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The Tale of Ibaka in the Face of the Blue Economy: Putting Akwa Ibom State at the Height of a Maritime Hub

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the significance of the blue economy in the growth of the Nigerian economy using the Ibaka (Ibom) deep seaport as the template for a sustainable blue economy program. The paper argues that, despite the blue economy's significant contributions to the economies of both developed and developing nations, particularly through deep seaports, efforts to realize the Ibom deep seaport for the growth of Nigeria's economy are hindered by a lack of political will, chauvinistic agendas, and insufficient collaboration with relevant stakeholders. This paper suggests that there must be a coherent regulatory landscape, with an urgent need for resolute governmental intervention, in view of the identified limitations associated with the realization of the Ibaka deep seaport. There should also be an interplay between international laws and treaties and national legislation, which must be directed at accentuating prudent resource allocation towards sustainable blue initiatives, steadfast research, and cutting-edge technology development.

Keywords: Blue Economy, Ibaka (Ibom) Deep Seaport, Political Will, Sustainable Economic Development.

Introduction

The blue economy is an emerging concept that encourages better stewardship of the ocean. It includes the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and wealth creation (Uko et al., 2022). The blue economy, as considered by Oladipo (2023), encompasses a wide range of economic activities related to oceans, seas, and coastal areas.

It aims to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability, ensuring that marine resources are used responsibly. It is the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs, while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems. It aims to balance economic development with social inclusion and environmental sustainability, rather than focusing on traditional economic benefits that can harm the marine environment (Yusuff & Ibidapo-Obe, 2024).

"Blue economy" is now widely used around the world with three distinct but related meanings: the ocean's overall contribution to economies; the need to address the ocean's environmental and ecological properties; and, as a result, the ocean economy as a growth opportunity for both developed and developing countries (Jacob & Umoh, 2022). According to OECD forecasts, by 2030, the "blue economy" will be recognized as an economic sector having a direct or indirect link to the ocean that will outperform other sectors of the economy in terms of utility and employment.

Whatever may be considered the strength and weakness of trade in driving growth in the LDCs, it is worth mentioning that before the invention of rail and air transport, maritime routes were the major trading routes between countries. Nigeria, as a country with a long maritime heritage coastline of about 777.8 km, has always been a hub of efficient and cost-effective seaborne trade to other parts of the world. Nigeria, under the United Nations Convention on Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS), lays sovereign claim to a territorial sea of 12 nautical miles (NM) and an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 200 NM. This translates into about 5040 sq. nm of territorial waters and 8400 sq. nm of EEZ (Oladipo, 2023). Besides all these, Nigeria has eight major ports, excluding

oil terminals, with a cargo handling capacity of 35 million tonnes per annum. These ports, according to Uya (2017), have accounted for about 99% by volume and 95% by value of the country's total seaborne trade. Consequently, about 70% of Nigeria's total resources are within its maritime environment. The maritime domain of Nigeria, where seaborne trade is prevalent, is the Bight of Bonny, which is closely connected to the Gulf of Guinea, and the Ibaka deep-sea port is within this enclave.

Ibaka is one of the villages in and a coastal town located in the Mbo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. It lies along the Bight of Bonny, a part of the Atlantic Ocean, giving it strategic economic and cultural significance. It is part of the greater Mbo, a confederation of maritime communities known for its seafaring history, fishing expertise, and distinct cultural identity. Ibaka, as a town, has its roots in ancient fishing settlements. These settlements evolved over time, not just due to environmental factors but also because of the town's strategic importance for maritime trade and resource abundance.

From the beginning, Ibaka was considered a major West African seaport by the Europeans due to its naturally deep waters and sheltered bay, which made it ideal for deep-sea facilities without costly dredging. It was to serve as a powerful template for West African seaports, leveraging blue economy advantages through its deep seaport and surrounding industrial city projects. Aside from the Europeans' discovery, the Federal Government of Nigeria in the 1970s and 1990s conducted feasibility studies that identified Ibaka Bay as the most suitable location for a deep seaport, deep ocean formation, and a long 19-meter-deep draft that requires minimal or no dredging for deep-sea port development.

