

# **ADVANCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARITIME TRANSPORTATION IN AKWA-IBOM STATE, 1987-2023**

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## **Abstract**

*In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the present-day Akwa-Ibom and the littorals of Cross-River States received the first batch of European traders in Nigeria. The area had such companies as the United Africa Company (UAC), John Holt, Campagnie Franchise de L'Ouest Africaine (CFAO), and Lever Brothers in operation; thereby providing the vestibule through which the Nigerian economy linked with the international economy. Marine transportation did not only revolutionise the life of the people living in the area, it also caused the coastal dwellers to sell their produce directly to the Europeans at the coast and the hinterland traders to directly export their agricultural produce overseas. However, over the years, people travelling between Cross-River riverine communities and Akwa-Ibom State have continuously encountered transportation challenges due to the dilapidated state of Calabar-Itu road. This paper analyses the marine sector in Akwa-Ibom State since the state creation and shows the efforts made by the state government to strengthen extant laws for the sector that would boost the state's economy as well as initiatives put in place to boost maritime security on the waterways and protect critical economic assets. In doing this analysis, the paper adopted the qualitative method of research where relevant documentary data and published literature were analysed and the content extracted for writing this paper. The findings of this paper reveal that marine transportation in Akwa-Ibom State is set to bring back the ancient fun memories of marine transportation, tourism and other economic activities along the coastline towns such as Oron, Ibeno, Eastern Obolo, and Ikot-Abasi.*

**Keywords:** Maritime, Development, Economy, Security

## **Introduction**

From the dawn of time, maritime transportation has enhanced the movement of cargoes of all type and volume. A huge percentage of world merchandise and trade is carried by seas while over 60 percent of all imports to West Africa are Nigeria-bound. A report by the Nigerian Maritime Administration and safety Agency (NIMASA) described port as an enabler of economic growth and prosperity and listed ship financing, ship building and ship repairs, and marine insurance as potential marine business opportunities. The agency is committed to enthroning global best practices in the provision of maritime services in Nigeria with focus on effective Maritime Safety Administration, Maritime Labour Regulation, Maritime Pollution Prevention and Control, Search and Rescue, Shipping Development, Ship Registration, Training and Certification of Seafarers and Maritime Capacity Development.

South-Eastern State was created on May 27, 1967. In 1975, 19 states were created and South-Eastern State became known as Cross-River State. On September 23, 1987, Akwa-Ibom was carved out from the former Cross-River State under the Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida Administration. The Lower Cross River Region which comprises Akwa-Ibom and the coastal areas of Cross-River State was drained by waters of the Cross, Calabar, Qua Iboe and Imo Rivers. The new state was dubbed the "Land of Promise"; the promise inherent in this expectation was that of rapid infrastructural

development as well as enhanced standard of living. The state's development plan was in threefold: to help the government pursue policies that will encourage private individuals to take decisions which will favour desired growth; to determine priorities for its own expenditure on the recurrent and capital amount including investment in government enterprises and to help ensure that adequate finance is mobilised for private and public investment. Akwa-Ibom inherited the Newsprint Manufacturing Company at Oku Iboku, Itu, a few private small and medium-scale industries and 10 industries from the old Cross-River State, though many were ailing. Maritime trade and commercial function of seaports were complemented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the implantation of the colonial structure on both the coastal areas and the hinterlands. In the present-day Akwa-Ibom State, the emergence of earliest urban centres such as Ikot-Abasi (Opobo), Itu and Oron brought about increased socio-economic activities and infrastructural development such as road networks and improved maritime transportation.

### **Maritime Industry in Akwa-Ibom State**

The maritime industry in Nigeria includes all enterprises engaged in the business of designing, constructing, manufacturing, acquiring, operating, supplying, repairing, and maintaining vessels or component parts thereof, managing shipping lines, customs brokerage services, shipyards, dry docks, marine railways, marine repair shops, shipping and freight forwarding services and similar enterprises. The industry comprises the following players: The Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA), Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA), Nigerian Shipowners Association (NSA), the Nigerian Shippers Council (NSC), Ministry of Trade and Transportation, operators, finance institutions and private investors.

Akwa-Ibom State is one of the mostly populated states in Nigeria; it has an above average development potential and the current transportation infrastructure consists of over 9,000 kilometres of paved and unpaved roads, a natural waterway network, biodiversity, an international airport, a seaport with restricted operability, a crude oil loading facility located just off the coast. It also has about 15% of Nigeria's coastline. The state's industrialisation plan document between 1975-1980 had objectives such as: increasing the national and state income; improving the stability of foreign exchange by diversification of exports and import reduction; providing markets for local raw materials and promoting balanced development in the state. From the 1970s, Akwa-Ibom had no manufacturing industry until the late 1970s and early 1980s; lack of capital, infrastructural deficiency, and poor management are some of the identified bottlenecks that hampered industrial take-off in the state. The established industries were based mainly on imported technology and semi-finished goods as raw materials. With diminutive industrial inputs from local sources, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, paints, biscuits, plastics, batteries, ceramics, flour, soap and many others were manufactured; these industries later either folded up or reduced their production capacity because of scarcity of imported raw materials.

