



IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM, A STRATEGY FOR BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS ECOSYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

One of the many problems of the Nigerian economy is that foreign economic systems are imported to use locally. These economic systems usually suit other places but they do not work here because they are not meant for the local terrain. Therefore, to harness the local economic systems, this paper investigates the Igbo apprenticeship system as a strategy for building a sustainable business ecosystem in Nigeria. The study is a descriptive survey research type. Three research questions and three hypotheses were raised for the study. Multi-stage sampling was used to select 398 SMEs. Data were collected using questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and t-test analysis. The study revealed that the Igbo apprenticeship system served as a startup incubator that provided youths with little or no formal education with the training, mentorship, and funding to help their business ideas succeed. The study also discovered that the Igbo apprenticeship system was a local strategy that helps build strong businesses and sustained them in the face of harsh realities. The study recommends that the government of Nigeria and African by extension should adopt the practice of the Igbo apprenticeship system in southeast Nigeria as a strategy for the development of African entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Small and medium enterprise, Apprenticeship, Entrepreneurial, mentorship, start-up

Introduction

In conditions of global instability and the impending recession of the world economy, nations all over the world are embracing the business ecosystem as a business model to maintain market positions, ensure economic security, and have the potential for further and sustainable growth. A business ecosystem is the network of organizations, including actors such as suppliers, distributors, customers, competitors, government agencies, and so on, involved in the delivery of a specific product or service through both competition and cooperation (Hayes & Boyle, 2021). The idea is that each component of the ecosystem influences and is influenced by others, resulting in a dynamic interaction that requires flexibility and adaptability for each component to thrive in a biological ecosystem. However, how a business ecosystem reaches equilibrium affects how efficient it is. According to Gueler and Schneider (2021), a robust business ecosystem strikes a balance between its participants' competitive value appropriation and cooperative value and contribution.

A typical business model is the Igbo apprenticeship system (Ekekwe, 2019). The Igbo apprenticeship system makes it simple to achieve an effective economic equilibrium where inequality is significantly reduced (Ekekwe, 2019). The Igbo apprentice system is a shared prosperity business philosophy in which participants work together to achieve organic economic equilibrium. Whereby accumulated market leverage-able factors are continuously weighted and calibrated out through market share loss and dilution, enabling social resilience and the development of livable clusters, and where success is determined by the quantifiable support provided to stakeholders rather than by complete market dominance (Ekekwe, 2019). In its most recent report, the UN did support Ekekwe's claim that Southeast Nigeria is the most balanced and economically stable region of Nigeria, with the least amount of hunger and economic hardship on the populace.

Several schools of thought and scholars have provided different reasons for the Igbo Apprentice and Apprenticeship Program. The

apprenticeship system is a training and skill development programme that is utilised in many nations across the world to prepare workers to acquire occupational skills (Lerman, 2012 in Ejo-Orusa & Mpi, 2019). Ejo-Orusa & Mpi (2019) state that an apprenticeship enables a male or female, depending on the type of business, to spend time and work with a different family or community member, or in other situations, not necessarily a family or community member, but a successful businessman (Ilianya & Nwanegbo-Ben, 2021). The businessperson or artisan provides the apprentice with guidance and training throughout this time. According to Alake (2018), apprenticeship is a part of the Igbo business culture, where an established businessperson in a town, street, or location has a duty to accept teenagers and young adults from their households and provide them with informal business training and mentorship.

The system is powered by a human-platform and enrolling in it doesn't cost a lot of money (Obi, 2021). The largest business incubator platform in the world is governed by the Igbo apprenticeship system at Alaba International Market (TED Talk, 2018). Even though apprenticeships have been around for a very long time, for the Igbo people, they are a way of wealth creation, economic growth, and national development. The Igbo apprenticeship system continues to be the foundation of the Nigerian economy. According to studies on business and entrepreneurship, Igbos outperform other ethnic groups in the nation. According to Maliga (2013), Igbo enterprises account for 74% of all investments in Lagos, which serves as Nigeria's financial centre. Nigerians' living standards have continued to rise thanks to Igbo businesses and entrepreneurial endeavours, both in Lagos and other regions of the country. There is evidence of apprenticeship across a number of economic sectors, including manufacturing, trading, services, and construction, among others.

