



# The Historical Perspectives of Land Acquisition for Sustainable Development in Rivers State: A Case Study of Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality in Nigeria 1913–2015

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## Abstract

Land acquisition in Rivers State dates back to the colonial period in 1913 when the colonial authorities acquired parts of Rebisi-Ikwerre land for development as a result of the location of harbor within the vicinity. And from then onwards Ikwerre people began to bear the whole brunt of developing several parts of the State. As a result, their lands had been put under serious pressure and stress. Moreover, as soon as the Federal government of Nigeria Promulgated the Land Use Decree (Act) in 1978, it gave a direct negative impact on Ikwerre people through forceful land acquisition by the State. Though the positive impact became overwhelming and beneficial to the sustainable development of the area, yet a massive alienation of Ikwerre land was carried out by both the state and the Federal government. By so doing, every infrastructural development was cited on Ikwerre land without consultation with the land owners neither was paid any consumerate compensation. This ceaseless land acquisition was undertaken through the application of several relevant laws and policies that relate to land in Rivers State. But these relevant laws and policies have not been equitably applied in other parts of the state. However, infrastructural development cannot usher in sustainable development if there are no lands to place them. It therefore means that Ikwerre people would pay more price than others in bringing about sustainable development in Rivers State.

Keywords: Historical Perspectives, Land Acquisition, Sustainable Development, Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality Rivers State, Nigeria, 1913-2015.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Adigun (1991, p. 10) land is the nucleus of man's livelihood and survival and the quality and quantity of land determines the extent of man's development. He went on to infer that in spite of whatever ideological approach that could be used which may include either the African collectivist approach, the capitalist and or the socialist approach on land especially in Ikwerre land, yet land still remains the key to any solution directed towards the process of development and poverty. It was based on this premise that colonial authorities at the time decided to ensure that there was an unrestricted access to land in the various regions they occupied. This policy affected Ikwerre people greatly to the extent that land was forcefully acquired which invariably made land a very scarce commodity among Ikwerre people.

Ikwerre people had unrestricted access to their lands before the Land Use Decree (now Act) was promulgated in Nigeria. The laws that granted government agencies access to lands, notwithstanding, lands could not be appropriated without payment of compensation to the owners of such lands. The current land administration intended to allow lands at the disposal of Nigerians with little or no cost for their use and for national development but not to forcefully seize them from the peasant owners for the benefit and enjoyment of a few privileged elites who in their various communities have allowed land owners to keep and own their lands. The question now is, why should only Ikwerre bear the brunt of the so-called development in which their lands have now become the property of the government, be it state or Federal government?

Adigun (1991, p. 14) in his assertion had re-iterated his earlier position when he explained that the promulgation of the Land Use Act in 1978 was based on the fact that land tenure systems in Nigeria were limiting, inhibiting and divisible in nature and did not permit rapid socio-economic development. This was actually the position of government when the Decree or Act was promulgated. Whether this was true or not is beyond the scope of this work. The emphasis has been placed on land use and not in actual fact on land ownership and nationalization. Indeed, Enyindah (2007, p. 55) was right when he opined that it does not matter what the intentions of government were but that by the Act all lands in Nigeria were vested in the hands of the state. The implications therefore being that all future transactions on land now required the approval of government and on lease bases.

Several scholars such as Eskor Toyo and Adigun etc have variously wondered why government's intentions on land did not extend to other means of production such as capital etc., if their intentions were good enough for the benefit of all. Such scholars therefore in order to get answers had classified Land Use Act of the Federal government of Nigeria which so much ousted ownership of lands out of Ikwerre peasants as a petty bourgeoisie measure meant for the elite to grab available lands for their personal use. Otherwise the Act would have been such that would redistribute lands to all Nigerians and that there should have been a limit to the number of certificate of occupancy issued by the Governor to a particular person in a state (James, 1973).

Indeed the Act has made governments and their agencies to hunger for land ceaselessly. The situation, according to Enyindah (2007, p. 57) has paralyzed many Ikwerre farming communities. This is because Ikwerre farmers now have less acreage of farm land for farming in a particular year. Again, the persistent fear that the state and its agencies would seize their lands has made the people to go into partitioning the land and place them for sale to those who cared to buy. It does seem therefore that there is an inequitable and or selective application of the Land Use Act against Ikwerre people as only Ikwerre people alone carry the burden of government development initiatives in Rivers State.