The Investment Trust Company Limited was one of the earliest attempts made to create an industrial base for Akwa-Ibom State; a process which began in the South-Eastern State and continued in the old Cross-River State. This attempt was also geared towards introducing new industries, stimulating business development, improving income of residents, training and improving skills as well as ensuring social stability. Other industrial establishments such as the Cross-River Breweries Limited (which later became Champion Breweries in 1976), Uyo, the Sunshine Batteries Limited, Ikot-Ekpene, International Biscuits Limited, Ikot-Ekpene, Qua Steel Products Limited, Eket, Quality Ceramics Limited, Itu, Plato-Crown Nigeria Limited, Uyo, Asbetonit Limited, Oron, Akwa-Palm

Industries Limited, Eket, Pamil Industries, Abak, among others were incorporated and promoted by successive governments in Akwa-Ibom State.

**However**, during the colonial era, maritime transportation was greatly enhanced by the Europeans who were in business with the people. Towns that were located on the coast served as important contact points for Africans and Europeans; their locations were determined by their accessibility from the sea and by the productivity of the hinterlands. Ports directed attention and trade toward the coast, the colonial metropolis and the world economy. Seaports grew in size and areas closest to the sea were the most accessible. Rivers such as the Niger and the Cross River and river ports, provided ready-made highways, but were characteristically slow with inflexible arteries that were not fully navigable for some time; unfortunately, their importance declined with the development of automobile roadways.

Ikot-Abasi (formerly known as Opobo), a border town and a settlement in Ibibioland separating both Rivers and Abia States from Akwa-Ibom State, is located at the right bank of Ikot-Abasi River. During the era of trade in staple commodities, the town which was a natural seaport with rich marine facilities was capable of receiving large ocean vessels and also attracted European missionaries and colonial administrators. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Ikot-Abasi was a major source of supplies to European supercargoes considering its location and direct linkage to the Atlantic Ocean; it was also easily accessible to the rampaging European invaders.

Around the creeks and riverine areas water transportation continued by canoe and throughout the 1900s, the Marine Department cleared the Imo River and other waterways to facilitate navigation. The provision of transportation and communication facilities attracted British colonial officials, European and African traders to the place. As trade increased so did shipping at the port and by 1922, 78 vessels entered the port while 88 cleared it. The Opobo port located at Egwanga was closed down in January 1950; it caused economic eclipse in the area and much of its trade in palm produce was diverted to Port-Harcourt. In 1951, Nigeria's premier boat building yard was established at Egwanga by the Department of Commerce and Industry on a site occupied by the United African Company; the industry, within a few years, manufactured a number of power-driven river craft including launches, freight-carrying barges and fishing boats.

Itu is geographically located on both banks of the Cross River and featured prominently as one of the largest slave markets in West Africa. Slaves from the hinterland parts of Ibibioland such as Itam, Ibiono Ibom, Enyong, and Umon were moved out to Calabar from Itu. The crucial position of Itu was made possible because of modern infrastructure put in place by the colonial administration. Attention was given to the development of maritime transportation for the purpose of linking the hinterland with the producers at the coast. Enyong Creek, from its confluence with the Cross River at Itu, was surveyed by Captain Steward of the Manchester Regiment and reported navigable for any sized puncheon canoe. However, the rivers and creeks were often silted and blocked with snags even though the colonial administration devoted attention to clearing them of obstructions. Marine services were well maintained on navigable rivers and the port of Itu remained the major link between Aba and Owerri, Ibibioland and Calabar and the Upper Cross River area, including Uzuakoli and Ogoja, in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the firm of Elder Dempster Lines alongside the Marine Department operated ferry services linking Itu, Calabar, Oron and the Upper Cross River area. The Elder Dempster shipping company was patronised by the United African Company (UAC), Campagnie Franchise de L'Afrique (CFAO), Societe Commercial de L'Quest Africaine (SCOA), Peterson Zochonis (PZ) among others.

Oron town emerged as an important crossroad between Calabar and the rest of the country; it was further strengthened by the developments in marine transportation during the colonial period. The Oron berths were used by the United African Company to transport palm oil and kernel produce to Calabar for export to Europe. Large, diesel-fuelled and faster vessels that had facilities for carrying motor vehicles and goods were introduced. The ferry services were supplemented by canoe transportation. The importance of the Oron route which enabled the movement of people and goods from Ibibio hinterland, Aba, Eket, and Ikot-Ekpene to Calabar was much felt after the creation of the South-Eastern State, when Calabar became the state capital. Oron remained the major link between the parts of the state and the state capital until the construction of the Calabar-Itu Road.