In order to reposition the Igbo apprenticeship as a worthy business model to be harnessed for building sustainable businesses that can compete favorably well with other businesses around the world, several empirical works were carried out. A few studies examined the Igbo apprenticeship system in context of entrepreneurial development (Anigbogu, Onwuteaka, Ifeoma & Okoli, 2019; Orogbu, Onyeizugbe & Onuzulike-Chukwuemeka, 2021). Some focused on SMEs development (Olisaemeka, 2022; Rufai, Assim & Iroh, 2021). Chineze (2022) looked at it from employment perspective. Indeed, very little if any evidence-based research examined the Igbo apprenticeship system in the context of a business model that can be adopted in building a sustainable business ecosystem in Nigeria. Hence, the present study.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the Igbo apprenticeship system as a strategy for building a sustainable business ecosystem in Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

- examine the Igbo apprenticeship system as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria;
- examine the impact of Igbo apprenticeship on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria; and
- find out whether the systems has what it takes in building a sustainable business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria

Research questions

- How has the Igbo apprenticeship system served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria?
- To what degree has, the Igbo apprenticeship impacted on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria?
- What are the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria?

Hypothesis

- There is no significant difference between the mean responses of service based SMEs operators and goods based SMEs operators on Igbo apprenticeship system as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria
- There is no significant difference between the mean responses of service based SMEs operators and goods based SMEs operators on the impact the Igbo apprenticeship system has on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria
- There is no significant difference between the mean responses of service based SMEs operators and goods based SMEs operators on the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria

Methodology

Research design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This type of research enabled researchers to employ questionnaires to determine the opinions, perceptions, and attitudes of people about issues confronting food security in Southeast Nigeria.

Area of the study

The study was carried out in Southeast Nigeria. Southeast Nigeria comprises of five States, which are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo State.

Population and sampling technique for the study

The population of the study comprised all 91396 registered SMEs operating within Southeast Nigeria. The sample size used for the study was first determined using Taro Yamani. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed in selecting 398 SMEs used for the study. Sampling was done in three stages. At the first stage, two states (Anambra and Abia) were purposively selected. The choice of these states was based on their commercial strength in the region of study. At the second stage, Onitsha in Anambra State and Aba in Abia State were both drawn using purposive sampling. At the third stage, 226 SMEs were randomly selected from Aba, while 172 SMEs were randomly selected from Onitsha. For the purpose of analysis, sampled SMEs were stratified into service based and non-service based. There are 297 non-serviced based SMEs and 101 serviced based SMEs.

Instruments for data collection

A structured questionnaire designed by the researcher was the instrument used for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of two sections A and B. Section A provided information on characteristics of SMEs, while section B was made up of three clusters according to the three specific objectives/research questions. Responses to the items in the questionnaire were based on a four-point Likert type rating scale, ranging from Very Great

Extent (VGE) (4 points), Great Extent (GE) (3 points), Little Extent (LE) (2 points), and Very Little Extent (VLE) (1 points) for research questions one and two. For responses to the items for research question three, a four-point Likert type rating scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) (4 points), Agree (A) (3 points), Disagree (D) (2 points), and Strongly Disagree (SD) (1 points). The instrument was duly validated by three experts (2 from the Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka) and 1 from Department of Computer Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka). Reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha. A reliability coefficient of 0.91 was established which signified very high reliability of the instrument.

Data collection

Direct method was applied by the researcher and two research assistants in distributing and collecting the questionnaire from the respondents at the respective locations of the study area. Before the distribution of the questionnaire, the research assistants were briefed on the modalities for distributing and collecting the questionnaire from the respondents on the spot. This ensured that the respondents appropriately complete the questionnaire. Thus, there was 100% return of the questionnaire, and were duly used for data analysis.

Data analysis

The data analyses employed in this study were both descriptive and inferential analysis. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer research questions raised in the study. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used as the benchmark for decision making for each item, since a four-point rating scale was used for the study. Thus any item with a mean of 2.50 and above was considered as accepted by the respondents, while any item with a mean below 2.50 was considered as unaccepted by the respondents. Independent sample t-test was used to test the differences in the mean responses of service based SMEs operators and goods based SMEs operators at $p < 0.05$. All computations were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25.0.

Results

Three hundred and ninety eight respondents completed the questionnaire. The responses of the respondents on each of the items in the questionnaire were computed. Results are presented in Tables.

Research question 1: How has the Igbo apprenticeship system served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria?

Results of Research Question one are presented on table 1

Table 1: Mean responses of the respondents' on how the Igbo apprenticeship system, served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria

S/N	Item statements:	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	Provides start-up capital	2.84	0.90	GE
2	Provides goods/equipment/materials for business start-ups	2.77	0.93	GE
3	Provides shops/offices for business start-ups	2.80	0.96	GE

4	Provides mentorship	2.90	0.98	GE
5	Provides business skills	2.75	0.95	GE
6	Provides business experience	2.91	0.85	GE
7	Provides opportunities for network with similar businesses	2.89	0.90	GE
8	Provides opportunities for partnerships	2.84	0.89	GE
	Grand Mean	2.84	0.92	GE

Note: \bar{X} =Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, N = Number of Respondents=398, GE = Great Extent

