibom? Additionally, agriculture still remains a sleeping sector in our local economy instead of being seen as a strong option to diversify our local economy. **Consequently, we finger the embrace of modern technology and mechanized agriculture as a foundational pillar of Ibibio security in need of immediate attention.**

The Ibibio must return to the basics which they have abandoned – agriculture!

It is whence the Ibibio found sustenance, progress and wealth. It is where we must look today and in the future, particularly as God's windfall to Ibibio people (revenue from crude oil) has not been judiciously expended for the well being of today's and future generations, which wind fall must surely expire someday. We must not wait however for those times to happen upon us.

The most obvious suggestion would be to adopt mechanized farming in Akwa Ibom. With the up surge in population, primitive and antiquated subsistence farming does not produce sufficient food to feed everyone. Simply put, the demand for food is not matched with supply. Today, plowing fields for crops and harvesting are performed more efficiently by utilizing modern technology in agricultural farming machineries.

The essentials of mechanized farming include among many others:

- Land
- Capital
- Electricity
- Irrigation
- Modern farm machineries
- Knowledge of agricultural chemicals and their safe application.
- Agricultural research.

Two of the authors live in Texas. If you enter Texas from Louisiana you enter the town of Orange. The distance from Orange (in the east) to El Paso in the west is almost 1,000 miles. So

one can be driving at 120 km/hr and take several minutes to pass a single farm/ranch in West Texas. Akwa Ibom does not have such luxury of large expanse of land. To produce the food we eat we have to embrace the emerging 21st Century agricultural technology in addition to mechanized farming. Today one does not need land to grow food. One does not need to re-invent the wheel either. One only has to develop the political will to set a target date to achieve food security and deploy resources consistently to achieve the goal.

Malaysia came to Nigeria in 1960 and got palm fruit seeds. Today they generate over \$15 billion per year from palm oil. We can learn from them. Check out <http://lipidlibrary.aocs.org/processing/palmoil/index.htm>. You see the technology needed is already developed. We just need to apply it. In fact we used to have one of these at Ekpene Ukpá by the stream before you get to Ndone Utim!

Most of the cows and goats we eat come from northern Nigeria. But actually our people prefer okopusem eboto to the imported one. During a visit to Akwa Ibom this past March, one of the authors stumbled on a small herd of Enang Ibibio (Angus beef) grazing in a bush near a church. These are shorter in height than the northern cows but they were stockier. It seems safe to assume therefore that if well bred and raised they would provide more meat than the Fulani cows. This clearly suggests that we can raise our own cattle in a more scientific manner and outcompete those who have to trek hundreds of miles to take their cattle to market. Our school of agriculture must commence a serious program to conduct a census of our cattle and develop a plan to increase their population in the not too distant future.

Another viable option to increasing our food production is Aquaponics farming. Large corporate farms such as we see in the USA requires a lot of money for equipment and large expanses of land. There is a new trend gaining ground in the USA that we believe we could emulate. With the advent and acceptance of organic (food grown without pesticides) food items as well as the concept of growing things locally on smaller scale, technologies and methodologies have been developed that we could easily adapt to grow our own foods. These technologies do not require the amounts of monies large farms do. In addition we can basically consider our regular markets to be Farmers Markets. Consequently it is our opinion that adopting these techniques would not only increase our productivity, it would lead to year round production of food under more hygienic conditions. A good example of this is Aquaponics.

According to The Texas Aquaponic Guide, “Aquaponics is the combination of aquaculture (fish farming) and hydroponics (soil-less plant culture) In Aquaponics, both fish and plants are grown in one body of water, using one ‘infrastructure’”. The advantages of Aquaponics are many. With it one:

- Can produce up to ten times more vegetables in the same area and time as a garden.
- Uses up to 40% less labor and 90% less water than a conventional garden.
- Uses a tiny amount of energy (go solar, forget PHCN).

In a state with limited land -mass, it is easy to see how Aquaponics could be employed to produce more vegetables from less land thereby permitting the use of more land for other cash crops and staples like palm oil and cassava.

We can continue citing other examples but it would be impossible to be exhaustive. **The essence of our position is that Ibibio people should make food self- sufficiency /security a priority.**

It is easy to be and we have been complacent simply because Nigeria has been spared devastating natural disasters as we have seen in other countries. The sad and astonishing thing is that most of the people running the state today lived through the Nigerian Civil war and should remember the

hardships we went through when Nigeria decided to blockade and starve Eastern Nigeria into submission. This raises a lot of questions in our minds. Listed below are some examples of serious questions that we should be addressing:

- ❖ Is there a seed bank for Eyop, Eben, Udara, Effiat, Nkarika, Nta ke mbriem, Ekom, Ntuen Ibok, Ntuen Akpo, Atikke, Uboong, Nton, Atama, etc that we could use to repopulate the state with these seasonals should something happen to destroy existing crops/trees?
- ❖ Is there any research that is ongoing to develop seeds with increased yield?
- ❖ Is there any Information Bank on the diseases, insects etc that attack these crops and the ways to combat them?
- ❖ If for any reason we could not import salt, is there a plan to get salt from the Atlantic Ocean (Sea salt) so that we can stave off Kwashiorkor?
- ❖ Has any Commissioner for Agriculture ever considered what we would do if a natural disaster wiped out any or many of the foods we eat?

You see where we are going and can add to these questions. These types of considerations constrain IPU to make the following recommendations:

- ✓ Ibibio food security must be made a priority.
- ✓ We should adopt mechanical farming for greater yield of our staple foods like cassava and palm oil that require large land mass.
- ✓ Emerging technologies like Aquaponics should be embraced to maximize production of food items that can be grown by such technology that do not require a large land mass.

Agricultural experts should be assembled to map out a plan to achieve these and other worthy goals. Our people should be educated on the need for the plan. The political will must be mustered to actualize the plan. The essence of our position is that Ibibio people should make food sufficiency a priority for their security and survival.

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