

IMPACT OF INFORMAL CROSS BORDER TRADE ON POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA: KOTANGOWA MARKET [LAGOS] IN PERSPECTIVE

Olukayode Abiodun Faleye (Nigeria)

ABSTRACT

This work investigates the impact of Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) on poverty alleviation in Nigeria using Kotangowa market in Lagos as a case study. While the policy dialogue in Nigeria is driven by the state-centric perception of ICBT as an economic malice, this study analyzes the impact of ICBT including smuggling on the socio-economic development of participants. Also, it examines the role of the state and non-state actors in negotiating the implementation of regulations at the margins and center of the state. The research problem is examined through an assessment of the financial history of informal cross-border traders and customers in the market. The factors considered include income levels, assets acquisition, and expenditure overtime. The approach is qualitative based on descriptive method of data analysis. While ICBT is tainted by state policies as hampering economic development, findings show that it actually alleviates poverty. This paper argues that informality of this nature exemplifies the moderation of arbitrary state policies by non-state actors in Sub-Saharan Africa.

KEYWORDS: Cross-border trade, informality, poverty alleviation, regulation, smuggling, state

INTRODUCTION

In West Africa, Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) is rooted in antiquity. For instance, in the pre-colonial period, peoples of the sub-region related and traded without the need for formal registration and without delineated borders. However, colonization witnessed the institutionalization of borders as symbol of state sovereignty. This phenomenon changed the sociopolitical and economic map of West Africa. At independence, the new political elites in West Africa acculturated into the new Eurocentric structure thereby categorizing ICBT as illegal in tandem with west-centric economics. Tariffs and various non-tariff barriers were imposed, disrupting the natural trading activities of communities, especially those living along national borders.

However, the postcolonial era witnessed attempts towards the economic integration of the sub-region through the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) protocol on free movement of people and trade liberalization. This initiative, to a great extent has been a failure due to the unilateral adoption of distinct economic trajectories by member states. While the state-centric approach seems to

create barriers for economic integration, notwithstanding, economic integration in the sub-region has been fostered by informal cross-border traders (Asiwaju, 2001).

Kotangowa Market is a destination of consumers who patronize imported used materials in Lagos, South Western Nigeria and beyond. Indeed, it is the centre of a thriving trade in used wears (see Figure 1). The economic crisis in Nigeria since the 1980s has led to a drastic reduction of the standard of living of majority of Nigerians. These challenges were complicated with the unproductive impact of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the 1980s (Meagher and Yunusa, 1996). The bastardization of the Naira vis-à-vis the decline in industrial output reduced the purchasing power of many Nigerians. Hence, the impoverished majority of the Nigerian nation sought solace in deviant activities such as ICBT including smuggling for survival. In this regard, for those who cannot afford the prices of brand new wears in the city, Katangowa market provides an access to cheap smuggled used wears, such as shirts, trousers, shoes, boxers, pants and brassieres. Thus, the attempt to alleviate state induced poverty by non-state actors through the exploitation of opportunities inherent in a frontier region is the subject of this work with informal traders in Kotangowa market, Lagos, Nigeria as the focus. This paper emanated from field works conducted in 2012 (April–May), (January–February) 2013, and 2014 (January). Oral interviews were conducted with traders and consumers. The field work was conducted in Kotangowa market in Agbado-Ese-Odo LCDA of Lagos State, Nigeria. The oral interviews focused on ICBT and poverty alleviation.

Apart from this introductory section, this paper is divided into three sections, firstly, the ‘Conceptual Clarifications’, this section explores the theoretical and empirical literature on border, statehood, informal cross border trade and poverty alleviation. A critical analysis of how these concepts and theories are applicable to Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) was uncovered. The ‘Trends of ICBT and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: Kotangowa market in Perspective’ analyze the factors that led to the development and growth of ICBT and the various effort channeled towards mitigating the effects of poverty in Nigeria. Also, it examines the functionality of ICBT in improving the standard of living of participants in Kotangowa market and the implication of the phenomenon on the welfare of society in general. The ‘Concluding Remarks’ summarizes the analysis.