The "Ibaka template" outlines how strategic maritime infrastructure can drive economic diversification, job creation, and sustainable development beyond traditional oil dependency. Despite political interference leading to its relocation, which is not the subject of this write-up, Ibaka still remains a strategically important location with potential for a deep seaport that would serve as a regional maritime and economic hub for Akwa Ibom State cum Nigeria, the motivation of this paper.

First, Ibaka, as a local port (locally and communally run and managed by the people and residents), has a rich resource in seafood, and fishing remains a dominant occupation. The waters around the Bight of Bonny are rich in crayfish, prawns, periwinkles, catfish, croakers, and shrimp. And women and youths play significant roles in fish processing, smoking, and trading, forming a vibrant local economy built on traditional knowledge and skills. Currently, the oil deposits in Ibaka have contributed to making Akwa Ibom State one of the largest oil-producing states in Nigeria. Offshore oil fields located near Ibaka are exploited by major oil companies, and the region is critical to Nigeria's petroleum economy.

Ibom Deep Seaport, as it is now politically rebranded, was originally conceived and planned for the Ibaka location by the then governor of Akwa Ibom State, Obong Victor Attah, who, as an architect before becoming a governor, drew the map of the state because he knew the state contour very well and knew which location would fit a particular project without bias to ethnic sentiment. After his administration, the state government continues to express commitment to realizing the deep seaport project. Yet, the extent to which their commitment translates to action is yet to be seen. Now let's discuss Ibaka in the blue economy, but first, from the overview of the Nigerian perspective.

Underscoring the relevance of the Ibaka deep seaport in the mirror of the blue economy, members of Akwa Ibom State in the National Assembly on the 14th of October, 2025, moved a motion directing the federal government to collaborate with the government of Akwa Ibom State to ensure the realization of the Ibaka deep sea port project. Outlining the significance of the port to international trade, the honorable members reiterated that the global economy is increasingly shaped by marine trade and the blue economy and that non-realization of the port has deprived Akwa Ibom State and, by extension, Nigeria of the potential for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and economic opportunities that could significantly improve the standard of living in the state and across the country. The stalling of the Ibom deep-sea port project for whatever reason has hindered the development of intermodal transport systems, limiting Nigeria's full participation in the blue economy while also weakening Nigeria's export and logistics competitiveness.

The contribution of the blue economy to Nigeria's GDP stands currently at about 2%, and with the president's strategic proposal to raise it to between 5% and 10%, the realization of Ibom Deep Seaport will be a major driver in achieving this goal.

Given Nigeria's vast coastline and Akwa Ibom State's strategic location on the Atlantic Ocean, the realization of Ibom Deep Seaport will directly stimulate the state's economy, create thousands of direct and indirect jobs, catalyze industrial growth, strengthen the maritime value chain, and facilitate the implementation of Export Processing Zone (EPZ) blueprints.

Comparative Analysis of the Relevance of the Blue Economy to the Growth of the Economy

Globally, the blue economy is the seventh-largest economy, valued at over $1.5 trillion annually, and is expected to grow to $3 trillion by 2030 (Agunsoye et al., 2025). It supports over 30 million jobs and provides essential services, including food security through fisheries and aquaculture, which supply protein to over 2 billion people. Coastal tourism, contributing 5% of global GDP and 6-7% of global employment, is also a significant component of the blue economy (Cicin-Sain, 2023). On the global stage, two policy instruments had triggered the development and sustainability of the blue economy:

First, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) highlights the significance of conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development and economic growth (Oladipo, 2023; Agunsoye et al., 2025). The goal also includes targets to prevent and reduce marine pollution, manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems, and enhance the conservation and sustainable use of ocean-based resources (UNDP, 2023). Second, the World Bank's Blue Economy Vision 2025 supports countries in developing policies that promote the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth. It emphasizes the need for governance reforms, capacity building, and sustainable investment in marine and coastal areas as an alternative path to sustainable development and economic growth.

In alignment with these global frameworks, countries, both developed and developing, have developed a blue economy as a sure berth towards sustainable development. For example, Australia's Marine Policy promotes the ecologically friendly and sustainable development of marine resources as well as the protection of marine biodiversity. The policy includes measures for ensuring integrated ocean management and establishing marine protected areas (Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, 2021). The Australian government has invested heavily in marine research and conservation to ensure the sustainable use of ocean resources for sustainable development.