## **LOCATION OF IKWERRE ETHNIC NATIONALITY**

In a bid to geographically locate Ikwerre, Wahua (1993, p. 125) explains that Ikwerre lies roughly within the coordinates of 4°:50N 5°:15N, 6°:30E and 7°:15E. It covers a land area of about 21, 400km<sup>2</sup> which is about 20% of the total cultivable land in the old Rivers State. He asserts further that the geology and geomorphology of the area are intimately associated with that of the Niger Delta which was created in the Holocene by the process of erosion and sedimentation.

According to Ikunga (2006, p. 38) there are four local government areas that make up Ikwerre ethnic nationality. They include Emohua, Obio/Akpor, Port Harcourt and Ikwerre with some pockets of Ikwerre minority in Ohaji/Egbema, Umuapu, Awara and Umuagwor all in Imo State, Nigeria. Nduka (1993, p. 19) in his study traced the territories of Ikwerre and opined that Ikwerre territory is bounded in the North and West by Ogba, Ekpeye and Abua, south by the people of Okrika and Kalabari, South West and East by those of Tai/Elemé and Etche and to the North East by the people of Umuapu and Umuagwor of Imo State.

According to Achinewhu (1994) Ikwerre land is within the dry land agricultural zone of Rivers State, thereby making it one of the major food and cash crop producers in the state. Its proximity to the state capital, Port Harcourt, has placed it at a relatively high region of infrastructural development. This has negatively impacted on Ikwerre land and its people in which government has had a field day making them to forfeit their lands and natural resources. The major highways in the State criss-cross the length and breadth of Ikwerre land. First is the inter-state road from Port Harcourt to the West and North and the second the East-West regional highway crossing its Southern section. Thus, Ikwerre people have suffered severely as a result of government's acquisition of their lands without adequate compensation.

## **LAND AND LAND TENURE SYSTEMS IN IKWERRE LAND**

According to the International Encyclopedia of the social sciences, vol. 7, land includes all the earth. Land encompasses all that is in it. It takes different forms such as swamps, plains, hills, valleys, mountains etc. Several vegetation types exist in it and different climates can be found there. The International Encyclopedia also explains that land could mean:

- Space or room and surface upon which life takes place
- Nature or natural environment comprising wind, other climate conditions such as soil and natural vegetation
- A situation or location with respect to such things as markets, communities, countries, geographical features etc. (Enyindah, 2007).

Land is one of the factors of production. It is a fixed asset and it means many things to different persons. In real economic terms, land is capital. In agriculture, it is a productive economic factor playing different roles to different people and without land no sustainable development can take place. It is for this reason that states and federal government became conscious of the use of land.

Fekumo (2002, p. 1) quoted Hon. Justice A. G. Karibi-Whyte as describing land as the most precious commodity of the ancient Nigeria. He went on to posit that our fathers lived by land and to them it meant everything. Therefore, our whole existence and activity were tied to land and its ownership.

Similarly, Wabara (1992, p. 20) agrees with the assertion that Africa has deeply rooted reverence for land as the foundation of community life. Stressing further he argues

that land has traditionally been the property of all members of the community and of all family groups which included the ancestors, the living and the unborn. Consequently land has the symbol of continuity of the community. Therefore, land has life that is continuum.

## **LAND TENURE SYSTEM**

Land tenure deals with the customs, practices and laws governing rights, duties and relationships of people. Land belonged to the living, the unborn and the dead as well. Land was regarded as a natural endowment as rain, sunlight and the air we breathe (Adigun 1991, p. 11).

According to Omereji (2003, p. 65) land tenure systems are legal and customary relationships between individuals, groups and society concerning rights and duties in the use of land. In Rivers State and Nigeria generally, the land tenure system by virtue of the established customs and traditions of the African people vested land rights in a corporate group such as the family or community and this group had overriding rights over those of the individuals in the group. Adigun (1991) states that the traditional land tenure system grants that land rights are inalienable. Enyindah (2007, p. 24) makes it more explicit when he admitted that the African land tenure system which had been developed by our forefathers or ancestors produced an unfettered internal group cohesion and peace among its citizens as ownership or access to land depended on one's membership of the group including tribe, lineage, village, community and family.

However, once the colonial administration was established in Ikwerre land, the status quo was changed. The traditional land ownership was seen as not working well enough for the demands of state government. It therefore led to the in perpetuum promulgation of various land legislations that transferred ownership of land to the colonial authorities with little or no compensations at all (Meek, 1968).