Figure 1: A photograph of Kotangowa market, Lagos.
Source: Personal collection

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Borders are marker of territorial jurisdictions and states' sovereignty (Prescott, 1987). However, substantial unrecorded economic activities crisscross state bor-

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ders. This situation questions the authenticity of traditional theories of statehood. Thus, rather than viewing this phenomenon from the state framework, it becomes logical to assess it through an alternative framework. This is what Meagher (2008:4) regards as 'alternative forms of regulation operating below and beyond the framework of the state'. Further, Titeca and de-Herdt (2010) tagged this phenomenon as "practical norms" evolved by both traders and government officials. These are logical rules structuring the behavior of state and non-state actors based on the friction between official and social norms. These social norms are conducts considered legitimate or criminal in particular contexts, though inexplicit, they emanated from the society. Influenced by Cleaver (2002), Titeca and de-Herdt (2010:579) asserts:

The fact that certain practices are considered illegitimate – through the social norms present in society – does not mean that they actually fail to guide the behavior of state employees or non-state actors. The power balance in which state and non-state actors are involved plays an important role. Both state and non-state actors may try to include social or legal norms in routinized patterns that become institutionalized in a more stable form or 'practical norm', but, in the end, what counts is the effectiveness of the norm in aligning others' expectations and, thereby, its value in smoothing the process of interaction. The prevalence of practical norms is therefore rather a function of the inventory of tactics and manoeuvres available to all parties involved, than a reflection of either 'legal' or particular 'social' norms. Practical norms are essentially the product of collective bricolage... The configuration of power relationships linking different actors determines the extent to which these practical norms deviate from the official or social norms. For example, if the central state has a rather powerful position, the 'practical norms' of the government officials in border areas will probably not be very different from official norms. Inversely, if non-state actors wield considerable power, they will manage to bend practical norms away from official state practices.

Thus, state power is not absolute, as it is often negotiated in order to sustain its legitimacy. These channels of power are seized by non-state actors as conduits of opportunities necessary to guarantee their survival in an international system bedeviled with human insecurity.

The term Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) is the activities of small entrepreneurs who are involved in buying and selling in neighboring countries. It occurs in a diversity of forms, and is often viewed as the darker side of entrepreneurship (Fadahunsi and Rosa, 2002). In the context of this study ICBT include traders who travel to neighboring countries for short periods to buy goods from retail and wholesale outlets to bring back to their home countries for resale without paying due tariffs. This type of trade is referred to as informal, since it involves unregistered small traders who may buy or more often sell in informal sector markets (Kachere, 2011). The distinction between the informal and criminal cross-border trading is that ICBT involves the import and export of 'legal goods' outside the official channels, whereas criminal cross-border trading refer to the trade of 'illegal goods', such as arms, drugs or human trafficking, which are serious crimes and are deemed socially undesirable by the general public (Meagher, 2003). Also, ICBT

participants may be involved in smuggling of part or all of their goods. In this purview, there is a clear distinction between criminals involved in the trafficking of illegal goods such as guns which are direct threat to national security and informal cross-border traders who buy and sell 'legal goods' including contraband commodity goods such as clothes which contributes to the wellbeing of the masses of the society.

The World Bank defines poverty as the 'inability to attain a minimum standard of living measured in terms of basic consumption needs or the income required to satisfy those consumption needs' (World Bank Report, 2005:9). This notion of poverty is based on the examination of the socio-economic performance of individuals in line with the social stratification of society overtime (Duesenberry, 1949). Thus, the income or consumption level serves as reference points for evaluating the level of poverty in societies. While numerous factors serves as poverty indicators, which may include political, economic, social, and cultural forces (Carney, 1992), this work is primarily concerned with economic poverty as the basis of all poverties. As observed by Clunies-Ross et al (2009), without financial power, the very poor are prone to abuse, suppression, disaster, malnutrition, and injustice. Indeed, with economic poverty, the poor inevitably becomes vulnerable to social, political, and cultural poverty.