In Canada, the Canadian Oceans Act of 1997 and subsequent policies after it laid the foundation for integrated ocean management, balancing ecological, economic, and social objectives. The Act provides a legal framework for sustainably managing Canada's marine resources (Government of Canada, 2021). The Canadian blue economy includes a robust fishing industry crucial for local economies, especially in coastal regions, and emphasizes ecosystem-based management, marine conservation, and the sustainable development of ocean industries.

In Norway, the Ocean Management Plan (2002) integrates the blue economy into its national economic policy, developing advanced technologies for sustainable aquaculture and offshore oil extraction to minimize environmental impact. Investments in marine research and innovation through the Norwegian Seafood Research Fund (FHF) support the seafood industry's research and development (Norwegian Seafood Research Fund, 2021).

The Japanese Basic Act on Ocean Policy (2007) provides the policy framework for the sustainable development and use of marine resources, the conservation of the marine environment, and the enhancement of marine science and technology within Japan. The policy supports initiatives in sustainable fisheries and marine renewable energy (Fisheries Agency of Japan, 2021).

In South Korea, the South Korean Marine Environment Management Act (2008) was designed with the aim of protecting and managing the marine environment sustainably. The Act also includes provisions for reducing marine pollution, conserving marine biodiversity, and promoting sustainable use of marine resources for enhanced

economic growth (Korean Maritime Institute, 2020). According to the Korean Maritime Institute (2020), South Korea's Ocean Industry Development Plan is designed with the aim of enhancing the economic value of marine resources while ensuring environmental sustainability.

In Africa, Agunsoye et al. (2025) reported on Seychelles' sustainability, and Mauritius has been in the vanguard of the blue economy, and Seychelles' economy, the blue economy, as it is believed, holds potential for economic diversification and sustainable development for a country in dire need of alternative income sources to drive economic growth. The blue economy model in Seychelles focuses on sustainable fisheries, marine conservation, and the development of marine-based tourism with the primary objective of integrating sustainable development with economy, environment, and society in line with the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030. The country also became the first to introduce a financial instrument (blue bonds) to support sustainable marine and fishery projects for the country's sustainable development and economic growth.

Mauritius equally views the blue economy as a key pillar of its economic strategy, investing in sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, and marine renewable energy. Its policy and strategic initiatives, in this regard, have boosted economic growth by creating jobs and improving livelihoods across coastal communities while boosting the subnational.

South Africa, through its Operation Phakisa Initiative, aimed to boost economic growth by unlocking the economic potential of its oceans. Launched in 2014 as a key aspect of the National Development Plan for South Africa's socio-economic growth, the initiative primarily targets marine transport, offshore oil and gas exploration, aquaculture, and marine protection services (South African Government, 2014). Operation Phakisa focuses on the ocean economy, which has the potential to contribute up to R177 billion to the gross domestic product (GDP) by 2033, while creating between 800,000 and 1 million direct jobs. The initiative also targets the creation of a network of marine protected areas to protect at least 5% of the ocean space.

Kenya's Vision 2030 comprises the development of the blue economy as a strategic objective, focusing on sustainable fisheries, marine transport, and tourism. The

government has also established policies to enhance marine conservation as well as promote investment in marine-based industries, all of which has helped yield sustainable development and growth in the nation (Kenya Vision 2030, 2018).

Ghana has also made strides in developing its blue economy as part of its overarching strategy for sustainable development and economic growth, and this is particularly in the fisheries sector. The Ghana Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector Development Plan aims to promote sustainable fisheries and aquaculture to ensure food security and economic growth. The plan includes measures to combat illegal fishing, enhance fishery management, and support aquaculture development (Ghana Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture Development, 2015).