In Ikwerre society, the community chief (or *Nenwe eli*) has control over the community land entrusted to his care for the benefit of all members of the community. Similarly, the family Head who undoubtedly could be the oldest male member of the family is invested with the sole rights to be in control of the family land for the benefit of all members of the family. For this reason, he cannot withhold land from all male persons who have been given approval to take a portion of the land. In other words, nobody was denied access to family or community land.

Famoriyo in Wabara (1992, p. 20) argues that permanent alienation of land was strictly forbidden except for the purposes of building a residential house. In this instance male children could inherit right of use or occupation at the death of the owner or cultivator which could also be sold. Worthy of note is the fact that land tenure system in Nigeria albeit Ikwerre was established so as to meet the felt needs of members of the communities. And the needs were met through the provisions of the customary tenure system. Unfortunately the market economy of western Europe which affected African societies changed all that.

## **GOVERNMENT ACQUISITION OF IKWERRE LAND**

The acquisition of Ikwerre land began in 1913 by the British colonial government when it acquired a parcel of land from the Rebisi community of Diobu, Ikwerre, because the then colonial government wanted to develop a harbor in the area. Once the sea port was established the place became busy with commerce and trade and with a beehive of activities. It accelerated development remarkably. Consequently, the colonial officer named Harcourt took steps to develop the area as a township and the place eventually was renamed Port Harcourt which became the Provincial Headquarters and later the capital of Rivers State.

In recent times, as the tempo of oil and gas exploration increased in Rivers State, it invariably put more pressure on Ikwerre land and its resources. As land was needed for development purposes within Port Harcourt and its environs, it was natural to turn to Ikwerre people who inhabit Port Harcourt and the surrounding territories. The tables below show the acquisitions by both the Federal and State governments of various Ikwerre communal and family lands which were previously farming lands.

Table 1: Ikwerre lands acquired by Rivers State government

S/NO	TITLE	AREA HECTERS	PURPOSE	L.G.A
1	G.R.A Phase I and II	565.2	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
2	G.R.A Phase III and IV	513.5	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
3	Eagle Island Layout	200.9	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
4	Elakahia Housing Estate	830.9	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
5	Ozuoba Layout	26,222	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
6	Trans-Amadi Industrial Estate	2,521	Industries	Obio/Akpor
7	Rivers State Television, Eledenwo	N.A	RSTV	Obio/Akpor
8	State Housing Estate Rumueme	69,748	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
9	Rumuibekwe Housing Estate	N.A	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
10	Amadi Flat	N.A	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
11	Shell Residential Estate	N.A	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
12	Oromineke Layout	N.A	Residential	Port Harcourt
13	Presidential Housing Estate	N.A	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
14	Rainbow Housing Estate	N.A	Residential	Port Harcourt
15	Rivers State University of Science & Technology	575.1	University	Ikwerre/Obio Akpor
16	Radio Rivers Transmitting Station, Eledenwo and Ozuoba	N.A	Office	Obio/Akpor
17	University of Education, Rumuolumeni Campus	17.6	University of Education	Obio/Akpor
18	University of Education, Ndele campus	105.1	University of Education	Emohua
19	Rivers State College of Arts and Science, Rumuola	N.A	College	Obio/Akpor
20	Rivers State College of Health Sciences, Rumueme	N.A	School of Health	Obio/Akpor
21	Rivers State School of Nursing, Rumueme	N.A	School of Nursing	Ikwerre
22	Rural Development Centre, Aluu	N.A	Office	Ikwerre
23	Risonpalm Estat, Ubima, Elele- Alimini	16,679	Oil palm	Ikwerre/Emohua
24	Rivers State Secretariat, Port Harcourt	N.A	Office	Port Harcourt
25	Hotel Presidential	N.A	Office	Obio/Akpor
26	Hotel Olympia, Port Harcourt	N.A	Hotel	Port Harcourt
27	Airport Hotel, Omagwa	N.A	Hotel	Ikwerre
28	Port Harcourt Golf Course	N.A	Sport	Port Harcourt
29	College of Education St. John's Rumukalagbor	N.A	College of Education	Port Harcourt

Source: Onuegbu, B.A. (2002). The place of Ikwerre nation in Rivers State politics, paper presented at end of year activities of Kelga committee of friends, Isiokpo