The maritime industry in Akwa-Ibom State seemed to have gone moribund especially after the eclipse of European trading activities in the area during the colonial period not until in recent years when the state government began to make concerted efforts to ensuring the revitalisation of the industry which bears enormous business potentials for the economic growth of the state. The rich maritime environment of the state can make it second to Lagos judging from the development of a seaport at Ibaka, Mbo Local Government Area to the already established Maritime Academy of Nigeria at Oron, and the oil terminal golf courses at Ibeno Local Government Area.

### **The Ibeno Beach Resort**

The development of the Ibeno beach resort represents the foremost attempt by the Akwa-Ibom State government to harness her maritime potentials. The beach which forms a border between West Africa and the Atlantic Ocean is reputed to be the longest beach in Africa stretching 45km from Ibeno Town in Ibeno Local Government Area to James Town in Mbo Local Government Area. It has been developed with robust supporting facilities and infrastructure and provides attractions such as boat riding, canoeing, water sports among others. In terms of security, the local vigilante collaborates with the Exxon Mobil Patrol guards to provide adequate security at the beach. Unfortunately, coastal erosion, gas flaring and oil spillage are some of the challenges threatening the stability of the maritime ecosystem in the area.

The development of the coastal communities will leverage on the comprehensive utilisation and integration of the social, cultural and physical resources of the coastal ecosystem which will translate into economic good. In the area of maritime infrastructure expansion in Akwa-Ibom State, coastal communities like Mbo, Udung Uko, Okbo, Oma, Eastern Obolo, Oron and Ibeno have started experiencing infrastructural revitalisation in the areas of road and telecommunication development.

### **Ibom Deep Sea Port (IDSP) Project**

In 2015, the Ibom Deep Seaport project was launched. The project received approval from the Federal Government of Nigeria in May 2015 based on the approved Outline Base Case and Request for Qualification (RFG) was issued in January 2018. The Ibom Deep Sea Port is a greenfield deep sea port project located on the Atlantic coast about 65km to the southeast of Uyo in Akwa-Ibom State. The project site is strategically located and accessible through major existing and planned transport infrastructure such as airport, railway lines and federal and state road networks. The project is promoted by the Akwa-Ibom State Government and will be owned by the Federal Government through the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) in partnership with Akwa-Ibom State Government and private investors. The port is an integrated development with the proposed Ibom Industrial City (which will be solely owned by Akwa-Ibom State Government) through a Public Private Partnership

arrangement. The IDSP is in line with the Federal Ministry of Transportation (FMoT) plans to augment port capacity in Nigeria and a key component of Akwa-Ibom's economic empowerment plans. The service definition of the IDSP project was derived from the Strategic Needs Assessment for the purpose of becoming a vital port capacity and the Eastern Gateway of Nigeria. The IDSP has two prime characteristics that enable it to provide vital port capacity to the south-south, south-eastern, north central and north eastern Nigerian markets: it is accessible for ships with drafts up to 15m and it has an abundant availability of land in the port area and its surroundings. The project is based on the following needs: to provide much-needed container handling and storage capacity, to provide much-needed import capacity for vehicles, to provide dedicated import capacity for food and agricultural products, to provide dedicated export capacity for industrial output and natural resources, to provide a supply base for the regional oil and gas sector, to provide a shipyard and dry dock for shipbuilding, vessel maintenance and repairs and to provide a logistics base and regional trading hub in West Africa. The handling of general cargo at IDSP is foreseen to be carried out in three categories, namely, general trade, offshore supplies and construction materials. The project will benefit industries nearby and within the Ibom Industrial City including agriculture, petrochemicals, auto assembly plants and power plants.

The Governor Umo Eno administration has made concerted efforts to actualise the IDSP project by repositioning the technical committee in charge of its implementation and providing it with a befitting office accommodation on the third floor of Dakkadda Towers, the state-owned 21-storey building on Udo Udoma Banking Layout, Uyo. The state government also awarded a contract for the construction of the 13.6km Orukim-Unyenghe Universal energy Road to the Ibom Deep Seaport side. The project, according to the Chairman Technical Committee on the Implementation of Ibom Deep Seaport, Mfon Usoro, will not only place Akwa-Ibom State on the global maritime map, but also serve as a major economic gateway that will benefit the West and Central Africa Region including Sao Tome, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Angola, Gabon, Congo, Congo DRC, Niger, and Chad.