In Nigeria, the blue economy presents a viable and alternative path to economic diversification, sustainable development, and economic growth (Ogunsoye et al., 2025). The country's heavy reliance on crude oil exports has led to local economic instability due to and often dictated by fluctuations in the global oil market. By harnessing its vast marine and coastal resources, Nigeria can achieve sustainable economic growth that will impact job creation and improve livelihoods while protecting the marine environment (Anammah & Ezenyimulu, 2023). The establishment of the Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu marks a strategic step towards exploiting and optimizing this potential. Nigeria's coastal areas are rich in biodiversity and marine resources, offering opportunities in fisheries, aquaculture, maritime transport, and tourism. However, implementing the blue economy in Nigeria faces several issues and challenges, including inadequate operational infrastructure; poor security risk perception along coastal communities; a yet-to-be-released official blue economy policy framework; and poor stakeholder sensitization, awareness, and buy-in (Yusuf & Ibidapo-Obe, 2024).

In the South-South region of Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta, various activities that characterize the blue economy are present, but they lack government regulation, monitoring, or evaluation. This region, which is abundant in oil and gas resources, also sees informal investment in fisheries, aquaculture, and marine tourism. Poor political will, state policy inconsistency, and a preponderant state preference for oil and gas

income have all acted to draw focus away from the blue economy, its rich potentials, and its prospects.

Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative approach involving the public and private sectors, setting out clear and measurable goals and milestones, effective policy frameworks and structures for the blue economy, and sustainable practices that ensure economic growth (Benzaken, 2022).

On the why of the blue economy, Igbozurike (2019) observed that there are two elements to the blue economy. The first is the necessity of protecting and restoring, where needed, the existing ocean resource base that already supplies food and livelihoods to billions of people. The other element of the Blue Economy is where opportunities may exist for enhanced or new sustainable economic activity derived from the ocean. Progress and prospects for ocean-related energy, such as offshore wind and tidal energy, appear promising. Opportunities also exist to 'monetize' the value of highly effective coastal carbon stocks such as mangroves and sea grasses into carbon finance markets, or 'blue carbon.' Globally, aquaculture has been growing at a compounded rate of almost 9% since 1980 and now supplies nearly half of the world's consumed fish protein.

The highlights on the blue economy as expressed by Odey (2023) are on the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and job creation while safeguarding the health of ocean ecosystems. The concept covers a wide range of economic activities associated with oceans, seas, and coasts, including established and emerging sectors. Additionally, the blue economy recognizes non-marketable economic benefits, such as carbon storage, coastal protection, cultural values, and diversity. Thus, the blue economy can be viewed as an innovative approach to economic exploitation, encompassing oceans, lakes, rivers, and other bodies of water. The concept promotes economic growth, social inclusion, and livelihood preservation while ensuring environmental sustainability.

Ibaka as Core Components of the Blue Economy Template

Akwa Ibom State's primary blue economy advantage is its exceptionally long coastline, enabling significant potential in sectors like blue tourism, maritime services,

and fisheries, though these are currently underutilized. Stakeholders and practitioners of the Blue Economy during the International Conference on Blue Economy, with the theme 'Transformation of Nigeria's Socio-Economic Landscape Through Blue Economy,' organized by the Marine and Oceans Academy in collaboration with the Department of Marine Science, Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU), on Tuesday, July 2, 2024, at Watbridge Hotel, Uyo, did advocate for diversification and strengthening of Nigeria's ocean-based resources in order to more firmly establish a path of increasing environmental sustainability and equitable growth for socio-economic transformation of the nation. This call was not made to specifically place emphasis on Ibaka but generally on ocean resources for the benefit of the present and future generations, cutting across maritime activities like fishing, shipping, maritime transportation, food production, tourism, ocean bottom extractive activities, mineral exploration or extraction, marine biotechnology, and bioprospecting.

However, this paper looks at the Ibaka Deep Seaport as a core component of the blue economy template and its potential to boost Akwa Ibom's blue economy through the opposite of positive action. The essence lies in the fact that both the Nigerian federal government and the Akwa Ibom State government are fully aware of the strategic viability and economic potential of the Ibaka Deep Seaport. Despite this understanding, they have hesitated to take decisive action towards its development. This hesitation appears to stem from a fear of uncertainty and the political complexities involved, which has resulted in delays and a lack of commitment to bringing the project to fruition. Consequently, instead of leveraging this critical infrastructure to boost the blue economy in Akwa Ibom, political considerations have hindered progress and stalled the actualization of the seaport's full potential.