Traditionally, economic theories tend to treat ICBT as a social and economic malice. It is argued that ICBTs have the potential to undermine established industries as they expose local industries to unhealthy competition, distort producers' price incentives and bastardizes foreign exchange earnings. For example, Slotterback (2007) argues that home based textile industries have suffered due to the importation of used clothes from the Western world. Also, Faleye (2013) calls for a restrictive import measures in order to protect indigenous textile industries in Nigeria. These submissions have approached the problem from 'above' rather than from 'below'. In an atmosphere of pandemic corruption, the implementation of economic policies is inevitably shrouded in subjectivity. In this respect, while the execution of industrial reforms favors the political elites in society, the impoverished commoners found refuge in ICBT to keep their heads above troubled water.

The Neo-liberal Economic Reforms theory argues that growth in trade is based on the comparative advantage of exporting countries coupled with free trade. However, while many economies in the Sub-Saharan Africa remain agrarian, they have implemented restrictive import measures contrary to the law of comparative advantage thereby isolating the region from the world economy (Agnew and Grant, 1996). These arbitrary policies are being moderated by the informal sector (Azuma and Grossman, 2002). Hence, this circumstance provides a fertile land for informal cross border trading as a response to the principle of demand and supply in a globalized world.

An attempt to re-absorb the informal sector into the formal sector through the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs has failed due to the limitation of states to adjust the amounts of unobservable components of productive endowments (Todaro, 1997). This failure is explained based on the Lewis' two-sector model of development which examines development from the agrarian and indus-

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trial point of view, where there was surplus labor in the agricultural sector. This unlimited supply of labor in the agricultural sector was expected to be absorbed by the industrial sector in urban areas. Thus, the failure of the industrial sector to absorb this excess labor distorts the structure of the societal economy thereby creating mass of unemployed and under-employed. In this circumstance, surplus labor emanating from the agricultural sector was absorbed into the informal sector economy (Lewis et al, 1954).

Advancing this discourse, this work traces the evolution of ICBT to the distortions and limitations of statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa (Faleye, 2014). In this respect, the development and growth of contraband markets such as Kotangowa at the center of the state shows the disparity between official policies, social values and ideals in reference to the often ensued dialogue between state policies and societal realities.

TRENDS OF ICBT AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

The pre-colonial era witnessed the interdependency of West African settlements and economies on inter-regional trade. In this era, communities and peoples of the region interacted and traded without restrictions. This freedom to interact was suppressed during the colonial period. At independence many African states adopted the artificially created borders, which led to the institutionalization of tariff and non tariff barriers (Asiwaju, 1976; 1984). The creation of colonial borders by the colonialists and their adoption by the post independence African political elites sustains the illegality of ICBT, since it did not conform to the international trading system. Tariffs and various non-tariff barriers were imposed, thus disrupting natural trading activities of communities, especially those living along national borders in West Africa.

Prior to the 1970s, the Nigerian economy was mainly agrarian in nature. For instance, the agricultural sector contributed over 60% of the GDP in the 1960s. In this era, industrial contribution to the GDP was negligible. For example, by 1969, the sector contribution to the GDP was 9.4%. However, the oil boom of the 1970s led to the investment of surplus capital in the industrial sector which includes iron and steel rolling, vehicle assembly plants, petro-chemicals and refineries, agro-chemical, iron and steel and the newsprint. This industrialization project was based on the Import Substitution Industrialization Strategy (ISI). This approach which relies more on external input than internal innovation became disruptive due to the short fall in oil revenues and external reserve of the Nigerian state by the 1980s. The sector contribution to the GDP was 10.7% in 1985, 8.1% in 1990 and -0.3% in 2001 showing a gradual decline in industrial output and employment opportunities since the 1980s (Lawal, 1997). This phenomenon is explainable based on Lewis' two-sector model which looks at development from the agrarian and industrial point of view, where there was surplus labor in the agricultural sector. The failure of the industrial sector to absorb the excess labor in the agricultural sector due to the failure of the ISI distorts the structure of the societal economy thereby creating mass of unemployed and under-employed. Also, industrial decline led to shortage of goods. The shortage created an op-

portunity for both the under-employed and the unemployed to engage in ICBT in order to meet the local demand for scarce resources. This is in tandem with Anthony Asiwaju’s submission that smuggling across West African borders are acts of disobedience to the law of the state while obeying the law of economics (Asiwaju 2009 cited in Coplan, 2012).