In 2021, Akwa-Ibom State government under Governor Udom Emmanuel partnered with the Norfin Group and the investor, Engineer Charles Udonwa, a Singaporean-based shipbuilder to site the Norfin shipyard in the state. The governor unveiled the ship manufacturing company known as Norfin Offshore Shipyard Limited at the company premises in Norfin Offshore Avenue, Ikot-Obio Esse, East West Road, Oruk Anam Local Government Area; he also commissioned a nine-metre fast security escort vessel "MV Norfin Swift" with a resolve to attract more private investments to the state. This move was in furtherance to his avowed determination to reposition the state to become the most efficient maritime hub in the Gulf of Guinea. The security vessel, made available for charter and direct purchase for security, oil and gas-related services is an endorsement of the industrialisation agenda for Akwa-Ibom State to take advantage of the vast opportunities in Nigeria's maritime, oil and gas industries.

In 2023, Akwa-Ibom State Government and Naval Shipyard Limited, a subsidiary of the Nigerian Navy signed an agreement for the construction of a 24-meter mild steel passenger/cruise ferry boat for marine transportation within and outside the state; the contractual agreement was signed by the Commissioner for Transport, Mr. Orman Esin, on behalf of Akwa-Ibom State Government and the Admiral Superintendent of the Naval Shipyard Limited, Rear Admiral Fredrick Damtong, on behalf of the Nigerian Navy. The Ministry of Transport has also in the interim, inaugurated a Local Content Committee to harness the benefits of marine economy in the state. This collaboration was done for the security and reinvention of the marine transportation in the state in order to further the ARISE

agenda. The ARISE agenda is an acronym that stands for five bold aspirations of Governor Umo Eno, the Executive Governor of Akwa-Ibom State: Agricultural Revolution, Rural Development, Infrastructural Maintenance and Advancement, Security Management, Educational, and Health Sectors. It is a detailed and well-articulated document, which focuses on improving and stimulating the state's economy. It also aims at expanding water transportation, supporting maritime security and seeing the best means to develop the blue economy. The blue economy has major components such as marine fisheries, aquaculture, seafood fish processing, trade, technology, marine services, skill development, logistics and shipping, coastal and deep-sea mining and offshore energy. However, it goes beyond the traditional maritime activities and encompasses a holistic approach that balances economic growth, environmental sustainability and social inclusivity. The development of a sustainable blue economy will allow coastal areas to access value from the water bodies.

The Akwa-Ibom coastline has many adjoining rivers emptying into it which serves as a hideout for criminals who terrorise the coastal communities. To improve on the fight against maritime crime, ensure a safe maritime environment for business, secure waterways and protect critical economic assets and also mitigate the activities of pirates, Governor Eno procured 14 gunboats for the state security agents which was inaugurated by the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Emmanuel Ogalla at the Nigerian Naval Shio base in Ikot-Abasi.

### **Conclusion**

The maritime industry is undeniably one of the most lucrative industries in the world. The maritime industry in Nigeria drives the country's economy and 80% of international trade depends on it. The system is the most cost-effective means of transporting goods and services especially heavy cargo; collaborations with non-state actors will help a great deal to advance this sector and promote regional integration. For a successful maritime development, the industry has to leverage on three pillars of community participation, government's leading role and private sector investment.

However, the industry is bedevilled by challenges which include: inadequate infrastructure where insignificant investment in ports, harbours and terminals, cargo handling, poor road networks all hinder efficiency; security concerns where piracy and illegal activities pose significant threats to the industry and have also deterred international shipping companies from operating in Nigerian waters; bureaucracy and corruption at various levels where cumbersome administrative procedures breed inefficiencies; inefficient regulatory framework which lacks clarity, consistency and transparency thereby making it challenging for industry stakeholders to navigate the legal and regulatory environment and inadequate skilled workforce which faces a shortage of qualified professionals and experts in maritime logistics and management.

Akwa-Ibom State is experiencing economic transformation and greater emphasis is now being paid by government to advance maritime development in the state in order to improve the livelihood (traditional income such as fishing, cropping, lumbering and sand mining, welfare and standard of living) of people living within the coastal communities, harness the immense potentials embedded in economic diversification, blue economy opportunities, investment in modern technology like GPS tracking, electronic data interchange (EDI) and automation to streamline operations and for the improvement of efficiency, security and safety. Development of maritime transportation encourages commoditisation of local culture thereby providing a platform for exhibition of the arts, music, artifact, cultural festivals and exquisite cuisines of the coastal communities. In Udung Uko Local Government area, the celebration of an annual festival alongside other maritime attractions of the

area has proven to be a potent tool for socio-economic transformation of the coastal community. Improved maritime transportation will also open up more tourism potentials and openings for social inclusion, social integration and revival of the people's rich cultural heritage; direct and indirect employment such as transportation, accommodation, tourism managers, security managers and other tourism service-related jobs would help ameliorate the huge unemployment burden in the coastal areas.

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