The meat

The Ibaka deep seaport, devoid of political relocation and renaming, would have been an international trade hub for large commercial vessels, facilitating international trade and establishing a crucial link to global markets. It would function as a gateway for exports and imports, attracting regional trade from other West African countries. This is because of its proximity to Cameroon and other West African countries. It would

have been expected to alleviate congestion at other Nigerian ports, like Lagos, in improving efficiency and reducing waiting times for cargo.

The Ibaka template would have expanded beyond the port itself to include the Ibom Industrial City, which would diversify the economy by creating industrial clusters. The industrial city will feature special economic zones with incentives to attract manufacturing, petrochemicals, agro-processing, and shipbuilding industries. By now, Akwa Ibom State would have had easy access to global markets via the port, promoting the export of manufactured and agricultural products rather than just raw materials.

In terms of human capital development and job creation, the Ibaka deep seaport, without emphasis, would have made the local workforce reap the benefits of the blue economy through employment opportunities. Because the integrated projects were projected to create hundreds of thousands of direct and indirect jobs across a wide range of sectors, from maritime operations to logistics and ancillary services. The port would have been a training center to equip both skilled and unskilled workers with the necessary maritime, industrial, and technical skills.

Due to their inherent characteristics, sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in Ibaka would have integrated practices aimed at protecting marine resources while simultaneously boosting the fisheries sector. Now, the effort of the government would have been to invest in infrastructure, such as cold rooms, to enhance fish production and supply to bolster food security for the region and Nigeria as a nation.

It would have been the model to promote responsible fishing, aquaculture development, and resource management to ensure the long-term health of marine ecosystems. Again, due to its nature, the coastal tourism development around the Ibaka would have supported resorts and recreation and created new revenue streams and employment opportunities. Coastal tourism would have improved the livelihoods of Akwa Ibom communities and provided new avenues for economic empowerment.

On maritime security and governance, Ibaka would have solved some security challenges because there would have been conscious, dedicated efforts to ensure safety and stability on the waterways. This would have been achieved through the establishment of marine jetties and security outposts to help curb piracy and other

criminal activities in the waterways, protecting local fishermen and trade (Osuntokun, 1992; Uya, 2017).

Conclusion

The implementation of the Blue Economy offers chances to address developmental issues, make use of existing resources, and investigate prospective growth pathways. Isaac Anumihe, in his article on 3rd October 2016, in *The Sun*, "Why Ibaka Deep Seaport Project Was Stalled," explained that "a high-powered conspiracy against the development of the Ibaka Deep Sea project" may have been the reason for its final abandonment, relocation, and renaming. A project that was conceptualized over two decades ago now remains in the realm of a concept, with multi-billion naira spent.

Nigeria's blue economy voyage embarks amidst a diverse regulatory landscape, emphasizing the urgent need for resolute governmental intervention. The intricate interplay between international laws and treaties and national legislation accentuates the monumental duty to not merely navigate this intricate tapestry but also steer the nation toward a horizon of flourishing blue prosperity. This journey necessitates prudent resource allocation towards sustainable blue initiatives, steadfast research, and cutting-edge technology development.

Opportunities for innovation and growth in the coastal, marine, and maritime industries exist under the Blue Economy and have significant potential to accelerate GDP growth in Nigeria. It is imperative to broaden the scope of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to foster inclusive, sustainable economic growth in the national or regional economy beyond the oil, coastal, marine, and maritime sectors. In order to enhance both forward and backward connections with other sectors of the economy, there is a need to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange among stakeholders. This will enhance Nigeria's commitment to a comprehensive blue economy roadmap. Engaging coastal communities, industry stakeholders, environmental advocates, and experts will ensure that a diverse array of insights shapes this transformative journey.

On the final note, the Blue Economy holds substantial potential for contributing to accelerated GDP growth in the Niger Delta region and Nigeria, offering opportunities

for innovation and development in the coastal, marine, and maritime sectors. The politics and lack of willpower on the part of both the people and the government have caused the delay in the implementation of Ibaka Deep Seaport projects. If the government and the people are sincere about a shift towards a blue economy, then the case about Ibaka Deep Seaport as the template for a blue economy should call for urgent action.

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