The results presented in Table 1 showed the mean and standard deviation of respondents responses on how the Igbo apprenticeship system, served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria. The results showed the respondents accepted item statements as how the ($\bar{X} > 2.50$). Indicating that the Igbo apprenticeship system served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of service based SMEs operators and goods based SMEs operators on how Igbo apprenticeship system served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria

The Results of Hypothesis 1 are presented on table 2

Table 2: t-test analysis of difference in respondents' views on how Igbo apprenticeship system, served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria

SMEs Operators	N	\bar{X}	SD	t-cal	df	P-value	Decision
Non-service	29	2.7	0.4	3.25	39	0.00	Sig.
Service	10	2.9	0.6		9		

\bar{X} = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; t-critical = 1.96; t-cal = t-calculated value; N = Number of respondents for each category; df = Degrees of freedom; Sig = Significant at 0.05 level; NS = Not significant.

This hypothesis was tested by carrying out an independent sample t-test by comparing respondents' views on how Igbo apprenticeship system served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria. There was a significant difference in the mean response for SMEs non-service operators ($\bar{X} = 2.79$, $SD = 0.49$) and SMEs service operators ($\bar{X} = 2.99$, $SD = 0.66$), $t\text{-cal} (396) = 3.25$, $p = 0.00$ at 0.05 level of significance. Following this result, the null hypothesis was rejected. Hence, the responses of SMEs operators on how Igbo apprenticeship system served as a business incubator in Southeast Nigeria differ by the various respondents. This indicates that the perception that Igbo apprenticeship served as an incubators is more among SMEs operators that renders services relative to non-service SMEs operators.

Research question 2: To what degree has, the Igbo apprenticeship impacted on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria?

Results of Research Question two are presented on table 3

Table 3: Mean responses of the respondents on the degree to which the Igbo apprenticeship has impacted the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria

S/N	Items statements:	X	SD	Decision
1	A cheap and reliable way of building entrepreneurs	3.00	0.90	GE
2	Reduce unemployment rate	2.98	0.89	GE
3	Grow human resource base	3.03	0.84	GE
4	Boost national GDP	3.00	0.91	GE
5	Raise standard of living	3.01	0.95	GE
	Grand Mean	3.00	0.89	GE

Note: \bar{X} =Mean, SD =Standard Deviation, N = Number of Respondents=398, GE = Great Extent

From Table 3, it can be seen that all items had mean scores above 2.50 indicating that the Igbo apprenticeship affected the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria. This was possible because, the system served as a cheap and reliable way of building entrepreneurs. Thus, unemployment was reduced, its human capital base improved, raised standard of living as well contributed to national GDP.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the mean responses of service based SMEs operators and goods based SMEs operators on the impact the Igbo apprenticeship system has on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria

The Results of Hypothesis 2 are presented on table 4

Table 4: t-test analysis of difference in respondents' views on the impact the Igbo apprenticeship system has on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria

SMEs Operators	N	\bar{X}	SD	t-cal	df	P-value	Decision
Non-service	297	2.99	0.45	1.58	396	0.11	NS
Service	101	3.01	0.77				

\bar{X} = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; t-critical = 1.96; t-cal = t-calculated value; N = Number of respondents for each category; df = Degrees of freedom; Sig = Significant at 0.05 level; NS = Not significant.

This hypothesis was tested by carrying out an independent sample t-test by comparing respondents' views on the impact the Igbo apprenticeship system has on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria. There was no significant difference in the mean response for SMEs non-service operators ($\bar{X} = 2.99$, $SD = 0.45$) and SMEs service operators ($\bar{X} = 3.01$, $SD = 0.77$), t -cal (396) = 1.58, $p = 0.11$ at 0.05 level of significance. Following this result, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Hence, the responses of SMEs operators on the impact the Igbo apprenticeship system has on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria do not differ by the various respondents.

Research question 3: What are the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria?

Results of Research Question three are presented on table 5

Table 5: Mean responses of the respondents on the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria

S/N	Item statements:	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	Continuous expansion of economic community	2.90	0.89	Accepted
2	The system continually evolve to maintain efficiency	2.86	0.91	Accepted
3	The dynamic nature of the system allows for innovations and competition	3.08	0.89	Accepted
4	Produces goods and services to meet the needs of man and the society	3.19	0.81	Accepted
5	Network of different kinds of enterprise	2.84	0.93	Accepted
6	Members are suppliers, producers, customers, government agencies etc.	3.23	0.79	Accepted
	Grand Mean	3.02	0.87	Accepted

Note: \bar{X} =Mean, SD =Standard Deviation, N = Number of Respondents=398, GE = Great Extent

Result in Table 4, suggest that the Igbo apprenticeship system has the features require in building a business ecosystem ($\bar{X} > 2.50$).