Indeed, by the 1990s, the deregulation policies of SAP led to the collapse of industries which contributed to high unemployment levels as workers were laid off. For example, the number of textile factories declined significantly as the cumulative textile production index declined from 427.1 in 1982 to 171.1 in 1984 (Slotterback, 2007). This phenomenon witnessed the liquidation of several textile mills in Nigeria. In the banking sector, about 25% of the country’s banks were liquidated during the period. The crisis almost led to the complete collapse of the financial sector (Akinloye, 2012). As observed by Meagher and Yunusa (1996:2):

The deterioration of conditions in the formal sector goes a long way to explaining the rapid rate of informal sector expansion. Successive devaluations have reduced the exchange rate from N1.2 (naira) to the US dollar in 1985 to 19 naira to the dollar in 1992...Severe wage restraint and high rates of retrenchment in the public and private sectors have significantly increased the rates of open and disguised unemployment.

Hence, the inequality between employable labor resources and employment opportunities made the informal sector a haven of a large number of urban dwellers located mostly in Lagos, Nigeria. Indeed, the 1990s witnessed the deterioration of Nigeria’s Human Development Index (HDI) in the face of rapid population growth (see Figure 2). Declines in state performance and employment opportunities led to poor standard of living. This circumstance witnessed food shortages in families, inadequate clothing, poor accommodation, inability to access quality educational, health and other essential services (Oral interviews, Mrs. Elizabeth Okah, 19/04/2012; Mrs Seun Ogundipe, 07/05/2012; Mr. Taiwo Sodeinde, 22/01/2013; Mrs Constant Akpa, 02/02.2013). This phenomenon pushed impoverished people into the informal sector as a palliative measure to keep their families from drowning in the sea of economic depression.

	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years of schooling	Mean years of schooling	GNI per capita (2005 PPP\$)	HDI value
1980	45.5	6.6		1,571	
1985	45.9	8.4		1,202	
1990	45.6	6.5		1,274	
1995	45.1	6.5		1,303	
2000	46.3	7.9		1,285	
2005	49	9	5	1,540	0.434
2010	51.4	9	5.2	1,928	0.462
2011	51.9	9	5.2	2,017	0.467
2012	52.3	9.0	5.2	2,102	0.471

Figure 2: Pattern of Nigeria’s HDI since 1980 based on consistent time series data and new component indicators.

Source: Adapted from UNDP Human Development Report, 2013

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This work approaches the subject matter from a micro level, using Kotangowa market as a case study. The study population comprises of three distinct groups: firstly, those who are directly involved in the smuggling of used commodity goods across the Nigeria-Benin international boundary, and secondly, the retailers whose livelihood depends on the wholesale purchase and retail of these products. The third category is the consumers. The investigation of the impact of ICBT on poverty alleviation is based on the oral interview of 12 ICBTs, 42 retailers and 23 consumers in Kotangowa market.

The majority of the traders started to engage in ICBT in the 1990s. This was attributed to the deteriorating economic atmosphere emanating from the 1980s. In this regard, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) seems to have pushed people into the informal sector resulting in an increased number of people engaging in informal cross border trade. While the majorities of participants were never employed in the formal sector and depends on ICBT for survival, others were once employed but lost their jobs due to company closure in the early 1990s. Most of the respondents have attained educational training up to the tertiary level. Indeed, unemployment coupled with social needs and responsibilities were given as reasons for participating in the informal trade.

According to the ICBTs, in an effort to reduce their cost of trading, they have sought ways to evade custom duties through under declarations, bribery, and smuggling through unofficial channels (Oral interview of 12 Anonymous ICBTs who are involved in the smuggling of used cloths, Kotangowa market, Lagos, 4th April – 6th May, 2012). This pattern of trade, they argued have been induced by arbitrary tariffs and other over-protective government policies. In this respect, duties are sometimes paid but often evaded through bribery or smuggling through unofficial channels.