Table 2: IKwerre land acquired by the Federal government of Nigeria

S/NO	TITLE	AREA IN HECTERS	PURPOSE	L.G.A
1	Shell Industrial Estate	N.A	Office	Obio/Akpor
2	Nigerian Agip Oil Estate	N.A	Office/Residential	Obio/Akpor
3	Zamani Lekwot Cantonment (Bori camp)	873.70	Army Camp	Obio/Akpor
4	Adaka Boro Cantonment (Elele-Alimini)	6,296	Barracks	Ikwerre/Emohua
5	Army Shooting Range, Igwuruta	129,454	Sports	Ikwerre
6	Military Hosptial, Port Harcourt	N.A	Hospital	Obio/Akpor
7	NNS Okemini Naval Base, Rumuolumeni	N.A	Naval Base	Obio/Akpor
8	Naval Base, Borokokiri, Port Harcourt	N.A	Naval Base	Port Harcourt
9	Nigerian Airforce Base, Port Harcourt	N.A	Air-force Base	Obio/Akpor
10	N.T.A Mgbuoba, Port Harcourt	N.A	NTA Office	Obio/Akpor
11	Federal Secretariat, Port Harcourt	N.A	Office	Obio/Akpor
12	Nigerian Ports PLC, Port Harcourt	N.A	Office	Port Harcourt
13	Nigerian Railway Terminus, Port Harcourt	N.A	Office	Port Harcourt
14	N.N.P.C Moscow Road, Port Harcourt	N.A.	Office and Terminus	Port Harcourt
15	Federal Housing Estate, Woji	8,944	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
16	Federal Housing Estate, Rumueme	22,665	Residential	PH/Obio/Akpor
17	University of Port Harcourt, Choba	4,791,35	University	Ikwerre/Obio Akpor
18	International Airport, Omagwa	479.135	Airport	Ikwerre
19	Prisons Farm, Elele	1,850	Farm	Ikwerre/Emohua

Source: Onuegbu, B.A. (2002). The place of Ikwerre nation in Rivers State politics, paper presented at end of year activities of Kelga committee of Friends, Isiokpo.

Between 1913 till date Ikwerre people have forfeited several thousands of acres of their farmland to both the state and the Federal government and there have been more acquisitions most of which were made without recourse to the owners. In some cases where owners of the land were consulted and promised compensation, the compensation even when paid was inadequate and some were not fulfilled at all. Compensation for land ended when the Land Use Decree (Act) of 1978 was promulgated. Economic trees and crops now became sources of compensation.

In several cases, it is very embarrassing to see that lands so acquired were not fully utilized. Rather than use them government has entered into the disturbing act of renting or leasing parts of the lands to individuals for their private use. Among such lands in question include Adaka Boro Cantonment (Elele Barracks), Elele Prisons, Zamani Lekwot cantonment, Rumuokoro, Air-force Base, University of Port Harcourt, Iriebe School to land farm etc. The money from such sales, rents and leases have been appropriated by the government. At Atali community in Obio/Akpor the people have vehemently resisted government sale of lands it acquired from the community for development. The people are

now asking that those who have been allotted the lands should come to see them for negotiation.

Again, in 1939, Her Majesty, Queen of England acquired Rumuolukwu land to build an aerodrome to prosecute the Second World War efforts. Having been forced out of their traditional homeland with a promise to resettle them with adequate compensation, it is interesting to discover that resettlement and compensation were not made till date. The people now occupy part of Rumuomasi land donated to them being their younger brother. That place is now an Air-force base in Obio/Akpor Local government.

Furthermore, it is important to discover that the acquisition of Zamani Lekwot Cantonment, Rumuokoro was during the Nigerian Civil War in 1966 by the then Eastern Nigerian government specifically to prosecute the war initiatives. The then Biafran soldiers abandoned it in 1968 once Port Harcourt fell to federal troops which of course took over and confiscated the Barracks. There was no payment either by the Eastern Nigerian government nor the Federal government that took it over. The Nigerian soldiers had over the years continued to extend the boundaries of the original land acquired by the Eastern Nigerian government to include Monier Construction Company (MCC) which had original lease agreement with the community of Rumuigbo. The soldiers had gone on molesting and harassing all the land owners in a bid to stopping them from asking for compensation and till date soldiers have refused MCC to renew the land lease with the Obio/Akpor community owners of the land.