The Results of Hypothesis 3 are presented on table 6

Table 6: t-test analysis of difference in respondents' views on the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria

SMEs Operators	N	\bar{X}	SD	t-cal	df	P-value	Decision
Non-service	297	3.04	0.48	1.48	396	0.14	NS
Service	101	2.94	0.90				

\bar{X} = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; t-critical = 1.96; t-cal = t-calculated value; N = Number of respondents for each category; df = Degrees of freedom; Sig = Significant at 0.05 level; NS = Not significant.

This hypothesis was tested by carrying out an independent sample t-test by comparing respondents' views on the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria. There was no significant difference in the mean response for SMEs non-service operators ($\bar{X} = 3.04$, $SD = 0.48$) and SMEs service operators ($\bar{X} = 2.94$, $SD = 0.90$), t -cal (396) = 1.48, $p = 0.14$ at 0.05 level of significance. Following this result, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Hence, the responses of SMEs operators on the characteristics require for the Igbo apprenticeship system in building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria do not differ by the various respondents.

Discussion

The study discovered that the Igbo apprenticeship system worked as an incubator for new businesses as it provided resources such as materials, business proficiency and experience, tracking, and links.. Materials in the form of cash, goods, equipment, shops, and offices are provided by the Igbo apprenticeship system as part of the settlement to the apprentice after he or she must have spent an agreed number of years gathering the necessary skills needed to succeed and sustain the business. This way, the apprentice may not have to worry about funds and the goods required to start his or her business. Funds and materials have always been the major setbacks for most entrepreneurs trying to kick-start their businesses. Nevertheless, this is not the case with the Igbo apprenticeship system. This finding is consistent with Olisaemeka's (2022) research, which showed that the Igbo apprenticeship system improves the creation and growth of small and medium-sized businesses, encourages business growth and survival rates, opens doors to trade and unofficial credit, and offers a chance to develop excellent business management skills and competence. Similar to this, Onyima, Nzewi, and Chiekezie (2013) discovered that the Igbo apprenticeship had a big impact on the pre-founding activities when the business was just getting started.

The study also discovered that the Igbo apprenticeship system provides follow-up in the form of mentorship to new start-ups. This is necessary because it helps the newly started business grow faster as they navigate their journey in entrepreneurship. This finding is supported by research by Orogbu, Onyeizugbe, and Onuzulike-Chukwuemeka (2021), which discovered a direct and advantageous association between mentoring and the survival rate of Igbo traders in southeast Nigeria. Additionally, the system gives start-ups the chance to network and connect with companies that have comparable traits.

The study found that the Igbo apprenticeship has a significant influence on Southeast Nigeria's economic stability. This proof is consistent with the findings of Orugun, Johnson, and Akeem (2014) as well as Abdul-kemi (2014), who reported that the Igbo apprenticeship system provides the solution to Nigeria's economic woes. The system served as a cheap and dependable means of creating entrepreneurs, which is a key driver for the development of economies all over the world, making it possible for the system to have a positive impact on economic development. Ezeajughu (2021), in support of this result, pointed out that the Igbo apprenticeship system doesn't require much empowerment because its output is already prepared to add value to the market. Because of its cheap and reliable way of building self-reliant individuals, the human capital base is more likely to improve and subsequently reduce the unemployment rate. Consequently, people's standard of living is positively affected.

Lastly, the study found out that the Igbo apprenticeship system has all it takes to build a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria. Like every typical business ecosystem, the Igbo apprenticeship system is an economic community made up of different kinds of businesses, cutting across manufacturing, commerce, supply and service. With the central aim of producing goods, exchange goods and render services that would meet the ever-growing population. For this reason, the Igbo apprenticeship system is bound to evolve to increase and as well maintain efficiency in order not to lose relevance. Therefore, the system is dynamic owing to the fact that it constantly reacts to business environmental factors like innovations, technology advancement, competitions, economic and natural shocks. The study also found that the main players of the

Igbo apprenticeship systems are producers, suppliers, consumers, and even competitors.

Independent sample t-test of respondents' show that they have similar views as regards the impact the Igbo apprenticeship system has on the economic stability of Southeast Nigeria, and on the characteristics of the Igbo apprenticeship system as it concerns building a business ecosystem in Southeast Nigeria.

Conclusion

The Igbo apprenticeship system is a form of startup incubator. It build successful entrepreneurs by empowering them with skills, knowledge, funds, goods, equipment, shops, office, and mentorship to help their business succeed. The system has proven to be successful as it pays attention to the socio-economic realities of man and his society. The Igbo apprenticeship system hand offers a local strategy that helps build strong businesses ecosystem in the face of harsh realities if harnessed.

Recommendations

1. The study recommends that the government of Nigeria and African by extension should adopt the practice of the Igbo apprenticeship system in southeast Nigeria as a strategy for the development of African entrepreneurship.
2. Nigeria would run the largest business in the world not just in Africa when they financially support Ndi Igbo in their apprenticeship method and system of building global market.

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