In a neoliberal society, financial power indicates the standard of living and status of people in society. In this regard, economic security ensures against other forms of poverty. This protects against the deprivation of basic human material needs which may transform to social, cultural and political deprivation and oppression. Thus, this study attempts to uncover the impact of ICBT on economic security of participants' overtime. This analysis is based on the financial history of the traders before and after involvement in ICBT. As observed by Kachere (2011), this approach enables quantification of the level of economic security compared with the problem of poverty before and after engagement in ICBT activities. Thus, in the present study, the basis of comparison is whether the level of income earned has alleviated the economic distress experienced by the participants prior to participating in ICBT.

Asset accumulation often serves as a weapon against economic poverty (Damas and Rayham, 2004). In this regard, the assets acquired and the average income accrued by the traders before and after engagement in ICBT is used as basis for the quantification of their experience of poverty alleviation. Most of the participants have lived below the poverty line of \$1 per day before engaging in the trade. It was discovered that the majority of the traders improved their economic strength by acquiring assets using income from ICBT. While the key participants who are involved in the

smuggling and wholesale of commodity goods agreed to have accrued enough profit necessary to provide basic consumption need for their families, the majority who are mainly retailers accrues average daily net profit of about \$2 each. Thus, the ability to acquire assets shows that the participants must have attained a minimum standard of living measured in terms of basic consumption needs or the income required to satisfy those consumption needs in line with the World Bank specifications. The growth of income above poverty level experienced by the majority of the informal traders confirms that ICBT contributes to economic security and poverty alleviation among traders in Kotangowa market. Further, the impact of the market on the well being of its customers is examined using a random sampling of 23 consumers. The major factor considered was their financial history before and after patronizing the market. All the respondents agreed to have accrued some savings due to the cheap materials accessible in Kotangowa market. These savings were reserved for expenditures on essential services.

While these discoveries are based on a case study in West Africa, it can be generalized across sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, pioneer studies conducted in Southern and Eastern Africa (Peberdy and Crush, 2001; Muzvidziwa, 2001; Cassanelli, 2010; Wekesa, 2010; Titeca and Herdt, 2010; Titeca and Kimanuka, 2012; Kachere, 2011) have reported similar findings. Considering the foregoing, it is obvious that ICBT alleviates poverty and contributes to the wellbeing of people in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, this study is distinct from earlier studies, as it focuses on the negotiation of state regulations not only in African borderlands but at the center of the state. Hence, against the economic theories that treat ICBT as a social and economic malice, this work argues that the failure of states in Sub-Saharan Africa to position themselves in a comfort zone within the global economy stimulates the drive to implement restrictive import measures in a de-bordering age. These arbitrary policies are being moderated by the informal sector as a response to the principle of demand and supply in a globalized world.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper uncovered the impact of informal cross-border trade on poverty alleviation in Nigeria using the Kotangowa market in Lagos as a case study. This work shows that the harsh economic environment which is characterized by high levels of unemployment and underemployment pushed people to engage in informal cross border trade as a panacea to economic insecurity. The participants accrue a living wage and acquired assets through the revenue generated from ICBT. Hence, this reveals an experience of poverty alleviation after involvement in ICBT.

Based on the foregoing, this work argues that the informal sector complements the performance of statehood by providing new opportunities as palliative measures against the limitations of the state. These include the opportunity to engage in Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) thereby reducing the level of unemployment and make available scarce commodities. In this respect, the development and growth of contraband markets such as Kotangowa at the center of the state shows the disparity between theory and practicality in reference to the often ensued dialogue between state policies and societal realities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olukayode Faleye studied History in the University of Ilorin and the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Presently, he is a Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Nigeria. Faleye is a member of African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE), African Economic History Network (AEHN) and the Historical Society of Nigeria (HSN). His research focuses on African History, Cultural History, Globalization and Borderlands Studies. Email: kayodefaleye@gmail.com