The site of the Port Harcourt International Airport is another case in point. The communities that own the land included Omagwa, IPO, Ozuaha and Igwuruta on whose farmlands Airport facilities are situated. They have not been paid any compensation for many years now. For 32 years now, a mass of 6,642 hectares of farm land forcefully acquired by the government have been occupied without compensation, apart from an initial payment in 1974 neither have the owners been allowed to take back part of the unutilized hectares for their farming activities. The more Ikwerre people cry and protest over the forceful acquisition of their farmlands, the more lands are taken. In Ewekwu and Rumuji communities of Odegu lands have been acquired for pipelines and gas facilities and when compensation was demanded, the land owners were arrested while others were shot by the soldiers guarding the facilities because of the assumption that the natives may attack and take over the facilities.

Therefore, it should be argued that what is applicable to Ikwerre should also be applicable to other communities in Rivers State. Ikwerre lands should not be for forceful acquisition while leaving those of other communities. Ikwerre alone should not be made to bear the burden of development alone in Rivers State with attendant social problems.

### **ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES OF IKWERRE LAND ACQUISITION**

There are advantages and disadvantages which abound in respect to the acquisition of Ikwerre lands by the government irrespective of the ugly situations which arise therefrom. First, it is noteworthy to infer that frequent land disputes have declined between communities sharing common boundaries where government had acquired territories in dispute. For instance, IPO and Omagwa land disputes have ebbed or ended after the acquisition of the disputed lands for the construction of the airport.

Again, Choba community has over the years had good working relationship with the university authorities. The university gives favour in employment and admission to Choba sons and daughters and the place has continued to grow in urban expansion. Business and commercial activities flourish in and around Choba town as there is constant influx of strangers into the area for settlement. The same is true of the various communities in and around the Airport in Port Harcourt.

New houses are being built for rent and the value of land appreciate very rapidly daily opening up for patronage. Lifestyles are changing and the world view of the communities have improved. There now exists opportunities for the youth to go to school and learn skills capable of given them access to skill employment.

On the other hand, the disadvantages had had a toll on Ikwerre land tenure system. There is now mindless unplanned land use by land owners. Secondly, many sacred forests and grooves lost their sacredness due to incessant trespass and deforestation. Igbozurike in Asadu (2002, pp. 32-33) explains that this action was necessary to prevent government from acquiring the area. He went ahead to assert that there is now an undue pressure on the remaining farm lands of the community. In several communities, fallow periods have reduced from either 8 or 7 to 3 years or even two. There is also soil or land degradation resulting to lack of food security.

Dislocation of family bond land emerged. There is no longer unity and the strength of relationships has weakened making it possible for homogenous communities to break apart. Ikwerre people now bury their dead inside houses as space outside no longer exists to bury their dead. The land owners are now impoverished with excessive environment pollution issues. Yet, no compensation is paid by the government that goes on to acquire these lands. Peasant farmers have suffered great since there is no longer land to farm. Waterways that constitute source of water for domestic use has been taken by government thereby denying the people of available water supply.

## **CONCLUSION**

From this study it has been discovered that between 1913 till date governments had continued to acquire Ikwerre lands without any compensation or rewards such as contracts and management level employment. This is true because Ikwerre dwells within the centre of Rivers State and houses areas or zones earmarked for development.

The action of government through the application of the obnoxious Land Use Decree (Act) of 1978 has diminished the size of land and other natural endowments in the area. These acquisitions were made without the consent of the land owner. Constant awareness on the part of the youths of Ikwerre called for the reason that some of them now resist such acquisitions in their various localities.

Land fallow has reduced to a level where there is now poor crop yield and low agricultural activities. Communities that were previously homogenous are now becoming heterogeneous due to land alienation that has separated the inhabitants of such communities. Sometimes too quarrels and disputes arise among individuals over compensation matters once government has entered the land and the disputes end up to become a serious communal conflict that lead to burning of houses and destruction of lives.

Indeed, it should be stated as part of recommendation that government should also acquire lands elsewhere as it is done in Ikwerre so that other people could share in the burden of development. Secondly, adequate compensation should be paid to Ikwerre land owners and those unutilized parcels of land should be reverted to their owners for crop cultivation and for the building of their own houses. And finally once a community is displaced as a result of land acquisition as in the case of Rumuolukwu, government should also take steps to resettle them elsewhere.

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